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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 6 July 2023

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Food Production Costs

1. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on increases in the cost of food production. [905828]

11. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on increases in the cost of food production. [905839]

13. **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): What steps her Department is taking to help mitigate the impact of increased food production costs on (a) consumers and (b) businesses. [905841]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): Putin's illegal war in Ukraine has placed pressures on global imports and energy costs. We have taken significant action to support British growers and to safeguard our food security. Building on the work to invest in fertiliser supply and slurry storage, energy infrastructure and costs, the Prime Minister recently hosted the first ever UK Farm to Fork summit on productivity and sustainability, as part of maintaining the £2.4 billion budget for farming each year.

Douglas Chapman: Last month, the Prime Minister said that weekly shopping bills had "gone up far too much in the past few months".

That must be the understatement of the year. Food inflation is at a record 45-year high. Farmers and growers are facing higher business costs across the board, and consumers are bearing the brunt with their weekly shop. What discussions has the Minister had with the Prime Minister to find out what they can do now for farmers, growers and producers and to protect beleaguered shoppers? What is the plan, because what the Government are doing now ain't working?

Mark Spencer: I think the hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are not responsible for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has had a significant impact on global energy prices. The good news is that those global

energy prices are coming back to a level, and that is starting to feed back into our food supply chain. That is why we are helping and supporting farmers, investing in new technology and investing in their businesses to make them more sustainable and more profitable going forwards so that they can continue to deliver great quality British food at a reasonable price.

Patrick Grady: The war in Ukraine has not caused the labour shortages that are causing Scottish crops to be ploughed back into the fields. The war in Ukraine has not caused customs barriers and tariffs that mean that Scottish seafood is being left in the sea. Brexit has caused those things. That is why food inflation is higher in the UK than elsewhere. When will the Government accept that?

Mark Spencer: Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman is misinformed. Food prices are higher in Germany and France. If Brexit were the issue, clearly that would not be the case. That is why we are investing in those farmers. We are supporting them by increasing the number of visas that are available in the seasonal agricultural worker scheme. We are supporting those farmers to continue to produce great quality food.

Kenny MacAskill: Businesses, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) has said, are suffering because of the absence of labour, in fishing and, indeed, in farming in East Lothian. Given that this has been brought about by Brexit and that the previous routes of labour have been sold off, is it not time that the Scottish Government had control over some migration visas, even of a limited timescale, as applies in south Australia and Quebec?

Mark Spencer: We have issued 45,000 possible visas on the seasonal agriculture worker scheme and we are currently nowhere near that level. There are an extra 10,000 visas available should the industry require them. We have not seen the necessity to trigger those extra 10,000 at this moment in time, which is because there are adequate visas available to support farmers and fishermen.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): The price of wheat peaked at £350 a tonne. It has subsequently fallen to below £200 a tonne—not much more than it was before the invasion of Ukraine. Why has the price of bread in our supermarkets not fallen, too?

Mark Spencer: I declare my interest in these matters.

I recognise the fact that global wheat prices have now come back down. We work closely with retailers, processors and the hospitality sector to make sure that there is not extra profiteering in the marketplace. We will continue to have discussions with those representatives and will work with the sector to make sure that food is reasonably priced for our constituents.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The farming Minister will know that in north Northamptonshire we have some of the best farmers in the country who are

facing these challenges, like every other farm up and down the land. Would he be kind enough to visit Kettering to meet a large group of local farmers—perhaps in early September in between harvesting and drilling?

Mark Spencer: That is a very kind invitation. It is always a pleasure to visit Northamptonshire, and, if my diary allows, I will of course meet my hon. Friend and his farmers.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Minister has talked a lot about support for farmers, but in reality there is a severe lack of profitability for those producing chicken. That is causing a sharp reduction in the number of birds reared in England, while in Scotland production has changed significantly, as retailers resist demands to pay a fair price for chicken. Will the Minister commit to extending the examination of food supply chains to poultry meat, as requested by the National Farmers Union Scotland, as the threat of empty shelves looms? Will he also engage with retailers to ensure that poultry farmers are fairly compensated?

Mark Spencer: I was on a poultry farm yesterday talking to poultry producers. The SNP cannot have it both ways; it cannot ask one question about suppressing prices for consumers and another about increasing the prices for farmers—those things are diametrically opposed. What we are doing as a Department is supporting those farmers through the £2.4 billion-worth of subsidy, helping them to invest in new technology and talking to retailers and producers to make sure we get fairness in the supply chain, so everybody gets a fair return for their hard work.

Animal Welfare

2. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What steps she is taking to bring forward legislative proposals to improve animal welfare. [905829]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government are committed to continuing to deliver on our manifesto commitments and the work we have undertaken through the action plan for animal welfare from 2021. So far we have delivered six measures through primary legislation and four through secondary legislation. We have also supported three private Members' Bills, one of which, the Shark Fins Act 2023, banning the import of detached shark fins, received Royal Assent last week. As the Minister updated the House on 25 May, we will be supporting the delivery of the measures from our manifesto during the remainder of the Parliament and we have already started with a consultation on banning primates as pets through secondary legislation.

Steven Bonnar: We have had three Secretaries of State and 760 days have passed since the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was first introduced in this House, and we are no further forward today on banning animal fur imports, or on tackling illegal puppy and kitten smuggling, or on banning foie gras. The former DEFRA Secretary, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), said the Bill did not go ahead due to

“a lack of resolve to take it through.”

How long must animals suffer the consequences of this Tory psychodrama, and when will animal welfare finally be prioritised in this place?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman must be living in a parallel universe. There is no doubt that many measures have been undertaken to improve animal welfare. One thing I would say is that there have not been any live exports of animals since 2021, and we still have legislation ready to go. We have already set out our approach. Of course he will be aware that it is already illegal to smuggle pets, and some of the legislation we were working on was to try to make it more challenging for criminals who abuse pets as well.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is right that progress on animal welfare can be made by specific and targeted measures. I would add to the ones she mentioned the adoption by the Government of my own private Member's Hare Coursing Bill. However, we do need a clear programme of further progress. Can she tell me the progress on two specific changes: the ban on the import of dogs with cropped ears and the ban on keeping primates as pets?

Dr Coffey: As my hon. Friend points out, he has already undertaken significant work regarding hare coursing; it is one of the top priorities for rural police and crime commissioners and they continue to do good work on that, recognising that much of it is connected to organised crime. On the two measures he refers to, because we are introducing secondary legislation to stop people keeping primates as pets, we have to consult formally and then the legislation will be prepared alongside that. In terms of the mutilation elements, when my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries spoke to the House on 25 May, he said that we would be taking forward measures on individual issues. I intend that to happen in the next Session of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Last Friday Lord Goldsmith resigned from the Government and his letter to the Prime Minister was absolutely devastating. If I may paraphrase it, it said that before taking office the Prime Minister assured party members via Lord Goldsmith that he the Prime Minister would continue to implement the action plan, including the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and measures such as ending the live export of animals for slaughter, banning keeping primates as pets and preventing the import of shark fins and hunting trophies from vulnerable species. Lord Goldsmith has been horrified as bit by bit the Government have abandoned those commitments, domestically and on the world stage. The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill has been ditched, despite the Prime Minister's promises; efforts on a wide range of domestic environmental issues have simply ground to a standstill; and, more worryingly, the United Kingdom has visibly stepped off the world stage. Lord Goldsmith and the Secretary of State served as DEFRA Ministers in the last Parliament. Does she agree with his devastating critique of the Prime Minister and her Department?

Dr Coffey: Of course not. I was very sad that the noble Lord chose to leave Government. I pay tribute to him for a lot of what he has done in terms of international

nature. The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), set out to the House on 25 May the approach that we are taking and why. We are getting on with the legislation on keeping primates as pets, and we are preparing single-issue Bills. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who is chuntering from a sedentary position, clearly does not know a lot about government. I understand that, because he has never been in it—*[Interruption.]* I am responding to the chuntering from the hon. Gentleman. The point is that when we introduce secondary legislation, the formality is that we have to consult. That is why we are doing a short consultation, which we launched last week. We will get on with the secondary legislation when we return after the recess.

Coastal and Marine Biodiversity

3. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with relevant stakeholders on monitoring coastal and marine biodiversity. [905830]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): My hon. Friend and I share a feature in that the coast and the sea are a key part of our constituencies. We have just brought into effect our first three highly protected marine areas. We engage regularly with various stakeholders on a variety of issues relating to the monitoring and protection of coastal and marine biodiversity. We will continue to do that around our shores, but we also do extensive work around the world, with our knowledge and expertise, to ensure that we preserve marine biodiversity much more strongly right across the globe.

Duncan Baker: I recently met Applied Genomics Ltd, a marine scientific business in my North Norfolk constituency. It specialises in environmental DNA acquisition and processing, and has developed an effective technique to measure a broad biodiversity profile, from fish stocks and invasive species to microbial pollution. The UK does not currently have an all-encompassing nationwide programme to monitor our coastal marine environments, so will the Minister consider launching a consistent, low-cost and accurate programme, and will she meet me to discuss it?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend will be aware that we monitor marine and coastal wildlife and habitats through the UK marine monitoring and assessment strategy evidence groups. Indeed, the £140 million natural capital and ecosystem assessment programme is an important example of how we are trying to do these things in a smarter and more timely way. I am delighted to say that Applied Genomics, the company to which he refers, whose work I think is interesting and valuable, has delivered some of that work.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Secretary of State join me in a campaign to try to clean up our seas and oceans? Around our country, there are reports of marine life dying. When will she wake up to the fact that tyres are not just made of rubber but contain 72 chemicals, some of them poisonous and related to cancer, and all that wear goes into the gullies, gutters, streams, rivers and oceans and it is poisoning marine life? When will she do something about it?

Dr Coffey: I know that the hon. Gentleman is trying to launch a campaign on that. The Department and the Government are aware of the impact of the particulate matter that comes off tyres and brakes. That is increasingly one of the challenges for heavier electric vehicles, and the Department for Transport in particular is working with the industry on that. On the other aspects he mentions, we have the £500 blue planet fund, and we invest right around the world and on our shores in improving marine biodiversity. That is why we are sponsoring activity on coral reefs, for example, and on getting plastic out of our oceans. It is why the UK played a critical role in securing the UN “biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction” treaty on trying to improve marine biodiversity. This Government have done more for the oceans, and made them a central part of tackling climate change, than any other country in the world, and we will continue to do so.

Tree Planting

4. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase tree planting. [905832]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am pleased that the England trees action plan has set out more than 90 actions to help us meet our targets in increasing tree planting. Since its publication, we have rolled out the England woodland creation offer grant scheme; we have added two new community forests, bringing that to a total of 13; we have invested in nursery capacity; and we have launched a new training and apprenticeship scheme to boost skills and workforce in the forestry sector.

Nicola Richards: Since January 2020, 350,000 trees have been planted in the west midlands. An estimated 62 tonnes of air pollution have been removed as a result in the Black Country alone. More than 320,000 of those trees have now been registered with the West Midlands Combined Authority’s virtual forest. Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking our wonderful Mayor, Andy Street, for spearheading that massive effort, and will she outline how the Government plan to help the west midlands to plant even more trees?

Dr Coffey: It is fantastic to hear about these successes and the innovation of virtual forests. I thank Mayor Andy Street and the people of the west midlands for planting more trees. We will continue to support tree planting through our national forest in the midlands. We will work closely with the Forestry Commission on the nature for climate fund grant schemes, including the local authority treescape fund. This is yet another example of fantastic Conservative Mayors delivering for their residents cleaner air, and greener and more beautiful spaces. As we regularly say, vote blue, go green.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I recently visited the Woodland Trust’s Snaizholme tree planting project, which is in the Prime Minister’s Yorkshire constituency. It has huge potential for nature recovery and carbon capture, but along with other sites, it faces a financial cliff edge when the nature for climate fund comes to an end. Will the Government commit to long-term funding that provides certainty for that vital work?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have extensive funding, and he will also know that the cycles of funding go with something called the spending review, which is until 2025. We will continue to invest in forestry, and we are doing it through our environmental land management schemes as well. I planted the first tree in the northern forest with my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green). We need to keep it going.

Dan Jarvis: I was there!

Mr Sheerman: He did it!

Dr Coffey: No, he didn't. The more trees that are planted, the better, so let us all take credit for planting trees. It is good for wellbeing, and it is good for the planet.

Fur Market

5. Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): When she plans to publish the results of her Department's consultation on the fur market in Great Britain. [905833]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): A summary of responses to the call for evidence on the fur market setting out the results and any next steps in this policy space will be published soon.

Christian Wakeford: The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs called for evidence on banning the import and sale of fur back in 2021, but two years on, we have yet to hear what the public think about such an important and timely issue. Will the Department commit to a date when it will release the results of the consultation on the fur market in Great Britain?

Mark Spencer: As I said, we are considering those responses and will publish our response very soon.

Non-mains Drinking Water

6. Sir Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): What mechanisms exist to supply safe drinking water to homes without access to mains water. [905834]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Private drinking water supplies are regulated by local authorities, which receive scientific and technical advice from the Drinking Water Inspectorate. Local authorities sample and identify water-quality risks, can serve notices to correct any issues identified and have remedial powers if those responsible for the supply do not comply with the notice. Private water supply compliance is steadily improving. In 2022, 96.4% of private supplies were compliant, up from 91.4% in 2010.

Sir Simon Clarke: The nine homes of Aysdalegate near Charltons do not have access to mains water. Over the last decade, Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council has performed drinking water checks nine times, and on all occasions, the supply has been judged unsatisfactory owing to bacterial contamination, including E.coli and enterococci. A regulation 18 notice, which specifies that the water requires boiling before drinking, has been in

place permanently since December 2017, and residents report to me finding tadpoles and other life in their drinking water. This is a Dickensian scandal in 2023, but Northumbrian Water has advised that it will cost these low-income homes over £100 each simply to give them a quote for mains water connection. That is obviously unacceptable. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me urgently so that we can discuss how to help my constituents?

Rebecca Pow: I am sorry to hear about this issue, which my right hon. Friend has already brought to my attention. Our legislation does allow for those on a private supply to request a connection to the mains supply, but it is right that the legislation allows a water company to charge for the cost of making a new connection, because otherwise it would impact on all customers' bills. The local authority can give advice, and I urge him to keep contacting it, but if there is anything more we can discuss usefully, I would be happy to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Like yourself, Mr Speaker, I am of a generation that can well remember when water came from the wells, and it was pure and clean. Times have moved on, and we have realised that such water is not available to everyone, as the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Sir Simon Clarke) said. I ask the Minister this question ever mindful of the discussions that she will have had: have there been any discussions between the Government and the devolved Administration in Northern Ireland to ensure that grants are available for people who need to go on to mains water and that their water is pure, as it was many years ago but is not always today?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; I, too, have a well, but it does not supply our drinking water. I think a lot of people have wells on their properties, or locally on their roads or wherever. The issue he has raised is a matter for the Northern Ireland Administration, but here the Drinking Water Inspectorate has commissioned research into the impact of future private water supplies, as well as the whole regulatory model and legislative framework.

Support for Farmers

7. Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): What steps she is taking to support farmers. [905835]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): We are backing British farmers with £2.4 billion of investment every year. We have recently updated our new schemes based on the feedback that farmers have given us, making them easier to apply for. We are providing tailored business advice to all farmers. We have cut red tape, brought in fair enforcement regimes, and helped the sector access the seasonal labour it needs. We are looking closely at the Shropshire review that we commissioned to see how we can go further. We are reviewing supply chain fairness in the sector and trying to unlock opportunities for genetic technologies. I could keep going, but I will leave it there for now.

Antony Higginbotham: Upland farmers across Burnley and Padiham, and indeed right across Lancashire, play a huge role in keeping us fed and enhancing the local

environment. That is why it is so important that we support them. Can my right hon. Friend say how recent announcements will improve support for upland farmers specifically, and will he reaffirm the commitment made in May by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that we will move beyond income-foregone calculations when designing support schemes?

Mark Spencer: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Lancashire farmers and the efforts they make to keep us all well fed. We are committed to ensuring that payment rates mean that as many farmers as possible can benefit from our offers, and have recently increased payment rates for upland farmers. Through countryside stewardship-plus, we will pay farmers extra for co-ordinating their action and working with neighbouring farms and landowners to tackle climate change, as well as supporting nature gains and keeping us all well fed.

Farming: Delinked Payments

8. **George Eustice** (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): When she plans to bring forward regulations to introduce delinked payments from 2024. [905836]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): The Government plan to bring forward regulations to delink payments later this year, as the parliamentary timetable allows. Those regulations will introduce delinked payments in 2024, as planned. Information about delinked payments can be found on gov.uk.

George Eustice: Delinking the legacy basic payment scheme payments from the need to have land area entitlements could be a really powerful catalyst for change. It would free the Rural Payments Agency and farmers from the bureaucracy of the legacy scheme; remove a very difficult distortion from the land market; and, crucially, free farmers up to make decisions about what to do with their land in future. Since farmers are making decisions about next year's land use now, will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to confirm from the Dispatch Box that the delinked payments will happen next year, and that there will be no reversal of that plan?

Mark Spencer: I am happy to confirm that, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for all the work he did to get us to this point. Of course, we will be bringing forward the legislation to delink those payments next year.

Food Security

9. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of UK food security. [905837]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): The first UK food security report, which we introduced in the Agriculture Act 2020, was published in 2021; the next one is due in 2024. The F4 group, comprising the British Retail Consortium, the National Farmers Union, the Food and Drink Federation and UKHospitality, meets regularly and reports directly to Ministers. We recently met representatives from the whole supply chain at the UK Farm to Fork summit in Downing Street.

Chris Elmore: I have raised access to food before with the Minister and, in particular, how surplus food and food near its use-by date can be used by organisations such as FareShare. There is still a huge problem right across the country whereby constituents cannot afford to buy food in supermarkets, and are therefore relying on food pantries and food banks for their main shop. To have food security, people must be able to afford food. What more can the Minister do to resolve those issues and ensure that people are not literally starving, or in a position where they cannot afford to buy basic foodstuffs?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the huge package of support the Chancellor of the Exchequer has introduced to help families with the cost of living challenges they face. On average, every household receives over £3,000 of support with their energy and food bills, but I am sure we can do more to help and support primary food producers, processors and retailers to make sure that we drive as much efficiency as possible into the system, in order to maintain lower food prices and help families up and down the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Last week, past failures caught up with the DEFRA ministerial team. First, the Climate Change Committee castigated them for lack of progress on agriculture and land use, and then the report they had commissioned from John Shropshire and his team detailed the crop losses and lost productivity and production caused by their failure to address labour supply issues. This week, could the Minister tell the House if he knows whether the UK is more or less food-secure than this time last year, and will he explain how he has reached that conclusion?

Mark Spencer: We have extensive conversations with the food supply market. We are blessed in the UK with very robust food supply chains, which are some of the most secure anywhere in the world. Of course, I acknowledge that the Shropshire review has indicated some areas in which we can improve and assist, but we have delivered the 45,000 visas that are available through the seasonal agricultural workers scheme. Not all of those visas have been taken up, and an extra 10,000 are available if required, but nobody has asked for that to be triggered.

Topical Questions

T2. [905848] **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It has been a particularly busy week for DEFRA in a number of different ways, with not only the launch of the designated highly protected marine areas, but the House of Commons voting to support the legislation to introduce the ban on plastics, which is another way to improve the environment.

Of course, there has also been significant speculation about the water industry. I think it is important to put it on record that the Government have confidence in the financial resilience of the water sector industry. We will continue to have discussions, which are important, and I think it is critical to be aware that people who do not know a lot about the water industry, frankly, are out of

their depth in making some comments and speculation. We need to make sure that we treat this situation very carefully, because it is critical to make sure that we have ongoing investment in the water industry, which everybody here relies on.

Suzanne Webb: Thankfully, my dog Sidney Pickles came from a great home, although one could complain to trading standards that his former home failed to describe him as a naughty cocker spaniel or a fox poo-rolling little tinker. Seriously, however, there has been much misinformation about the Government's action on puppy farming from the Opposition. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this Government have, in fact, been taking firm action to stop the unscrupulous selling of puppies by deceitful sellers?

Dr Coffey: Indeed, and I want to thank my hon. Friend. I have met her dog Sidney Pickles, who is delightful. As she says, it was purchased from a great breeder. One thing we need to continue to focus on is improving the laws on dog breeding to crack down on unscrupulous breeders. Regulations do require commercial dog breeders to hold a valid licence from their local authority, and it is important that people check for that licence. The regulations also prohibit the third-party sale of puppies and kittens.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are on topicals, folks. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Tories are sinking the water industry. Since Tory privatisation, water companies have racked up debts of over £60 billion. Every day, we see 800 sewage dumps and lose over 3 billion litres of water in leaks, and what is the biggest leak of all? The £72 billion paid out to shareholders. Now Thames Water is on the edge as the money dries up. Can the Secretary of State tell the House if she believes that this is an isolated case—yes or no?

Dr Coffey: I have already said to the House that the Government have full confidence in the financial resilience of the water sector. I will point out that, of course, the gearing for Thames Water shot up in 2007, when Labour was in government. It is fair to say that, when a previous Secretary of State issued a strategic policy statement to Ofwat, one of the key focuses was about reducing the gearing, and that has not happened with Thames Water. Ofwat is still responsible, and I am still holding it to account on how that goes forward. However, it is very important that we do not have speculation and misinformed comments. It is critical that we get water companies through certain stages, and I am confident the Government will do that.

Jim McMahon: Like the industry itself, that response does not hold water. People know that Thames Water is not an isolated case: five companies are rated as being of concern by the Government's own financial regulator. Last weekend, I wrote to the Environment Secretary setting out six key tests to safeguard bill payers, workers and taxpayers from paying the price of a failing water industry. Will she finally act to protect the national interest and commit to those six tests, and will she rule out customers having to pay twice for boardroom failures—yes or no?

Dr Coffey: I have not yet seen the hon. Gentleman's letter, but I will of course respond to it before the recess. Over £190 billion has been invested into our water industry since privatisation, through a long-standing combination of equity and debt investment by water companies. Speculation around such an important utility does not help the situation, and a measured approach is critical to getting through this difficulty. He mentions other water companies, and that is why Ofwat has acted and why new equity has come into many water companies. It is critical that we continue to have that confidence.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Hundreds of animal lovers across the west midlands have suffered the dreadful crime of pet theft in recent years. What are Ministers doing to prevent such crimes?

Dr Coffey: Stealing a pet is already a criminal offence, and we know the devastating impact that pet theft can have. We legislated to require the microchipping of cats, in addition to dogs, because that can act as an effective deterrent. The pet theft taskforce reports that dogs are mostly stolen from gardens and outbuildings, and highlights the need for owners to ensure security at home for their treasured pets.

T3. [905849] **Amy Callaghan** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Bearing in mind the escalating number of dangerous dog attacks, including the death of a dog, Sula, in Milngavie in East Dunbartonshire, whose owner felt that their life would have been at risk had they intervened, will the Secretary of State review the Government's decision to drop the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill? If not, will she explain to the House how she plans to deliver its measures by different means?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries set out on 25 May how we intend to take through our manifesto commitments. We also have a taskforce working on this situation, and I expect a report with some recommendations later this year.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): A couple of weeks ago, I visited Yorkshire Water's sewer improvement project. This £15 million scheme under the A65 in Ilkley is only happening as a result of a huge campaign by the Ilkley Clean River Group and our passing the Environment Act 2021, which the Opposition voted against at every stage. Does the Minister therefore agree that the Government are purely focused on cleaning up the water quality of our rivers?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I could just say yes, but I will add a bit more. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is this Government who have got water quality on the radar. We are cleaning up our rivers and our bathing waters, 93% of which are classed as good or excellent. Our plan for water will ensure that we provide the clean and plentiful water we need for generations.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Gateshead food bank and Feeding Families, both of which operate in my constituency, have seen huge increases in the demand for food parcels over recent years. With food inflation running at 18.3%,

the situation will only get worse. What will the Minister do to tackle food inflation, so that people do not have to rely on those organisations?

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): That is why we are investing in our farmers to help them produce food more efficiently and increase productivity. It is also why the Government have put forward a huge £94 billion support package—over £3,300 per household—and provided £100 million of support to charities working in the sector.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): The use of storm overflows is of huge concern to my residents in Southend-on-Sea. Due to this Government's actions, Anglian Water was supposed to have its plan for mitigating the use of overflows on the Secretary of State's desk last Friday. Was it there, and when will my residents be able to see it?

Rebecca Pow: Every water company was asked to put a plan for every storm overflow on the Secretary of State's desk. I can tell my hon. Friend that all the plans have arrived and are being analysed.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What should I say to my twin grandsons, who are here today, about their future given that they live in Cambridge, where air quality is poisoning young people, pregnant women and many others? What will the Secretary of State really do about cleaning up the environment for that generation?

Dr Coffey: I recommend that they vote for a Conservative MP.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): What assurance can the Farming Minister give my Ynys Môn farmers that this Government are doing all they can to ensure that food labelling is accurate? Will the Minister accept my invitation to the Anglesey show on 15 and 16 August to discuss the matter with my farmers in person?

Mark Spencer: It is always a pleasure to visit Wales and Welsh farmers. I say to constituents of my hon. Friend that making sure there is a red tractor on their food is a very good step to make sure that their food is procured in the right way and that they are supporting UK farmers. I will look at my diary and see whether I can attend her show. I am sure it will be an excellent example of the top-quality food and farming in Wales.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Justice for Victims of Crime

1. **Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in ensuring access to justice for victims of crime. [905801]

4. **Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):** What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in ensuring access to justice for victims of crime. [905804]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): The CPS is improving access to justice for victims through its victim transformation programme. Together with measures in the Victims and Prisoners Bill, this will help to ensure access to justice for all victims of crime.

Liz Twist: In October 2021, the Government made the not hugely ambitious pledge to reduce the size of the Crown court backlog within four years. The latest figures published last week show that the backlog is now almost 2,900 cases higher than when they started. Will the Solicitor General explain what new steps the Government will take to meet their target, as what they have been doing so far clearly is not working?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. One method being used is sentencing blitzes, whereby sentences are being lined up back-to-back to ensure that cases are completed as quickly as possible.

Neil Coyle: The Ministry of Justice's early legal advice pilot scheme has just reported. It ran for five months, cost £5 million and supported a sum total of just three people. Instead of the Attorney General and the Government trying to reinvent the wheel by making it square, why do they not deliver better access to justice by supporting more people through legal aid?

The Solicitor General: In terms of access to justice for victims, I mentioned the victim transformation programme, which is vital in supporting victims. It will transform how the CPS communicates with victims and ensure that those with specific needs have enhanced support.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The victims' right to review makes it easier for victims to seek a review of a CPS decision not to bring charges. Will the Minister congratulate CPS East Midlands on having the victims' right to review prominent on the front page of its website? Is he satisfied that the scheme is being rolled out satisfactorily across the country?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. He will be pleased to know that on the law tour, the Attorney General and I saw CPS East Midlands for ourselves, and he is right. It is also right to acknowledge that the vast majority of cases are performed correctly and accurately. Of those that are not, it is right to say that 243 decisions were found to be incorrect and were reviewed last year.

Illegal Migration Bill

2. **Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):** What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the compatibility of the Illegal Migration Bill with the European convention on human rights. [905802]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am bound by the Law Officers' convention not only to not talk about advice that I give to Cabinet colleagues, but to not even reveal whether such advice has been given.

Chris Stephens: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees gave evidence to the Court of Appeal, advising the court on matters concerning international

refugee law. That ultimately contributed to the Bill being found unlawful. The recommendations included co-operation with EU neighbours and fair and fast asylum procedures that are more humane, efficient and cost-effective. Will the Attorney General ensure that the Cabinet listens and enacts those recommendations?

The Attorney General: The Government are disappointed by the recent outcome of the case before the Court of Appeal and will seek permission to appeal to the Supreme Court. The Court of Appeal did say that the policy of removal to a safe third country could be compatible, and it did not disturb the finding of the High Court that Rwanda is safe, though the majority was concerned about the possibility of onward removal from Rwanda. The Government will make robust arguments before the Supreme Court and will be applying for permission later today.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The former Lord Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), when told of the demise of his Bill of Rights, said:

“All the wrong people will celebrate.”

Was the Attorney General celebrating the defeat of that attack on our European convention rights? Will she now stand up to other of her Cabinet colleagues who repeatedly transgress international law? They did it with the Northern Ireland protocol, with the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, with the Illegal Migration Bill and again this week with the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill. She is the Attorney General, so if she will not stand up for the rule of law, who will?

The Attorney General: I absolutely can and do stand up for the rule of law. The Government are committed to the rule of law domestically and committed to maintaining and upholding our obligations under international law. That is made quite clear to all Ministers.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Rwanda asylum plan was declared so poor that it threatened the rights of asylum seekers not to be tortured or subjected to inhumane treatment, and it was found incompatible with a host of international conventions. Those were the findings of the Court of Appeal, and the Supreme Court will inevitably reach the same conclusion. How much taxpayers' money does the Attorney General estimate the Government will spend appealing this illegal plan?

The Attorney General: I absolutely do not accept the premise of the hon. Lady's question. The divisional court was a strong win for the Government. At the Court of Appeal, the majority found against us, but we also had a strong judgment from the Lord Chief Justice. We believe that the assurances we have had from Rwanda regarding asylum protections there are robust, and we intend to make those arguments strongly in the Supreme Court.

Violence against Women and Girls

3. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase prosecution rates for cases relating to violence against women and girls. [905803]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): Work is going on across the criminal justice system to drive up prosecution levels. In the Gower, charges of adult rape suspects have increased dramatically in the past year. The Solicitor General and I recently visited CPS South Wales to discuss its future plans.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The Jade's law campaign is gathering more supporters with each passing day, united in our belief that a man such as Russell Marsh should have no say over the future of his children, whose mother he so viciously murdered. Will the Attorney General engage in a serious and sympathetic discussion with her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice about how we can make Jade's law a reality?

The Attorney General: While I always enjoy my discussions with the hon. Lady, I am afraid that I am not a Minister in the Ministry of Justice. I am happy to pass on her points to those Ministers. The Attorney General's Office stays completely separate and independent of the Ministry of Justice, and it is important that we maintain that.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am sure the Attorney General will agree that the investigation and prosecution of rape and serious sexual offences requires particular skills in both investigation and handling in court. Will she therefore welcome the increase in prosecution counsel fees to an equal level with those for the defence so that we get the most competent people doing these cases? Will she also accept that more investment must continue to go in so that the Crown Prosecution Service, as the Director of Public Prosecutions pointed out to our Committee on Tuesday, can continue to recruit sufficient experienced rape prosecutors and have the digital technology to deal with things such as mobile phone evidence in these cases?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend knows well that I do not hold the budget that he is seeking to influence, but he is one of the best campaigners in the House and, as ever, he made his point extremely clearly. I watched with interest his Committee's proceedings earlier this week and noted what was said.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Attorney General.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Almost 500 days ago, in the joint inspectorate's report on the post-charge handling of rape cases, it recommended that “Immediately”—I stress that word—

“the police and the CPS should work...to ensure that bad character is considered in all rape cases, and progressed wherever it is applicable.”

That means applying to enter into evidence relevant elements of a suspect's history, including past convictions and a record of violence. But when I recently asked the

Ministry of Justice about the issue, it could not even tell me how many bad character applications had been made or allowed in the last year, let alone what progress had been made in meeting the immediate recommendations from last year's report. Does the Attorney General know what progress has been made? If not, will she make immediate inquiries?

The Attorney General: I am always interested in the right hon. Lady's inquiries into the way that data is produced. She has made some valid points in the past, and I am always keen to engage with her on how best we can provide transparency. I am happy to take her point forward with Ministry of Justice colleagues. I have seen much closer working between the CPS and the police. That is working particularly well in the area of rape and serious sexual offences, which is why we have prioritised that work. I would be happy to look into her question.

Crimes of Aggression against Ukraine

5. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential establishment of a special tribunal on crimes of aggression against Ukraine. [905805]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): I am confident that Russia will be held accountable for its appalling actions in Ukraine. We have been at the forefront of international efforts. We have referred Russia to the International Criminal Court, we will intervene on behalf of Ukraine before the International Court of Justice later this year, and we are part of the core group of states working to establish a special tribunal for the crime of aggression.

Peter Grant: The Attorney General will appreciate that the International Criminal Court does not have jurisdiction over crimes of aggression—in effect, the deliberate, violent and unprovoked military incursion into the sovereign territory of another recognised state. Karim Khan, a prosecutor at the ICC, has pointed out that none of the other 93,000 war crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine could have happened had it not been for that initial crime of aggression. Will the Attorney General assure us that steps are being taken to set up a special tribunal as quickly as possible, so that Putin and his fellow criminals can be brought to justice before they get the chance to destroy the evidence?

The Attorney General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his interest in this matter. There are three broad strands to our work on accountability. First, we have provided expert assistance to Ukrainian investigators. Secondly, alongside the international community we will continue to provide the ICC with funding, people and expertise, though I accept that the crime of aggression cannot be prosecuted there. Thirdly, we are exploring other options to hold Russia accountable for the crime of aggression.

Rape and Serious Sexual Offences

6. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to increase support for victims of rape and serious sexual offences. [905806]

10. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to increase support for victims of rape and serious sexual offences. [905812]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): We know that increased support for victims means that they are more likely to stick with the case until trial. We are working together across the criminal justice system to achieve that. Independent sexual violence advisers are really effective. The new intervention is the revised victims code, which will put a duty on the CPS team to meet the victim.

Robbie Moore: In constituency surgeries I have heard some of the most horrendous, gut-wrenching child sexual exploitation stories, some of which have involved multiple instances of rape of young children. That has profound, lifelong implications not only for the victims but for their families. As the cases move through the court, the experience can be terrible and traumatic, which is further exacerbated if the trial is delayed. Will the Attorney General assure me that in those cases, the whole family, including the victim, are supported not only during the trial but before and after, with mental health and wellbeing support?

The Attorney General: I have spoken to my hon. Friend about the specific case in his constituency. The Government are making it easier for all victims, including children, to access support. I spoke earlier about ISVAs—we also have children and young persons' independent sexual violence advisers, who are specially trained to work with children. The Solicitor General and I saw some great work in Manchester, where a large number of child victims are supported.

Alexander Stafford: Some of those who groomed and raped children in Rotherham during the child sexual exploitation scandal and were put away are now starting to be released, some having served less than half their sentence. That is causing immense psychological damage to the victims, who live knowing that their rapists walk free. What can we do to protect those vulnerable people and make sure that child rapists serve their proper sentence behind bars?

The Attorney General: Public protection is our top priority. We want serious offenders to serve the time in prison that reflects the seriousness of their crimes. Last year, we abolished automatic halfway release for serious sexual and violent offenders who are serving more than four years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Attorney General very much for her answers. One thing that concerns me and everyone in this House, but in particular families, are the delays for those who have been sexually abused over a number of years and are waiting for a trial to happen. What has been done to support families and individuals through that, because the timescale erodes their willingness and confidence to have justice?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the concern that with delay comes victim attrition. The answer lies in support. The ISVAs that I mentioned earlier are invaluable in ensuring that victims are willing to continue their case to trial.

Serious Violent Crime: West Midlands

7. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the level of prosecution rates of serious violent crime in the west midlands; and if she will make a statement. [905808]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): On our recent law tour, the Attorney General and I saw at first-hand the work of the Crown Prosecution Service west midlands serious violence unit. As my hon. Friend would expect, the CPS prosecutes violent crime robustly.

Michael Fabricant: As the Attorney General will know from intimate knowledge, serious violent crime is thankfully not something that Lichfield suffers very much from at all, but that is not the case in the broader west midlands. What can the CPS do to demonstrate to people in the west midlands that it will have a zero tolerance attitude and take action against serious violent crime?

The Solicitor General: The sale and use of drugs is driving serious and violent crime. Last year, for drugs offences the CPS in the west midlands had a conviction rate of over 90%. I agree with my hon. Friend's zero tolerance approach.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

8. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [905809]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): The unduly lenient sentence scheme remains an important tool, ensuring appropriate sentences for the most serious crimes. Last year, we referred 139 cases to the Court of Appeal and the sentence was increased in just under 70% of those cases.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Solicitor General for his response. He will recall that I contacted him on behalf of a number of my constituents about a child sex offender in my constituency. Our local newspaper, the *Stoke Sentinel*, reported the sentencing of that offender beneath the headline, "Pervert Walks Free From Court". My constituents are rightly concerned that such serious offenders can receive a non-custodial sentence. Given that my right hon. and learned Friend has been unable to intervene, will he review the way in which such offending is evaluated, so that such cases can be considered?

The Solicitor General: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and for raising this case. He is a great champion for Stoke-on-Trent. He will understand

that I cannot comment on individual cases, but it is right to say that the threshold or test for undue leniency is a high one. In the vast majority of cases the Crown court judges get the sentence right, and the Court of Appeal will grant permission only in exceptional circumstances.

War Crimes Trials: Ukraine

9. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Whether she has taken recent steps to support Ukraine's judiciary in its conduct of war crimes trials. [905810]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): We have sent our most experienced international judge, Sir Howard Morrison, to train more than 100 Ukrainian judges. I met some of them earlier this year in Kyiv with him. Next week, we have a delegation of Ukrainian officials in the UK for prosecutorial training.

Patricia Gibson: The International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression was launched in The Hague this week with the backing of the EU, the US and the International Criminal Court, collecting data, interviewing victims and building evidence files to assist both international and national prosecutors to bring criminals to justice for the invasion of Ukraine. In addition to what the Attorney General has already said, what further practical steps will she take to support the centre, and assist and support international efforts to gather evidence of war crimes committed in Ukraine?

The Attorney General: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I would be delighted to pick this up with her outside the Chamber if she would like more detail on the work we are doing. I work very closely with the Ukrainian prosecutor general, Andriy Kostin. His team are currently investigating and prosecuting 92,000 open war crimes cases during a conflict—something that is unprecedented. We are providing help at every level, including prosecutorial and evidence-gathering help. We are a keen part of the atrocity crimes advisory group. We have been training judges. We are keen to help with the wider accountability question on the international stage as well. At all levels, we are absolutely determined to help our friends in Ukraine.

Mr Speaker: Could the Attorney General keep going for another 30 seconds?

The Attorney General: I could keep going on Ukraine almost forever, Mr Speaker. What else shall I talk about? What a delight! I could talk about Ukraine all day.

There is another large piece of work on compensation that we are undertaking with our international partners—

Mr Speaker: Well done!

Rail Ticket Offices

10.30 am

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State if he will make a statement on plans to close rail ticket offices.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): I am answering the urgent question on behalf of the Secretary of State, who is currently involved in this process, so it is appropriate for me to respond.

There has been a huge shift in the way in which passengers purchase tickets at railway stations, with about one in every 10 transactions taking place in ticket offices in 2022-23. That is down from one in three a decade earlier and equates to 13% of rail revenue. Despite this, our stations have hardly changed in the past 10 years, which means that staff are constrained to work in ticket offices, although they could serve passengers better on station platforms and concourses. I am pleased that the rail industry has launched consultations on the future of ticket offices under the ticketing and settlement agreement process, which will give the public an opportunity to scrutinise the train operating companies' proposals to ensure that they work in the best possible way for passengers.

These changes are about modernising the passenger experience by moving staff out of ticket offices to be more visible and accessible around the station. Crucially, no currently staffed stations will be unstaffed as a result of this reform—staff will still be there to provide assistance and additional support for those who need and want it—and the new approach will take into consideration the potential impact on individuals with protected characteristics. It is of course vital that our railway is accessible to all and I have engaged directly with accessibility groups and will continue to do so.

This is an industry process, so I encourage Members and their constituents to engage with their local train operators to find out more about the proposals for their local stations. If passengers want to raise any views, they can contact the relevant passenger body. I believe that the industry's proposed reforms could enable staff to provide a more flexible, agile and personal service, creating the modern experience that people expect.

Louise Haigh: Yesterday, the Rail Delivery Group confirmed plans to close hundreds of rail ticket offices across the country but, this morning, as is usual when difficult decisions are made, the Secretary of State was nowhere to be seen. This announcement, driven every inch of the way by his Department—not the industry, as the Minister claimed—has caused huge anxiety to vulnerable and disabled passengers and rail staff up and down the country; and how long have people been given to respond to these hugely consequential plans? Just 21 days. This is a massive change to the network, affecting more than 150 million rail journeys a year and hitting elderly and disabled passengers the hardest, and they have been given only three weeks to have their say. Why does the Minister not just admit that this consultation has nothing to do with taking on board their concerns? It is a rubber stamp for a decision that he has already made, with the most vulnerable cut out altogether.

Can the Minister give any reassurance to vulnerable passengers who rely on staff in railway stations to help them to purchase tickets and board trains? Why has he not published equality impact assessments alongside these consultations? Given that he claims the solution is modernisation and digital ticketing, does he know how many stations do not currently have tap-in or barcode capability? What assessment has he made of the impact on revenue for our rail industry? Will he admit that this process is merely a prelude to job losses that will mean far fewer staff to serve the travelling public, and the continued managed decline of our railways?

We know what this is really about. It is not about reforming our railways; the Government have already ditched plans for Great British Railways. It is not about modernisation; the Department has already confirmed that the contactless ticketing roll-out is limited to London and the south-east. This is about one thing and one thing only: the Conservatives crashed the economy and now they are asking for more self-defeating cuts on our declining railways.

On the Minister's watch, our rail services are already being run into the ground, with cancellations at record highs, basic services such as wi-fi being taken away and legislation to reform the network on the scrapheap. Will he simply acknowledge that the Conservatives cannot fix the railways because they broke them in the first place?

Huw Merriman: Let me give a little more detail on the Secretary of State's role in the ticketing and settlement agreement, which has been in place not just under Conservative Administrations, but under the last Labour Administration. The Secretary of State is required to make a determination where the train operators and the passenger groups cannot reach an agreement. That makes it entirely right for him not to be here to respond to the urgent question.

The hon. Lady mentioned job losses. First and foremost, this is all about taking expert ticketing staff into the parts of the station where currently they are not seen. If only 10% of tickets are sold across the ticket counter, crudely, that means that 90% of passengers are not accessing that member of staff. The idea is to take the member of staff on to the platform to help passengers to purchase tickets via a ticketing machine or online. Ninety-nine per cent of tickets can be purchased in that manner, so there is no reason why this will not be an improvement.

In the event that there are some staff who do not wish to make the transition, of course, the train operators will need to look at that. The sad reality is that there is an offer on the table that would guarantee no compulsory redundancies up to December 2024, but the union leaders refused to put that offer to their members. If there is any concern about the impact on jobs, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and those it backs financially might wish to take some responsibility for that.

The hon. Lady talked about pay-as-you-go being rolled out only to the south-east. The devolution deals that have been announced will enable the roll-out of pilots by the Mayors of the West Midlands and Manchester by the end of this year. She also talked about wi-fi being taken away, but that is not the case either. We are looking for each train operator to do research to show how much the wi-fi is used, how helpful it is and what more can be done.

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

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): The Transport Committee is conducting an inquiry into accessible transport. We have received alarming evidence that the quality and range of assistance to vulnerable passengers has declined markedly since the pandemic. If the redeployment of staff is to be meaningful, it is essential that the new roles and training are designed with the support of campaign groups for vulnerable people. Will my hon. Friend assure me that that will happen?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The very first discussions I had with any groups about these changes were with those groups that represent passengers with accessibility and mobility issues on the railway. I told them that I am keen to work with them to help to ensure that these proposals are designed such that they work for each group with different characteristics. I will be looking to meet them again to ensure that that occurs.

At 9.30 am, the Office of Rail and Road issued its rail passenger assistance bookings update for the latest year, which shows that passenger assists increased by 68% compared with the previous year. That demonstrates that more help is needed at stations for people with accessibility needs. Again, by freeing people who are currently under-utilised in the ticket office and putting them on to the platforms to give help and guidance, we will help those who need it the most. That is at the forefront of everything that the train operators are looking to do with these proposals.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): In May 2021, there was a partial collapse at Northwich station—it was the ticket office. It is being rebuilt as we speak and there is an investigation into the collapse. I am now told by the Minister and the Secretary of State that it is incredibly likely—it seems a foregone conclusion—that the ticket office will never reopen. Disabled and elderly people already struggle accessing the station, but they will struggle even more without staff. This is a folly. The Minister needs to think again.

Huw Merriman: It is not the ticket office but the expert people in it who assist passengers. With these proposals, the train operators are looking to free up people from behind the glass, often in parts of the station that passengers do not access, to help them to use their skills to get tickets sold at ticket machines and to advise people on how to purchase online, so they can do that in future, and thereafter to help them with the entire passenger journey experience, giving them information and making them feel more reassured.

These roll-outs have occurred across other parts of the network. London Underground did this some years ago, and I do not believe the current Labour Mayor of London has any plans to turn it round because it actually works. It gives a better passenger experience. People can either live in the past or look towards the future. The way in which passengers transact across a whole range of services is exactly the same, and we are keen to see the railways modernise and thrive.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Many of my constituents write to me about overcrowding, on an almost daily basis, particularly on Chiltern Railways. No one has

ever written to me about ticket office provision. Sympathetic as I am to the argument for ensuring staff come out from behind the counter to assist people directly on platforms and around the station, how will this solve the demands of passengers, which we are probably all seeing in our inboxes on a day-to-day basis, in relation to rush-hour capacity and weekend capacity?

Huw Merriman: Chiltern Railways, for example, is looking to expand coverage at High Wycombe. By redeploying staff, it can get more staff on to the platforms. This is an example of where my hon. Friend's passengers will benefit because train operators can flex staff to provide more coverage, which makes people feel more reassured. Again, as hon. and right hon. Members look at the details and engage with the consultation, they may find their constituents are getting a wider range of services over a wider range of hours than they currently receive.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): As a booking and ticket clerk on the underground back in the 1970s, trust me: I know ticketing is now easier. I still use the buses and the underground every day, so I am familiar with the scenes at stations in the mornings and evenings. However, more screens and more opportunities for things to go wrong are not the answer to every problem. Does the Minister know how many ticket machines fail every day? These machines will make it harder, not easier, to buy tickets. It will be harder, not easier, to secure refunds. It will be harder, not easier, to apply for rail cards. Who uses booking office clerks? Disabled people, the elderly and people with language problems or difficulty understanding how to use the ticket machine. Will he give the green light for the RDG to change track and scrap this train wreck of a proposal?

Huw Merriman: There are 979 regulated, operated stations, but 43% of all stations currently do not have any ticket office facility at all, and people are still able to use those stations to access trains. Ninety-nine per cent of transactions can be completed either online or via a machine. In the event that a machine is not working and there are no staff—a lot of stations, like my own, are staffed for only half the day—a ticket to ride can be acquired and then a ticket can be purchased at the end of a journey. Again, these processes are already in place for those stations with no ticket office. We have those blocks to build on.

Mr Speaker: I do not think the Minister should plug The Beatles in that way.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Many people using stations such as Stoke-on-Trent station are infrequent travellers, and many are vulnerable or elderly and need support to buy a ticket. Can the Minister assure me that there will always be someone at Stoke-on-Trent station to provide a paper ticket to those without digital skills?

Huw Merriman: There are no plans to replace paper tickets through the train operators' process. Again, the aim is to ensure that ticket office staff are freed up and on the platform to sell the tickets and help passengers to purchase them at the machines or online. The hope is that, thereafter, those passengers will be able to book

for themselves with confidence, without needing to use that service. Those staff will also be available at Stoke-on-Trent to provide other services and information: more customer services. This is the exact way in which our rail passengers transact across the retail and financial space, which is why it is the right approach for the railways.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): My constituents who use Cross Gates station and people across the country will be worried about this proposal, because closing ticket offices is yet another example of private profit being put before the public good in our railways. This move is really about gutting railways of station staff, who have a big impact on passenger accessibility and safety, especially for older and disabled people. Does the Minister really believe that this will make the railways more welcoming for people—or does that not matter?

Huw Merriman: If we like seeing station staff when we access our journey and like the fact that we will be seeing more of them because they will be freed up, then I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Rather than gutting the railways, this Government, and indeed the taxpayer, have provided £41 billion of support since the pandemic. That does not sound like gutting the railways to me. I truly believe that we will end up with a better station experience, one that better reflects modern usage, which is why we are happy to support the train operators with these proposals. As I say, 10% of transactions are purchased across the ticket office counter—10 years ago, it was one in three. The railway is adapting to the manner in which consumers have changed their habits.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Disabled, elderly and other vulnerable passengers have been troubled by today's announcements, but does the Minister share my weary exasperation at the fact that people do not understand that the best way to help disabled and elderly passengers is for staff to come out from behind their screens to assist them in using a ticket machine, to help them on and off trains, and to help them to move around the station? Does he agree that for more than a decade Ministers have sought to improve services for passengers on the stations but have been blocked at every turn? Does he not see an opportunity to improve accessibility on our rail network here? It should be welcomed, not rejected.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend speaks with experience, having done this role himself, and he is absolutely right in what he says. I find it patronising to be told constantly that those who have disabilities or those who are elderly cannot access things online and cannot do this. That is not the case at all. At the moment, we do not have enough products online, and, as part of this process, I have been pushing to ensure that we have more online. It will mean that people do not have to go to the station beforehand to pick up a travelcard because they need a photo that they have to take. The idea is that this move should make things better for those who have accessibility and mobility challenges, not just in putting more tickets online and into a place where they can buy them from the comfort of their own home and phone, but in making sure they have more help at the station. So I thank him for the points he makes; he speaks with expertise.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Government have overseen the largest increase in rail fees. My constituents must deal with frequent delays and cancellations, and now people in Bath and across Somerset face losing their ticket offices. Bath is a world heritage site that has a large number of visitors. Foreign visitors, in particular, find getting through apps and ticketing machines bewildering; they depend on the ticket offices. It more important than ever now to attract people on to public transport, so will the Minister explain why my constituents, and the many visitors to Bath who would otherwise come by coach, should feel confident that train journeys will be more reliable, cheaper and more attractive than driving?

Huw Merriman: It is because we want to give that better customer experience, so that more passengers are seeing more staff at the stations to help them with information, make them feel more secure and welcome, help them purchase a ticket, and do so in a manner where those passengers are used to transacting across the space. I very much hope the hon. Lady will see a better staff experience as a result and therefore even more people will be attracted on to rail.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend is a good Minister and a good friend, but I think even he knows he has a tough gig this morning. To use his Beatles analogy, can he not just let it be? I queue up at my ticket office every Monday morning. There is always a queue of people wanting route advice, people with disabilities who cannot use the machines and people wanting refunds. I have to queue because I have an open flexible ticket, as many Members do, that I cannot get from the machine. Will roving members of staff be subject to statutory regulation? At the moment, ticket office staff are the only staff subject to statutory regulation, so I might not even be able to find a roving member of staff to take me to the machine, to request a ticket that the machine will not give me. It is not going to work, is it?

Huw Merriman: The Beatles analogy rather flew past me, I am afraid. Let me repeat the statistic to my hon. Friend: 99% of all tickets can be purchased from a ticket machine or online. In terms of the 1% we need to work on, I have asked the industry and officials to speed up the process, so that more tickets can be purchased in that manner and ticket machines can be changed so that that can occur. I seek to work with my hon. Friend to convince him that that is the right approach.

As the former Chair of the Transport Committee and having spent all my time on transport since I became a Member, I would not be making this statement if I did not believe this was the right thing for the railway and for passengers. That matters to me hugely. I am not a stooge; I do this because I think this is the right thing to do, it will create a better passenger experience and it guarantees our future in rail.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Minister spoke of modernising passengers' experience of railways. Having visited, he will know that Luton station is not fit for purpose and that the ticket office is integral to the upper level walk-through from the town centre to High Town. Any closure of the ticket office will pose risks to the security and safety of staff and passengers. Crucially,

[Rachel Hopkins]

can the Minister assure me that the proposed closure of ticket offices will not be used as a reason to delay, decrease or halt refurbishment of stations that are in need of renovation in the future, such as Luton station?

Huw Merriman: I have stood at the Dispatch Box and assured the hon. Lady that the maintenance improvements for Luton station will start in August and will be delivered by the beginning of next year. I can give her that assurance. This programme is completely separate and does not have any knock-on effects regarding the Access for All programme, through which 400 stations will have been given step-free access by next year.

As part of the process for the programme, passengers will have a three-week period during which they can provide their views on individual stations, so they can give their views on Luton station. There will then be a 35-day period during which passenger groups will assess what they have seen, and they can work with train operators on issues with which they are uncomfortable, perhaps for reasons of meeting accessibility needs. Finally, the Secretary of State will determine matters, if the two parties cannot agree. So there is a process in place to ensure that every station meets its requirements, which they must do from an accessibility perspective. None of that changes through this mechanism.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Ten per cent of ticket sales is still an awful lot of ticket sales. In this process, I hope that people who choose or need to buy their tickets from a ticket office will not suffer from the tyranny of the majority who choose not to, and that their interests will be properly protected throughout. Will the Minister assure me that those people who want to pay for their tickets using cash will still be able to do so? To me, banning people from using cash to buy tickets would be completely unacceptable.

Huw Merriman: I think I see the Beatles analogy, because there is a ticket to ride process—[*Interruption.*] Okay, that was it. That process is available to anybody who wishes to pay cash. For example, if my hon. Friend looks at the Northern Trains website, he will see that there is a whole feature explaining how cash can still be used. The machines should take cash. In the event that they do not, there is a process for passengers to purchase a ticket on the train without fear of a penalty. So yes, cash can still be used in the machines.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister is clearly on Southeastern time. That is why he was late getting the analogy. He said that just 10% of tickets are sold over the counter, but that does not explain who are using the ticket offices and what alternative arrangements he is going to make for them. Southeastern has announced 40 ticket office closures, 35 of which are in south-east London—that is 35 in south-east London. That is an outrage. One in my constituency has closed, but all the ones around my constituency are closing as well. What will he do to ensure that these people not only keep their jobs once they are moved out from behind the glass, but are not moved from being redeployed to redundancy? And what will he do about the 10% who rely on ticket offices?

Huw Merriman: I say respectfully to the hon. Member that Southeastern has had its best performance in six years. He stood in this place in January rightly saying that changes in the December timetable had led to higher cancellation rates. Those rates have gone down from 13% to 1.6%. Southeastern was one of the best operators in terms of performance. That was all down to the staff, but never has he stood up to thank the staff for turning things around and working so hard. He should not think they are his friends when they have to listen to him going on and giving misinformation about the situation. He has also got Southeastern's consultation wrong. Southeastern is doing its part in stages. The first part is on the Metro, so it is London TravelWatch that will deal with the responses. It will then roll out the changes to the rest of the network. He knows that, because it was on an email sent to him.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I pay tribute to and thank people such as Vinnie at Chislehurst station who was actually very busy when I came through this morning to get my rather late running Southeastern train—but we will leave that on one side. Does the Minister accept that 21 days is a very short period for such an important consultation? Secondly, one of the stations named—Sundridge Park—does not have step-free access to both platforms. It is staff currently in the ticket office who help people get on the trains: they put up the ramps and help passengers to negotiate the steps. Will he give an undertaking that no staff will be removed until cast iron arrangements are in place for somebody to be in attendance on those stations to assist people throughout all the hours that a station is operating?

Huw Merriman: The changes mean that some staff may be best deployed on the platforms, because that is where they are seeing most of the passengers and some of them need their help. There may be other situations where it makes more sense for that member of staff to be near where they are currently positioned because of the design of the station. The idea is that each station is looked at, so that when a member of the public decides to fill in the consultation, they will get a dropdown, which will locate the station in which they are interested and then they can provide their comments. The passenger groups will then look to see whether what is proposed will work. If it does not, that is a different matter. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that the train operators and the passenger groups will make their determinations on a case-by-case basis. Where things do not make sense, those changes will not just be put through to make for a worse experience.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The announced closure of 45 railway ticket offices across Greater Manchester, including at Levenshulme and Gorton stations, will be to the detriment of my constituents who depend on them. Just when we should be encouraging travel by rail to reduce our carbon footprint, this measure will push people away from our great British railways. We should be trying to make train travel easier, cheaper and more accessible, so why are the Government acting against the interests of the public?

Huw Merriman: I re-emphasise that the aim of these measures is to redeploy staff who are currently underutilised and who are not seeing the passengers that they used to

because passenger habits have changed. Those staff will be freed up to work in other areas where they can not only sell the ticket to the passenger, but also help them with information and cater for any particular accessibility needs on the platform. This is all about making for a better passenger experience. All I can say to the hon. Member is that he has the consultation and he should complete it. He will find that things such as this happen in all walks of life and in train stations as well. Manchester has looked at using ticketless travel. Tyne & Wear Metro has just done this and London Underground has done it for years. It actually works and it gives a better passenger experience and that is what I am determined to see the train operators deliver through this change.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I have huge concerns about these plans. As the Minister knows, my hard-pressed constituents trying to get to work, college or university from Marsden or Slaithwaite stations and transiting through Huddersfield still face huge disruption on the TransPennine route. When the computer says no, does he not agree that the best way for them to get advice on ticketing, refunds, alternative routes and when the next train is coming is by speaking to fully trained staff in ticket offices?

Huw Merriman: If I give my station as an example, we have one member of staff, who is in a ticket office. Most people already have their tickets, for the reasons I have given; only one in 10 buy them from the ticket office. They access the platform through a gate and do not see any members of staff. If there are delays and problems, it is better for passengers to be alongside the member of staff on the platform to get that information, rather than trying to find them behind glass.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): There is a problem with the Minister's point about looking to the future. Back in 2021, Transport for the North, of which I was a board member at the time, was forced to abandon its integrated smart ticketing programme after the Government pulled the funding. I am sure the Minister will remember that from his time on the Select Committee. That work would have helped to digitise transport and create multi-modal, multi-operator pay-as-you-go travel on rail, light rail and bus. We thought it was a deeply flawed decision at the time, and recent events have shown that to be the case. Will he work with TfN and others to see whether any of that work can be reinstated?

Huw Merriman: I have the greatest respect for the hon. Member and I will certainly look at what more can be done. We are keen to roll out more pay-as-you-go. There will be 400 stations by the end of the year that will have pay-as-you-go in place, where people can tap in and out. That tends to be the future, as we see with London Underground. Those pilots are in place for the end of the year in the west midlands and Manchester. I recognise that does not cover the area he mentions, and I am happy to work with him to see what more can be done.

Coming back to London Underground, this system has been in place for some years. London Underground does not have staff behind ticket office counters, and I believe it works well. It has freed those staff to come out into the station area as a whole, where they can give much better advice and understanding to passengers. It works really well, and that is why, I believe, no Labour Mayor has asked for it to be reinstated.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Residents in Swindon had a taste of things to come yesterday, when the ticket office was closed and people were queueing out of the door to use the wholly inadequate machines at the station. The wi-fi was unreliable as well. If we are to proceed with this significant change, the technology available to customers must be significantly better and we need to avoid a situation where elderly customers who come to pick up an advance ticket have nobody to help them. Will the Minister do everything he can, working with the rail authorities, to ensure that residents do not face—to quote the Beatles again—a “Magical Mystery Tour” when they come to Swindon station?

Huw Merriman: I will certainly do so, with my right hon. and learned Friend, and I will share a bit of experience that led me to want more in this direction. I need to get a weekly travel card, but I could not get it online because it was not available. I went to the station but did not have a photo with me. I asked, “Why is it the case that we still need a photo when that weekly travel card is less than an Avanti single?” I was told, “That’s the way it has been on the railway for 40 years. That’s why we do it.” That is not good enough. I have mobility, so I can walk up to Charing Cross to make that transaction—or not make it—and then leave, but for others who do not, it does not work for them at all. I can give him the assurance that alongside this programme is a strong exercise to make all products accessible from machines and online; 99% are already accessible, but we need to get the full suite of products so that people do not have to queue in the manner he has just described.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): Although these station office closures are in England, they have implications for Scottish passengers. Many in my constituency, myself included—never mind those in the Borders and elsewhere in southern Scotland—access services through stations in northern England, in Berwick and elsewhere. That is not just a matter of choice, but often a matter of necessity; it is required because of the pan-UK services timetabling from LNER, TPE or CrossCountry, all of which are signed off by the DfT. What discussions are taking place with the Scottish Government or with Scottish passenger representatives to ensure that the rights of those north of the border who are impacted by this change will be protected?

Huw Merriman: I will be looking to speak to the Scottish Executive. In Scotland, similar proposals have, as I understand it, been rolled out to a number of ticket stations by ScotRail. I want to assess whether that was a mandate from the Executive. I will certainly be having a chat with them to see what lessons can be learned, given that Scotland appears to have gone before England in that regard.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): May I take this opportunity to welcome the extension of contactless payments to Berkhamsted and Tring in South West Hertfordshire? I declare an interest as a local commuter from one of those stations. Although this initiative on rail ticket offices will, in my eyes, help more travellers, can my hon. Friend reassure the House that additional support will remain for those who require help, such as the elderly and the disabled?

Huw Merriman: Yes, I can. I thank my hon. Friend for his points. I know that he has busy stations and will want to ensure that his constituents are looked after. The very first meeting that I had when we were looking at the train operators' proposals was with disability and access groups and age concern groups. I wanted to work with them—I still do—to find out what individual characteristics of the design may work for some but not for others. I can give him the assurance that we will continue to support those who have the greatest vulnerabilities. I firmly believe that taking people out from behind glass and putting them into areas where they can be best accessed will mean that they will be able to give passengers the greatest help, making for a better rail experience.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Minister says that he has engaged with relevant disabled people's organisations, but there has been widespread opposition to ticket office closures from such organisations, including Disability Rights UK, the National Federation of the Blind, Transport for All, Royal National Institute of Blind People, Royal National Institute for Deaf People, Guide Dogs and Scope. The Minister thinks that taking expert staff out of station ticket offices and putting them on the platform will help people, but how will people know which member of staff to go to for the help they need? A ticket office means that people know where to go to get that help. If those staff are to be redeployed, there will not be a single redundancy, will there, Minister? I have a funny feeling that these proposals will go down not like a yellow submarine but like a lead balloon.

Huw Merriman: I have stated the position with regard to redundancies. A deal is on the table but the RMT will not give it to its members to make a determination. It included a commitment to no compulsory redundancies until December 2024. It is for the RMT to decide whether it wishes to get that protection in place. I will say the same thing to the hon. Member that I have said previously: I have worked with those groups; they were the first I met and are at the forefront of my mind in ensuring that this works. From a passenger perspective, if they want to reach out to a member of staff for any reason, they will do so, and members of staff will—because they are great members of staff—signpost them to somebody else. All members of staff must have the requisite training, and they do. I have great faith in our railway workforce to continue looking after passengers. I believe that these changes will bring more benefits in that regard.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I thank the Minister for meeting me yesterday to discuss the proposed closure of Darlington's booking office. I also met David Horne yesterday afternoon to discuss that issue. I remain deeply concerned that our mainline station, which is currently receiving £139 million of expansion investment, will be left without a booking office. The elderly, disabled and vulnerable rely on help from our ticket offices, and if a station has barriers, that help needs to be in front of those barriers, not behind them. Ticket machines and apps have cut-off times, making purchases impossible in the minutes running up to a train leaving. Will my hon. Friend look into that problem? Will he assure the House that there is proper consultation, and that some ticket offices can be saved? Will he make it clear that representations can be made by letter and not just by email?

Huw Merriman: Yes; the way in which the ticketing and settlement agreement process works means that anyone can access it online, but they can also write. Details will be available at stations, and indeed online, explaining how people can write through to make their points about their stations.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for meeting me and for doing so in a constructive manner whereby he was able to give me examples of his concerns, including tickets not being available within 15 minutes of travel. I have taken that point away because it forms part of the catalogue of changes that I want to see—the remaining 1% of tickets that cannot be purchased for that reason should be reduced towards 0%. I invite all right hon. and hon. Members who can give other examples to get in contact with me as well, because I will take those problems away and look at getting them fixed.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) was right: sometimes it is just too complicated to purchase a ticket without using a ticket office. I recently had that experience, and buying my ticket from the ticket office was £50 cheaper than if I had purchased it from the machine. I am afraid that the Beatles analogy he started is right: he's got a ticket to ride, and he don't care.

Huw Merriman: I was not even aware that I had started a Beatles analogy. Actually, this is more important than joking about music; this is about reassuring passengers that we can deliver a better experience but also an experience that they are very familiar with, in terms of the other transactions they make across the retail space. More and more people are doing that online, and they start doing it online by being taught how to do it. The idea is that ticketing staff who are currently behind glass, not seeing those passengers, will help to deliver that and ensure that those passengers have a better experience and do not need to queue up next time, because they can do it in a seamless manner. Where that operation does not exist because of the machine, we are looking to upgrade. I will take any examples he has, to ensure that passengers get the best price but can do it online or via a machine.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Staff at Kettering railway station are superb; they are friendly, polite, efficient and dedicated to simply outstanding customer service. Given that Kettering is one of the stations potentially affected, will the Rail Minister encourage rail passengers in Kettering to take part in the public consultation promoted by East Midlands Railway? Can he confirm that if the changes go through, a passenger who turns up at Kettering railway station with cash to buy a ticket will be able to do so?

Huw Merriman: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that cash purchases would remain across the network. If there is a machine that is not working for cash, passengers can enter the train, safe in the knowledge that they can then purchase their ticket on the train or at the end of their journey. There are a number of stations that are not part of the current consultation, and they will tend to be the end point where passengers will find a busier station. I can absolutely give him that assurance.

My hon. Friend mentioned the staff. We are looking at the ticket office as a place that people are not accessing any more, but the ticketing staff are brilliant. All we want to do is utilise them more, so that they can see more people and use their expertise. Passengers want their ticket office staff to be more accessible, so that they can gain that expertise, and that is exactly why we want to put them in the places where the passengers are.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am a bit worried. The Minister keeps saying that staff are not utilised and that people are not accessing ticket offices. I can tell him that in Hull last year, nearly 180,000 tickets were sold from the ticket office—that is one ticket every 1.6 minutes. We have gone through years of bad management with TransPennine at Hull Paragon station. This looks like another downgrading of facilities for passengers. We have heard about the effect it will have on the elderly, the disabled and the vulnerable. Can the Minister just for once put the travelling public first?

Huw Merriman: I am putting the travelling public first when I make these points. What the right hon. Lady and others cannot deny, despite saying it cannot be believed, is that 10 years ago one in three tickets was sold across the ticket office counter, because people were not purchasing as much online or through machines. Now it is 10%. That demonstrates that ticket office staff are not being utilised fully. We want to utilise them in a better manner. Redeploying staff where they are not as busy as they were and could be better utilised and have a more rewarding job is what happens across the retail sector. The railways should be no different.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Anyone who has experienced the long queues from the machines and the ticket office at my local train station of Leigh-on-Sea—sometimes it goes out of the office and around the block—on a Monday morning, and sometimes on a Saturday, will know why I have been campaigning for contactless ticketing to be extended to Leigh-on-Sea and Chalkwell stations ever since I arrived in this place. As such, I am personally delighted; however, innovation must never be used as an excuse to exclude any of my constituents or deliver a worse service. The blind and partially sighted, such as the wonderful Jill Allen-King OBE, cannot access the touchscreen ticket machines and need a person to help them buy that ticket, but that person does not need to be behind glass. Can the Minister assure me that there will always be somebody available at Leigh-on-Sea and Chalkwell ticket stations to help the blind and partially sighted, the elderly, and anyone else who needs help?

Huw Merriman: Yes—any currently staffed station will not become unstaffed as a result of these changes. As I have said, 43% of stations do not have ticket office staff, but if the stations that my hon. Friend has mentioned are currently staffed, they will not become unstaffed.

My hon. Friend referenced guide dogs. I am very grateful for the meeting I had with the Guide Dogs team, because we know that when it comes to mobility and accessibility issues, what may work for some does not work for everyone. Sight loss is a particular example of that, so I am very keen to continue to work with

Guide Dogs to reassure my hon. Friend's constituents that they will always get the help they need at her local stations.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I have several rail ticket offices in my constituency: Stockport, Heaton Chapel and Brinnington. The Minister will know, because I have raised it with him frequently, that Heaton Chapel and Brinnington do not have disabled access, so I am not convinced by the notion that this Government are looking to deliver more for passengers, and I do not think my constituents are convinced either. The ticket offices at all three of those stations—Stockport, Brinnington and Heaton Chapel—seem to be earmarked for closure, and the people who work in those ticket offices will be worried. Some 240,000 people work on the railway; they will be worried that the Government are running the industry into the ground, so I urge the Minister to rethink this proposal. Twenty-one days is an absolutely outrageous period of time for a consultation.

Huw Merriman: Again, I point to the accessibility stats. There was a 68% increase in the number of passengers who needed assistance at stations, so it surely makes sense to free up people who are working behind glass and are unable to provide that assistance—people who may not be as utilised, because fewer passengers are purchasing tickets in that manner. Those people can then go and assist the passengers who need that help the most, which is at the forefront of these changes.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the announcement that Gillingham and Rainham ticket offices will be kept open, and I pay tribute to the fantastic staff in Gillingham and Rainham. Across the board, constituents have raised with me the needs of an ageing population and the elderly. I accept the need for innovation and adaption, but whether it is banking or seeking repeat prescriptions, services are going online, and the elderly are finding it difficult to access face-to-face services. Regarding transport and getting advice and support at public train stations, can the Minister please ensure that face-to-face provision is always available for our elderly residents?

Huw Merriman: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I hope that these changes will lead to more face-to-face interaction, because those who work on the railway and provide such brilliant help, information and reassurance for passengers will be more likely to be in the places where those passengers are located. Southeastern is doing its consultation in stages—the current part is for the metro side of Southeastern, after which it will be rolled out further—but I can give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My constituents and I are getting a bit fed up of everything being pushed online, because as we have heard today, it does not work for everyone. However, I want to ask the Minister what he is going to do to help operators deal with this change. Merseyrail, for example, does not accept tickets on phones, and there have been plenty of examples of people who bought through tickets online being fined because they have not been able to produce a physical ticket. Is the Minister going to do an assessment of operators' capacity to deal with this issue and give them some financial support to make that change?

Huw Merriman: We will certainly be working with the train operators to ensure that passengers are not inconvenienced. As I mentioned, 43% of stations do not have ticket offices right now, and people still purchase their tickets and get on board. However, if members of the public are not able to purchase a ticket for whatever reason, including in stations that do not have a ticket office—perhaps because the machine is not operating—there will be a means to ensure that they are not inconvenienced. Obviously, the changes could be rolled out further, so I will make sure that train operators are fully geared towards that end, and that passengers are not inconvenienced in the manner that the hon. Gentleman has described. I give him that assurance.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Of course, it is always healthy to carry out a review to make positive change, but I have to say that I am deeply concerned to hear that Northern is considering closing the ticket offices in Keighley and Ilkley. I am yet to be convinced that these changes will have a positive impact on disabled passengers, elderly passengers, those with accessibility issues and of course those who want to carry out more complex transactions. One in six people carry out such transactions at those two stations—higher than the national average. Will the Minister meet me so that I can express my concerns, but will he also reiterate to the House that this is a consultation and that there is no done deal, and urge people to comment and give their views to the consultation?

Huw Merriman: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I would certainly be delighted to meet him and any other hon. and right hon. Members who wish to meet me to discuss this issue. Again, let me set out the process, which has been triggered by the train operators setting out their plans. There is a period of time—21 days—for members of the public to respond. There is then a 35-day period for the transport groups, London TravelWatch and Transport Focus, to assess what is being said at each station. If they are not convinced, they will work with the train operator, and if that mechanism cannot reach an agreement on these matters, it will go to its ultimate stage, which is with the Secretary of State.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Many Members have mentioned the impact on those with accessibility problems, and I would urge the Minister to take that into account. For my constituents in Edinburgh West, the closures announced by LNER, CrossCountry, Avanti West Coast and TransPennine all affect stations on the main line route. Can the Minister tell us how he is going to address the perception, which is growing, that people are not being encouraged on to public transport, and that accessibility to the south of the United Kingdom from Scotland, particularly from Edinburgh, is being undermined?

Huw Merriman: As part of this process, a number of stations will not be included. They tend to be bigger hub stations, as we call them, so Edinburgh is not included in that regard. I may be in danger of repeating myself, but the reason I sat down on the very first day this came up with those who represent disability and accessibility groups is that I was concerned they would feel that such a change may not be a positive for them. I wanted to work with them to understand how we can make this change positive, and how we can deploy more

staff into the spaces where they will be able to access them more than they can right now. I continue to work with those groups, and I give the hon. Member the assurance that that process will remain. Of course, after the consultation and at the end point, all the current accessibility requirements will have to be met under these proposals, as they are under the existing set-up.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): First, I absolutely understand and respect what my hon. Friend and next-door neighbour is looking to achieve through these innovations, but he will not be surprised that I have already had a deluge of concerned constituents get in touch who are feeling that they are being designed out and are set to be disenfranchised. This follows hard on the change to car parking at the station, which now requires a specific app.

I have already had assurance from Southern that there will be assistance for passengers at Eastbourne from the first train to the last train. Under the proposed changes, there are longer ticket assistance hours than ticket office hours, so at face value this may represent an improvement and an extension of support. However, I can only imagine the complex and quite convoluted conversations at ticket machines that will have to take place about journey planning, and the long line of other passengers waiting to access a service with which they are super-fluent. The consultation is for 21 days, which is a very short period of time. I intend to make a significant contribution to that on behalf of the very many people who will not know how or will not feel empowered to do so. Will the Minister encourage operators to accept that?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say that it might be worth putting in for an Adjournment debate? The question must be shorter.

Huw Merriman: I can give my hon. Friend and neighbour that assurance. Again, I would encourage hon. Members to look at the train operators in their area to see what the plans would mean. A number of train operators have decided to take a number of people from behind the glass counters, who are all working the same hours, and flex their hours—they have the ability to do so—which means there will be wider coverage over the day. One plan I was particularly interested to see was with late-night coverage where there is no such coverage at the moment; these changes will actually provide that coverage. It is coverage not just to sell a ticket on the platform and provide help and guidance, but to provide safety reassurance, an information point and the greeting that people want if they are to be able to use their railway. That is why I am a passionate advocate of these changes, and I believe they will make for a better experience for the passenger over a longer period of the day.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): The Minister may remember our meeting on 1 December with Southeastern. In that meeting, I asked whether there were any plans to close any ticket offices. The response from Southeastern was no. Was the Minister privy to any conversations or plans regarding ticket office closures before our meeting?

Huw Merriman: I will look back on our notes from that meeting and work out what was said. The train operators have put forward these proposals because

they are required to look at their coverage and at how they need to adapt and modernise to give a better passenger experience. I have of course had discussions with them, and one of the examples that I have given over the course of the past three quarters of an hour is that of ensuring that more ticket options are put online and on to machines. I also made sure that my first discussions were with accessibility groups, because I wanted them to be able to give me their views. Yes, I have been involved in the process, and I will look back at the minutes from our meeting in December, assess what was said and write back to her.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to the centre of the railways: Strangford.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Strangford is the centre of the world, Mr Speaker.

Is the Minister aware that not everyone is completely computer literate or has access to a printer? For example, my 92-year-old mother has the capacity to go to the train station for a day trip, but she absolutely cannot go online because she is a cash person. Where in this decision is the consideration of people such as my mother and others of that generation? Surely customer care and satisfaction has to be key to any decision.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: customer care is at the forefront of this change. At the moment, a customer can go to a station and purchase a ticket from an office behind the glass, but only 10% of tickets are purchased in that manner. That means that other members of the public often do not receive any help or journey assistance in other parts of the station and do not get the full benefit of that member of staff. These changes are all about giving passengers a service. This is not just about buying tickets, with a member of staff with them at the machine showing passengers what to do, but about help in all other regards.

I have a great passion for the railways. I love this job, and I love the railways. All the staff who work on them do an amazing job. That is why I am spending three weeks of my summer visiting all parts of the system to learn more, assess more and reassure more. I recognise Members' concerns, and I hope I have answered as many questions as I can. For those who want to meet me because they want to understand more, I am happy to do that, because I want every hon. Member to have everything they need to ensure that this change is positive for our passengers.

Hong Kong Pro-democracy Activists

11.28 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary if he will make a statement on the warrants and bounties issued against pro-democracy activists by Hong Kong national security police.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): As the Foreign Secretary set out on Monday in response to this latest egregious action in Hong Kong, we will not tolerate any attempts by the Chinese authorities to intimidate individuals in the UK. The UK will always defend the universal right to freedom of expression and stand up for those who are targeted simply for exercising that right.

We strongly object to the national security law that China imposed on Hong Kong, including its extraterritorial reach, and declared it a breach of the legally binding Sino-British joint declaration when Beijing imposed it on Hong Kong in 2020. Let me be clear: that law has no jurisdiction here. In response to its imposition, the Government acted quickly and decisively to suspend our extradition agreement with Hong Kong indefinitely. We introduced a bespoke immigration route for holders of British national overseas status and their immediate family members, giving nearly 3 million people a path to British citizenship. We welcome the contribution that this growing diaspora makes to life in the UK, as we welcome the contribution of the diaspora with links to mainland China. They are all safe to live here and exercise the same rights and freedoms that all UK residents enjoy.

Three years on from the law's imposition, we have seen how this opaque and sweeping law has undermined the liberties enshrined in the Sino-British joint declaration and in Hong Kong's Basic Law. It has seen opposition stifled and dissent criminalised. Alternative voices across Hong Kong's society have been all but extinguished, and changes to electoral rules have further eroded the ability of Hong Kong's people to be legitimately represented at all levels of government. Hong Kong's governance, rights and social systems are now closer to mainland norms.

The Foreign Secretary made plain our views on Hong Kong with Chinese Vice-President Han Zheng on 5 May and at the UN Human Rights Council on 27 February. The Hong Kong authorities are busy trying to attract the world back to Hong Kong following years of political disruption and covid. It is hard to see how that will be successful while they continue to pursue citizens who came out on the streets to do nothing more than to protest peacefully to protect their rights. We call on Beijing to remove the national security law and for China and the Hong Kong authorities to end the targeting of those who stand up for freedom and democracy. We will continue to act as a convening power, bringing together our international partners to stand up for the people of Hong Kong, to call out violations of their rights and freedoms and to hold China to its international obligations.

Layla Moran: Finn Lau, Christopher Mung and Nathan Law are three incredibly brave individuals who stood up for democratic values while the Chinese Communist

[Layla Moran]

party rode roughshod over them in Hong Kong. They sought refuge in the UK because they thought they would be safe. Chillingly, Beijing is trying to do all it can to interfere in what should be their safe haven.

The Government have rightly said that they will not tolerate this intimidation, but I am afraid their words ring rather hollow. The danger to those individuals on these shores feels all too present. We saw it in Southampton in May, we saw it in Manchester at the consulate last October, and we see it in the reported secret police stations. We need more than just condemnation; we need action. Most urgently, that means ensuring that these individuals are safe. Tragically, Finn and Christopher have said that they do not feel safe. They have asked for a meeting with the Foreign Secretary. Can we have confirmation that that will happen?

Can the Minister clarify that it is illegal to bounty hunt in the UK, and that the Government will actively prosecute those who do? Does she agree with Lord Patten that it is now time for those UK judges who still remain on the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal to resign over this? Will the Government reconsider the Foreign Secretary's planned visit to Beijing in the light of this blatant escalation by China of transnational repression? Finally, will the Government at last take meaningful action against those involved in these warrants, as well as those intent on snuffing out the flame of democracy in Hong Kong?

It is staggering that after everything that has happened, we are yet to sanction a single individual. Our allies acted years ago. We have existing obligations under the joint declaration, yet too often this Conservative Government choose constructive ambiguity rather than firm lines. What is clear on all sides of this House is that it is time for that to change.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I know the House will understand that as a matter of long-standing policy, we do not comment on the detail of operational matters. I hope colleagues will understand the risk of compromising the integrity of security arrangements for those who are here in the UK. As I say, we will continue to afford them the opportunity for freedom of speech and expression. Discussions are ongoing, but I am not able at the moment to give more details. I hope the hon. Lady will understand that. I am in regular contact, as are officials, with the Minister for Security and the Home Office on this matter.

In relation to the question on judges, they are private citizens. We therefore must allow them to reach their own decision in that particular situation. However, as I said—I will repeat this as many times as anyone wishes me to—I think that all of us in the House and everyone in the UK are clear that the UK will not tolerate any attempts to intimidate or silence individuals here on UK soil, and that we will do all we can to ensure their safety.

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

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The bounties placed on the heads of those fleeing Chinese Communist party repression and autocracy are not just outrageous but a blatant violation of international law. They also

expose the lies of Xi Jinping when he says that he is respecting freedoms within Hong Kong. We must take a stand against transnational repression to protect British nationals and those seeking refuge in the UK. Only last week, I wrote to HSBC to argue against how it is appallingly denying Hongkongers access to their own pensions. Given that three people seeking refuge in the UK have now had bounties put on their heads, has the Foreign Secretary or my right hon. Friend the Minister called in the Chinese ambassador this week in response? If not, why not?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee that these bounties are extraterritorial and therefore have no rights or legitimacy here. As I have stated, we must always protect and allow the voices of those here with us to maintain that freedom of expression.

We speak regularly with Chinese colleagues. In fact, just a few weeks ago I had meetings with the visiting economic secretary and raised these issues—that was obviously before this bounty was raised. We will continue to work closely, including with the embassy, on a number of matters, including this one.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on bringing forward this important question.

The issuing of these arrest warrants is a further repressive step by the Hong Kong Government. The national security law under which the warrants have been issued is itself a serious breach of the legally binding Sino-British agreement that set the terms for governing Hong Kong until 2047. Beijing's attempts to bully and intimidate those who have already fled growing repression in Hong Kong are a symbol of the Chinese Government's attempt to stifle any further dissent and undermine basic freedoms in the territory. They deserve clear and unified condemnation, and it is pleasing to see so many hon. Members in the House showing that.

Given that three of the eight named individuals are based here in the UK, the move by the authorities in Hong Kong will further compound the fears held by the British-based Hong Kong community that they are still not free of the long arm of Chinese state repression. We should be proud of the UK's role in welcoming people here from Hong Kong to all our communities. We cannot tolerate efforts to harass or intimidate those who have come to the UK fleeing political persecution.

The Minister will know that protection for Hongkongers has been raised repeatedly by Labour. The Foreign Secretary's dismissive response at the last Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office oral questions was simply not good enough. I will repeat the question asked by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns). Has the Minister met today, or does she intend to meet today, a representative of the Chinese Government here in the UK to underline the feelings in this Parliament? Secondly, will she reassess whether it is in order for sanctions to be placed on leading members of the Hong Kong Government? Thirdly, will the Government grow a backbone and live up to our moral and legal obligations to Hongkongers both here in the UK and in Hong Kong?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The whole House clearly agrees that any attempt by any foreign power to intimidate, harass or indeed harm individuals or our communities in the UK will not be tolerated. This is an insidious threat to our democracy and to those fundamental human rights that the UK always stands up for across the world.

As I said, Home Office officials work closely with the FCDO and other Departments to ensure that the UK is and continues to be a safe and welcoming place for those who choose to settle here. As I said in my statement, the BNO route is now available to up to 3 million, and so far about 160,000—those numbers might not be entirely correct—have taken up the opportunity. The door is very much open. I will also highlight that the Security Minister directed the defending democracy taskforce to review the UK's approach to transnational repression to ensure that we have the most robust and joined-up response both across Government and with law enforcement, should—sadly—we need to make use of that.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Extending bounties and arrest warrants to people living in this country who have escaped Hong Kong is a particularly chilling extension of the Chinese Communist party's tentacles across sovereign borders. Frankly, tough words need to be followed by tough actions. Just saying that we will not tolerate this—or we will not tolerate this again—is no deterrent.

Will my right hon. Friend now admit that her sitting down with Liu Jianchao, the head of the Chinese Government's international liaison department—the chief dissident snatcher who had a role in issuing the warrants—and being photographed sitting next to him smiling, along with five other hon. Members of this House, was a bad idea? It sends out entirely the wrong message to the Chinese Government, which is why they think they can get away with it. When will we see real sanctions, the calling back of judges and some real implications for what China is doing, rather than tough words that mean nothing?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As the Foreign Secretary set out in his recent speech on China, we consider it important to engage with our Chinese counterparts, where appropriate, to protect UK interests and to build those relationships. I therefore was comfortable sitting down with Liu Jianchao for a political dialogue when he visited at the invitation of the Great Britain-China Centre, because I believe it is important to have such conversations. In every diplomatic relationship, being frank is possible only if the parties are in the room together. Colleagues will be aware that I was extremely frank with the gentleman in question. He was able to hear directly from an FCDO Minister our many concerns about sanctioned MPs and about Hong Kong. The issues we are discussing today and others were raised. We consider that an important way to maintain the conversation.

On this latest, very worrying situation on bounties, most importantly we want to ensure the safety, security and freedom of expression of those who choose to be here, so that they are able to express their views clearly on these matters. As colleagues know, when the national security law was brought in, we declared that it was a breach of the Sino-British joint declaration. We continue to raise those issues to see whether they can be resolved, but we do not feel confident at the moment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Using the Chinese national security law, authorities are seeking to prosecute critics of Hong Kong anywhere in the world. Extraterritorial warrants with outrageous bounties have now been issued for eight pro-democracy activists, former lawmakers and legal scholars, who have been attacked for speaking out against Chinese actions and campaigning for sanctions. At least three are known to live in the UK. If caught, they could face life sentences in China.

I welcome the Government's suspension of the extradition treaty with Hong Kong, but after the incidents in Manchester and Southampton, how can those pro-democracy activists be protected? What actions are the Government taking to break up the secret police units across the UK? With China having broken every single commitment and guarantee to Hong Kong, what action will the Government actually take against China?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I have said it but I am happy to reiterate. Colleagues rightly have concerns for the safety of those on British soil, and we provide them that freedom of expression. I will not discuss ongoing operational matters, but the FCDO and the Home Office are working closely together on these matters, and will continue to do so.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I am extremely disturbed to hear that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs is passing on details of new bank accounts opened by Chinese people and Hongkongers in the UK to the Chinese Government as part of anti-money laundering efforts. Will my right hon. Friend please work with the Treasury to make sure that that loophole is not exploited by the Chinese Government, putting exposed Chinese people and Hongkongers here in the UK in danger?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I would be pleased to catch up with my hon. Friend after this urgent question to discuss that matter more fully. Absolutely, I will take it up with urgency.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): There is a clear and present danger from the Chinese Government not just to the citizens of Hong Kong, but to citizens here in the United Kingdom. Is it not about time that we realised the pernicious influence of China on this country and Europe? With China having so many investments and so much influence in this country, is it not about time that we took sanctions against it—really rugged ones—because that is the only thing they will listen to. When will the Government act?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As colleagues know, we do not discuss potential future sanctions, as that could reduce their ability to have the impact we wish them to.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The Minister said that the United Kingdom will not tolerate these latest egregious acts and that they are a real threat to human rights. I note that she says she will not discuss future possible sanctions, but having been a Foreign Office sanctions Minister, may I ask her this specific question? Looking at the will of Parliament,

[Rehman Chishti]

will she ask the sanctions team to consider whether, given the real threat to human rights, the criteria passed by Parliament have been met, and update the House within the next 14 days?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: It is always nice to have the chance to discuss sanctions with a former sanctions Minister. It is one of the most extraordinarily complex but impactful tools that the FCDO has to make clear the UK's views and direction. I will happily take my hon. Friend's comments away. The work is constant and ongoing. We have more than doubled the team in the sanctions directorate in the last year, but we will not discuss any new sanctions that might be brought forward.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the Minister tell the House what discussions she has had with the US and Australia about co-ordinating an Interpol early warning system to protect pro-democracy activists overseas?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Officials have regular conversations with allies and partners around the world. They work with Interpol to ensure that rules that need to be maintained are and to ensure that we can use international powers to protect those here from extra-territorial reach.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): This recent development is yet another example of China's outrageous disregard of fundamental human rights and freedoms. One can hardly imagine how the decent, honourable and brave young man Nathan Law is feeling now, a young man I had the privilege of meeting in this place. He and others affected need to know that we are doing everything we can to defend their freedoms. I am sure our like-minded international partners feel the same. What is the UK doing to show leadership following this announcement, and to work with our international partners to stand up for the people of Hong Kong, call out this particular violation of their rights and freedoms, and hold China to its international obligations?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is always a champion and a strong voice. I thank her for the support she gives to those who are feeling under great strain. Some challenges remain. We suspended our extradition agreement with Hong Kong in July 2020, but 13 countries have still not done so, despite the national security law being brought in. They include two European countries, Czech Republic and Portugal, and 11 others, including Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea and India. We continue to work closely with them to ask that they reconsider their position so that those who need to be able to maintain their freedom of expression in their countries can do so safely.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My constituent Carlos Auyeung has written to me about significant distress and fear in the Hongkonger community caused by the exerting of extraterritorial enforcement on British soil, saying that it requires immediate attention and action. I listened carefully to the Minister's responses to my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton

(Alicia Kearns), both of whom asked her to call representatives of the Chinese Embassy in London into the Foreign Office to dress them down about the matter. She just did not answer their question. Will she answer it now, so that the House can be better informed?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The Foreign Secretary has many meetings during the week. I will take away that question, and I am sure that Foreign Office Ministers will have heard of the importance of these matters. We will continue our ongoing discussions, but we will also ensure that these concerns, which, rightly, are so clearly heard, are included in our annual human rights report, which will be published—I want to say “next week”, but I think the correct term is “imminently”, just in case the printers do not produce it on time—and in which China will, sadly, feature.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Last Thursday I had the privilege of meeting members of Hong Kong Watch, including representatives of the 3,000 BNOs who have recently come to settle in Warrington. What was very plain was the fear that they felt for the family members, many of them elderly, whom they had left behind in Hong Kong. They are now unable to return to see those family members. They requested that I ask the Minister to assure the House that she will continue to push for progress on human rights in China and particularly in Hong Kong, including the right to freedom of expression. Can she send that message to members of the BNO community in Warrington?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: It is heartening to know that Members on both sides of the House are so closely involved with the BNOs who are coming to the UK to make their new homes here, and I thank my hon. Friend for his commitment to that. I can assure him that the Government will continue to make clear our disagreement with—in fact, our shocked objection to—the national security law and the impact it is having on freedoms.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): This clearly constitutes a dangerous escalation of Beijing's global war on dissent. Can the Minister confirm that it is illegal to issue and pursue bounties in the UK and that the UK Government will be actively seeking the prosecution of anyone who aims to take them up, and can she tell us what the UK Government's thinking is in relation to financial sanctions targeting those in government in Hong Kong, about which she has been less than clear during this session? I find it concerning that she has also been less than clear about her intentions in respect of meeting officials and conveying the deep unhappiness of Members about this matter, and our significant concern for Hongkongers in the UK.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I can of course confirm that extranational bounties have no validity here. We have no extradition treaty with Hong Kong, because we have suspended it indefinitely, so there is no reach to those people here. Any attempt by a foreign power to intimidate, harass or harm individuals in the UK will not be tolerated. As I have said, the Security Minister is working through the defending democracy taskforce to review our approach, and to ensure that we have all the robust tools that we need to protect those who are here.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Last week I met a constituent who was deeply concerned about the erosion of democracy in Hong Kong. Will the Minister assure me, and the House, that the UK will always defend the universal right to freedom of expression, and stand up for those who are targeted in Hong Kong and around the world by China?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I give him that absolute assurance. I hope that when the human rights report is published shortly, all those who wish to read it will see clearly just how seriously the UK takes its obligations.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bounties for people are the stuff of films, not the stuff of real life in this United Kingdom. However, the despicable behaviour of the Chinese Communist party towards those who dare to dissent from its thinking and to request freedom and liberty has become the norm. The world is united alongside those from Hong Kong who espouse and wish to enjoy freedom of expression. What further steps can the House, our Government and our Secretary of State take to support those Hongkongers who live in the United Kingdom? We have a moral obligation to speak up for them and not to be silent.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We continue to call on Beijing to remove the national security law and, indeed, on the Hong Kong authorities to end their targeting of those who stand up for freedom and democracy in the country. The terrible step this week will simply ensure that we continue to make it clear categorically, through our engagement in the UK and across our international partnerships, that we all stand for freedom of speech and expression for all citizens across Hong Kong.

Business of the House

11.55 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 10 July will include:

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.

TUESDAY 11 JULY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Illegal Migration Bill.

WEDNESDAY 12 JULY—Opposition day (20th allotted day). Debate in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 13 JULY—Debate on a motion on the second report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, “The cost of complacency: illicit finance and the war in Ukraine” and the Government response, followed by general debate on the third report of the Health and Social Care Committee, “Workforce: recruitment, training and retention in health and social care” and the Government response. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee at the recommendation of the Liaison Committee.

FRIDAY 14 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 17 July includes:

MONDAY 17 JULY—Consideration of Lords message on the Illegal Migration Bill, followed by consideration of Lords message on the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill [*Lords*], followed by consideration of Lords message on the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill.

TUESDAY 18 JULY—If necessary, consideration of Lords message on the Illegal Migration Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords message.

WEDNESDAY 19 JULY—If necessary, consideration of Lords message on the Illegal Migration Bill, followed by debate on the Committee on Standards report on all-party parliamentary groups, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords message.

THURSDAY 20 JULY—The Sir David Amess summer Adjournment debate. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the summer recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 20 July and return on Monday 4 September.

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

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

I would like to address the Standards Committee report published this morning on the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher). I am shocked and

[Thangam Debbonaire]

saddened at its findings and my thoughts—and, I hope, the thoughts of the whole House—are with the victims. As well as addressing the impact on them of the Member's behaviour, the Committee found that the actions of the Member significantly affected the public's perception of this House. I am afraid to say that, shamefully, it appears that the Conservative party protected and even promoted him, despite a previous investigation into his conduct.

I am concerned that the Leader of the House did not announce a motion to approve the Committee's report. I do hope that the Government are not attempting to delay any possible by-election. Will the Leader of the House confirm that she will bring forward the motion as soon as possible, that the Government will recommend approving the report and its sanctions, and that the Prime Minister will show some backbone this time and actually condemn the actions of the Member? If the Member does not do the decent thing and resign, will the Leader of the House ensure that she allocates time with the speed and urgency that the activities require? Does she want me to remind her week after week that sexual harassment is not acceptable?

To continue, I wish the England cricket team the best of luck as they start the third test against Australia today. On that note, the remaining legislation announced by the Leader of the House up to the summer is more like a series of dot balls. Where is the drive? The Government have a huge majority and they are not doing anything with it. Instead, the Prime Minister is wasting precious time on the Floor of the House trying to pass red meat for a small group of right-wing Back Benchers, rather than new laws that will actually help working people.

Why did not the Leader of the House announce the transport Bill or the mental health Bill, which have been left in limbo, or the much-needed schools Bill, which the Government have now completely abandoned? Where is the leasehold reform Bill? Millions of people around the country will be furious that the Government have, again, failed to introduce long-promised and much-needed leasehold reform. That was a 2019 Conservative manifesto commitment and it has been promised by almost every Housing Secretary since. So where is the Bill?

Labour forced the Government into committing to end the sale of new private leaseholds and to replace existing ones with commonhold. Our motion passed with a majority of 174, without a single vote against, so where is the Government's plan? Our motion also instructed the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to make an oral statement to MPs by 23 June. Where is he? He is 13 days late and counting. He is hiding in the dressing room, sending out the nightwatchman when there is an entire Session left. Will the Leader of the House find the Housing Secretary and get him to the Dispatch Box to explain to leaseholders why he is dragging his feet?

Instead of scoring runs, the Prime Minister is running scared of scrutiny. Too weak to turn up to Prime Minister's questions, he would not even try to bat away questions on his failing record yesterday—a so-called leader who cannot even defend his own wicket. Any credible Prime Minister would accept the need for scrutiny and answer the questions from colleagues on behalf of the people we represent.

It is not just PMQs, though, is it? The Prime Minister barely makes an appearance these days. He did not show up or even give an opinion on his predecessor's lies last month. I did notice that he managed to find time to watch the cricket, so I hope this speech might catch his attention. Can the Leader of the House tell us whether the Prime Minister will stand up to the senior members of his own party who attempted to undermine and attack the democratic institutions of this House and vote for the Privileges Committee motion on Monday? The public deserve to know what he thinks and they want a Prime Minister who stands up for standards.

Just like at Lord's on Sunday, the ball is dead, it is the end of the over and we are heading towards the end of the innings. The Tories have sent out their last batsman. He is out for a golden duck. The Prime Minister has nothing to show the people of this country. He has failed to bring down the cost of living, failed to bring down waiting lists and failed to stop the dangerous boat crossings. Should he not, like Ben Stokes, consider what is in the spirit of the game? It is time he declared and called a general election.

Penny Mordaunt: May I start by saying how delighted I was to attend yesterday's service of thanksgiving and dedication for His Majesty King Charles III at St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh. I thank all involved in what was a magnificent day.

I add my voice to the many tributes that have been paid this week to all those who work in and alongside the national health service for its 75 years of service. I also commemorate the 35th anniversary of the Piper Alpha disaster. I am sure the thoughts of Members across the House are with all those responding to the incident in London this morning.

The hon. Lady sends a message to the England cricket team that I am sure we would all echo. We all want them to do well. May I make a plea to her and her party to assist in that by telling Just Stop Oil to just stop? Not content with interrupting car runs, it is now intent on interrupting cricket runs. I am all for frustrating the Australian batsmen, but that is the England cricket team's job. In all seriousness, we have seen some awful scenes this week, particularly at the tennis. It is particularly callous to interrupt sporting events, which can turn the course of a match and risk injury to players. I appreciate the connections between this selfish and counter-productive group of people and the Labour party's coffers, which might also explain why Labour's energy policy undermines our energy security and prosperity, and the fact that Labour has voted against every measure we have brought forward to end dangerous and disruptive protests. I hope we will see no more scenes such as we have seen at those sporting events, and I wish all those taking part in this sport-packed weekend good luck. On our proposals for renters and for leasehold reform, we remain committed to those and I will update the House in the usual way.

I turn to the very serious matter that the hon. Lady focused on: standards. Let me first make a broad point. The House knows my view on these matters. The only way we will improve the situation here is by recognising that we are not just one organisation, but a community of many. Processes and the volume of standards bodies, with 13 separate entities and counting, does not improve behaviour—only cultural change will do that. The key

to that is deepening our understanding of the duty of care we have towards each other. We are custodians of the trust and authority of this place.

I have set out my intention to conclude my own assessment, with external advice, of where we need to focus in this place. I will make those findings available to the Commission, the hon. Lady and the Committee on Standards. I held a private session with the Committee this week to tell it of my concerns and suggested solutions. I have also told the Committee and the Speaker that I think the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme review needs to be brought forward. Finally, as the hon. Lady will know, and I thank her for her support, I am establishing a forum between political parties, the Government and the House to ensure that we can work together in the best way possible to support MPs, prospective MPs, their staff and the staff of the House. I am supported in all that work by the Prime Minister.

The hon. Lady mentions the privileges motion. I will not dwell on that today. We will be able to debate that and both be able to say what we think on Monday. As for the report published today at 9 am, the Government did not set the timetable for the publication of that report; it is the Standards Committee's report and it has published it today. She will appreciate that the hon. Member concerned has 10 days to appeal and we must let due process run its course. But she knows that we take these matters incredibly seriously. Further business will be announced in the usual way.

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

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for what she has said. Eight days ago, on 28 June, before the debate on the hybrid Holocaust Memorial Bill, but after I had come into the Chamber, a written statement from a Minister was put in the Library saying that the estimated cost in one year had gone up by more than twice the £17 million that the Government have already spent without achieving anything.

Does the Department think that is an appropriate way of putting important information into the public domain, when neither Minister speaking in the debate mentioned that increase of nearly £36 million and no MP in the Chamber knew about it?

Will the Leader of the House ask the permanent secretary in that Department to report this to the National Audit Office and ask it to update the report it made a year ago?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He should know, because I think the letter would have been copied to his office, that I have written to the Department on that matter and I shall certainly, again, make sure it has heard his comments today.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Leader for giving us the business and, again, endorse the remarks that the shadow Leader has made about standards. I wish to add my own remarks about the 35th anniversary of the Piper Alpha tragedy. I am sure our thoughts are very much with all those who continue to be affected by the tragic events that took place 35 years ago to this day.

I also wish to say how pleased I am that the Leader of the House enjoyed her visit to St Giles' Cathedral yesterday for the service of thanksgiving. I hope she did not suffer from a bout of sword envy when she saw Dame Katherine Grainger carrying out that duty yesterday.

This week sees the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the NHS, the inspiration for which came from the experience of the Highlands and Islands Medical Service, established in 1913. I add my own words of thanks for the contribution NHS staff, past, present and future, have made and will make to our collective health and wellbeing as a nation.

Last week, I asked the Leader of the House to make time for debates on why six police forces in England continue to remain in special measures and on why NHS staff sickness in England has hit a record high. There are, alas, no signs of any debates forthcoming on those issues. Can I add to that list a request for a debate on why 28 NHS trusts and integrated care boards across England are in similar special measures, so we can find out what the Government intend to do about that?

This week, members of the Orkney Islands Council agreed that they should explore options for alternative models of governance, including exploring their Nordic connections. There have been some suggestions that they might wish to rejoin Norway and exploit those historical links. It is easy for Members on the SNP Benches to see the attractions of being part of a small, prosperous, energy-rich, independent country of 5.5 million people, so the only question is the constitutional means by which that could be given effect, if a part of the UK wished to leave. Asking for approximately 5.5 million friends, could we have a debate on how that might happen please?

Penny Mordaunt: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Dame Katherine Grainger on the incredible job she did. There was a lovely moment in the cathedral when we caught each other's eye and gave each other a massive grin. She did a tremendous job and it was an incredibly moving service. I again thank everyone who took part in that.

The hon. Gentleman quite often criticises me for being well prepared for our exchanges. I am a former Girl Guide and I believe in that sort of thing, but it is very easy to prepare to answer his questions because they are usually focused on one thing, which is not an issue that is of any relevance to the people he represents. If he were less focused on the cause of independence and more focused on their needs, we might have more clarity on the confusion and concern about the new policy on fishing-free zones this week, announced by the SNP's coalition partner, which will increase those areas to 47%. Given his brief, he might like to look into that.

If being well prepared is the qualification for a person doing my job, surely it is self-delusion and lack of self-awareness that is the necessary condition to do the job of Opposition Members on the SNP Benches, because only an SNP spokesman would come to this session to ask me a question about police investigations and police performance. Perhaps that self-delusion is hard to sustain in the wake of tens of police investigations. There was more news this week of missing accounts, frustrating the SNP's auditors from being able to complete their task, and of exactly how much Scottish taxpayers'

[Penny Mordaunt]

money has been spent by the SNP on just one of their foreign jollies. For COP27, they blew nearly £150,000. Not content with staying in Sharm El-Sheikh and flying back to Scotland, they also managed to do an overnight in Milan. No wonder so many of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues are heading off. Quitting because the going is too tough in opposition is really quite something.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, we first came across each other as colleagues during a review of the Mental Health Act 1983. At times we were frenemies, but now we are firm friends. I spent a large amount of last year and a bit of this year as a member of the Joint Committee on the draft Mental Health Bill. It is a hugely important and complex Bill, but it will ensure that, when people are ill, having a mental health crisis, their wishes in regard to their treatment are better respected. Please can we bring the Bill to the Floor of the House and turn it into an Act?

Penny Mordaunt: I pay tribute to all the work my hon. Friend has done on this. It has enabled Members across the House to contribute to the Bill, too. The Bill has been through the Joint Committee process, as he rightly points out. I suggest he raises the matter at the next Health questions, on 11 July, but I will ensure all those involved in preparing fourth-Session legislation, as well as the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, have heard what he said.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): It will be a short advertisement from me this week. The Backbench Business Committee is very much open for business and we would welcome applications for debates here in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall for the September sitting weeks, immediately after the summer recess. Please take note, everyone: we have some time available, if that time is awarded to us by the Government.

As Chair of the all-party parliamentary group for parental participation in education, earlier this week I was pleased to welcome as visitors some of the award winners of this year's national parent teacher association awards and hear about their activities. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the award winners and recognising the invaluable contribution of all PTAs across the country to our schools and communities?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his helpful advert for the Backbench Business Committee. I encourage all Members to use that innovation. I join him, as I am sure all Members of the House would want to, in thanking all PTAs for the incredible work they do in schools and also in their local communities.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May we have a debate on acquired brain injury so that I can highlight the work of my constituent, Dr Shan Shan Jing, who became a victim of this condition after a tragic car collision and is now bravely campaigning to improve care and treatment for others with acquired brain injuries?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this important matter and I pay tribute to her constituent for doing likewise. She will know that the next Health questions is on 11 July, but I will also ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care has heard concerns and focus on the matter.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I want to raise the issue of back-of-house drug testing at UK festivals. For years, the testing of confiscated drugs on site at UK festivals has played a successful part in safeguarding, harm-reduction strategies and drug intelligence sharing, but the Home Office made a last minute decision, just before the recent Parklife festival in Manchester, to withdraw permission to carry out back-of-house drug testing, putting thousands of people's lives at risk. This matter was raised with the Leader of the House last week.

The sudden change in policy will see festivals forced to apply for individual drug-testing licences, which can take up to three months to process and must be administered within a permanent building. Those are not sensible conditions for festivals and senior people in the night-time industry say that such conditions will all but remove back-of-house drug testing on site for the remainder of the 2023 festival season. That is dangerous and I believe it could lead to more fatalities at festivals where drugs are not tested. Given that we are now into the festival season, can we have an urgent debate on this vital issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue yet again. She will know, because she alluded to it, the answer I gave at the Dispatch Box last week. The Home Office told me that applications were not received, but clearly this is a pressing matter as there will be festivals over the summer, so I will ask the Home Secretary to convene a meeting before the rise of the House so that the policy on this can be clear. I suggest that any festival that wants to run the service is given the information it needs, so that such licences can be given in a timely way.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): It would be better to get inflation down by expanding supply, rather than hitting mortgage holders again to get them to spend less. Can we have an urgent statement, before the summer recess, from the Government on measures to expand our domestic output of food, oil and gas, and industrial products with suitable incentives and facilitations?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for that very helpful suggestion. He will know that, as Treasury questions are not until after the summer recess, he will have no opportunity to raise it there, so I will make sure that the Chancellor has heard his suggestion. I know that that will be welcomed by many Members across the House.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): For some time, we have been promised a transport Bill in this parliamentary session to establish Great British Railways. The Bill is ready to go, it is short and, unusually, it is unlikely to be controversial, so it will not take much parliamentary time. We are consistently rising early, so why the delay? Can the Leader of the House confirm that it is the Prime Minister who is blocking the Bill? If that is so,

can she ensure that the Prime Minister himself comes to the Chamber to explain why he is blocking a Bill that, unusually, will get widespread support in this House?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know, given where we are on a number of important Bills, that business is dynamic—if I can put it in those terms—and that the business statement that I have given will be dynamic. She tempts me to comment on future business, which I shall announce in the usual way. Of course, we are preparing now for the fourth Session.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Biomass plants do not provide a viable electricity producing solution for the UK's net zero transition. They do not keep energy bills low or reduce carbon emissions. By 2027, UK energy bill payers will have paid £13 billion in subsidies developing this technology. In a climate of increasing energy bills for UK households, it is wholly unjust to require them to pay any more. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement on how the Government are independently verifying the environmental and economic benefits of this technology?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. She will know that suppliers have to demonstrate to the regulator that they meet sustainability criteria, and there is a process by which the Treasury will arrive at what carve-outs it will do for particular sectors. We have been right to do that for emerging technologies, which cannot currently compete on cost. There is tidal power, for example. Space solar power is another example that we will no doubt look at in the future. She is right to raise the issue of getting value for money for British taxpayers.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I wonder whether the Leader of the House could contact her colleagues at the Ministry of Defence? On 8 June, veterans from the LGBT community were expecting the LGBT report to be published. Many service people were forced out of the services; they had their careers cut short and were denied the opportunity of a pension. They are expecting that report imminently, but a date has not yet been given. As we are fast approaching the end of term, can she arrange for a statement to be made, please?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that several Members of the House have raised that matter. I have written already to the MOD, but I will follow up after this session and ensure that all Members who have raised this have an update on when that report will be published.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): May I associate myself with the comments about Piper Alpha? Over the years, I have been heavily involved in many issues that flowed from the aftermath of that horrendous incident.

Will the Leader of the House bring forward a debate on local news provision across the UK? Iain Pollock, the editor of the *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, has recently been in touch with me with concerns about the BBC's "Across the UK" proposals, which will see money diverted from local radio stations into online services. Many local newspapers rely on those online services,

either through subscriptions or from advertising, for their viability and are concerned about the BBC's move into this area.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that important matter. It is raised very regularly in business questions so I know how vital and valuable local news services are. The next questions to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will be on 20 July and I encourage him to raise that matter with her.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The deputy leader of the SNP has said that she will not stand again at the next election because of the toxic nature of this place. The Leader of the House would do better than to make a joke at her expense over that.

Sunscreen products are too expensive. Research from Melanoma Focus has shown that two thirds of people surveyed would use sunscreen products if they were 20% cheaper. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on my VAT Burn campaign, which has cross-party support both in this place and in the Scottish Parliament, to reform the VAT charged on sunscreen and to raise awareness on melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancers?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Other Members have also raised that matter. As a consequence, I have written to the relevant Departments—the Treasury and the Health and Social Care Department. Of course, we can only consider these options because we are now outside of the EU.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): We mark World Hepatitis Day on 28 July. I would like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to campaigner Philip Baldwin who has worked passionately to raise awareness of hepatitis C and HIV, and the stigma surrounding both diseases. As we mark the NHS's 75th anniversary this week, I would also like to take the opportunity to highlight the progress that has been made in fighting those diseases. Thanks to research carried out at local hospitals, particularly at St Mary's in my constituency, hep C and HIV are no longer the life sentences that they used to be. In light of that, will my right hon. Friend please consider a debate on the importance of Government support and funding for medical research to help us defeat previously thought indomitable diseases?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising awareness about those very important areas. She will know that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has approved treatments that can now cure the hep C virus in over 90% of patients. We also have the commitment to ending new HIV transmissions by 2030, and we have just signed up to an international programme to eliminate the hepatitis virus by the same year. These are incredibly important matters. It is our Department of Health and Social Care, our NHS and our life sciences community that are helping these incredible achievements to happen.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): This week is Alcohol Awareness Week, with a theme of alcohol and cost. The ultimate cost is alcohol-specific deaths, which have risen sharply since 2019. The 9,641 deaths registered in 2021 saw a 27.4% increase on 2019 figures, with

[*Christian Wakeford*]

figures for 2022 set to rise even further. Alcohol duty may bring in around £12 billion, but the cost that alcohol has on our health service and society can be anything from £35 billion to £50 billion, which, I am sure the Leader of the House will agree, makes no sense, and, more importantly, no fiscal sense. Therefore, can we have a debate in Government time on a full alcohol strategy, especially as it has been more than a decade since the last one; numbers are not going backwards and lives are being lost?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter, which he may also wish to raise with the Health Secretary on 11 July. He will know that there has been a huge push in parts of the country where this is a particular issue, but of course it is relevant everywhere. One innovation, for example, is an automatic screening service for people who go into accident and emergency, which identifies those who may need further support and services. It is a good topic for a debate and I encourage him to answer the call of the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee. I am sure that, if he applied for a debate, it would be well attended.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate about rural colleges? I remind the Chamber that I am a former student of the Scottish Agricultural College, and, like many people across Scotland and the UK, I benefited from the experience of Hugh McClymont who has retired from Scotland's Rural College after more than four decades. For 43 years, Hugh has been part of the fabric of SRUC and has been widely recognised for his contribution to Scottish education, dairy farming and grassland management. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Hugh on his immense contribution to Scottish agriculture and thank him for the encouragement and support that he has provided to so many?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure the whole House will want to join my hon. Friend in thanking Hugh for his long list of achievements and for the contributions he has made to that community in particular. Not least, I understand, he is responsible for Daisy, a life-size plastic cow that he took around various areas in 2012 to raise awareness of the Royal Highland Education Trust.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): In her answer to me on 8 June 2023 about risk-based exclusions, the Leader of the House said that

“it is the intention of both the Commission and myself to bring forward a motion following that debate. There is time to do that before the summer recess.”—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2023; Vol. 733, c. 885.]

We are rapidly running out of parliamentary time, with fresh, concerning allegations made on “Newsnight” last night and the publication today of yet another report on serious sexual misconduct by an MP. How much longer will we have to wait before we take the necessary steps to make Parliament a safer workplace and begin to repair its public reputation?

Penny Mordaunt: As the hon. Lady will know, that is a matter for the Commission. I hope the Commissioners will not mind me saying that we will be looking at the

matter at our meeting on Monday. There is still the ability to bring something forward before the summer recess, and that is still our intention. She will know, because she attended the debate on the matter—I thank her for doing so—that there are some issues that the House asked the Commission to look at, and we will do so. I reassure her and all colleagues that we want to bring forward measures, but it is the House that will decide what those measures are.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): The Defence Committee report on women in the armed forces highlighted the existence of military sexual trauma. Thankfully, a number of Ministry of Defence strategies and support mechanisms are now in place to prevent and manage that, but evidence also highlights that men can be subject to military sexual trauma. The Office for Veterans' Affairs has funded a research project with the charity Forward Assist to look at formulating a male-specific MST support pathway for servicemen and veterans. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging any such man suffering in silence to contact Forward Assist, which is here to help, and will she congratulate Tony Wright and his team on the work they do on this difficult subject?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she does on those and related matters. I know it is much appreciated by all who serve. I also thank Tony and his team at Forward Assist for the work they are doing, and echo my hon. Friend's plea for people to come forward if they are facing issues of that nature. She alluded to other services: the Aurora New Dawn service provides confidential independent support to any serving member who is experiencing sexual violence, domestic abuse or stalking; and Togetherall is an independent digital mental health support tool that is also available for all those serving and for veterans.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Residents in Tyrrell Court in Wakefield got a shock this year when their social landlord, Wakefield and District Housing, added a new service charge for communal energy for things such as lighting. Some have been tenants for more than 20 years and have never had to pay that before. It is an extra £125 on top of recent rent increases. Many tenants are elderly and on fixed incomes and will struggle to find extra money. According to Shelter, it is not a unique case. May we have a statement from the Housing Minister on any steps the Government can take in such situations?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, which is similar to those that other hon. Members have raised. He will know that the next questions to the Housing Minister will be on Monday. I have also previously written to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to raise these concerns, and the Department is running bespoke surgeries for colleagues who have casework of this nature.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The recent transfer of the administration of Help to Buy equity loans from Target to Lenvi has been handled extremely poorly. Market participants and holders of loans were not advised of the change, and constituents who have loans advise me that they have made numerous calls and sent emails to Lenvi with no response.

Remortgaging can be a time-sensitive matter. Can the Leader of the House advise me what steps I can take to raise the importance of this matter with the relevant Department?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for looking at this important issue. We have helped 837,000 people on to the property ladder through those schemes, and we do not want to see the further people whom we wish to assist discouraged from coming forward, or the people already on the scheme unable to make the financial decisions they wish to because of poor service by a provider. The next Levelling Up questions are on Monday, but, given the seriousness and the timeliness of this matter, I will make sure the Secretary of State has heard his comments in advance.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The upgrade to Lodge Hill junction in Abingdon, an infrastructure project that is key to nearly 2,000 homes in the Vale of White Horse, is stuck. The final piece of funding from Homes England is languishing for sign-off with the Treasury, but now an earlier piece of funding secured from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is in question because of the Treasury delay. If the stalemate between Departments is not resolved by the end of this month, the whole project and more besides will be at risk. I am at my wits' end. I held a Westminster Hall debate on this matter two months ago and since then I have tried everything to get Departments to engage common-sense mode. Can the Leader of the House please help me to secure a meeting with Treasury Ministers, so that this vital scheme does not have to wait a moment longer?

Penny Mordaunt: I shall certainly ensure that Treasury Ministers hear what the hon. Lady has said. We have these schemes in place because we want to get funding into local communities, and we have a great track record of doing so. She will also know that the next Levelling Up questions are on Monday; I encourage her to raise this matter with the Secretary of State, in what I think is panning out to be a busy and question-packed session.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): Ultra-processed food is linked to obesity because it is high in fat, sugar and salt and is highly addictive. Some 64% of adults in England are either obese or overweight, as are 40% of 10 to 11-year-olds. That costs the NHS a staggering £6.5 billion per year. Please may we have a debate in Government time on the role of ultra-processed food in the obesity crisis?

Penny Mordaunt: As my hon. Friend will know, obesity is of huge concern to the Department of Health and Social Care, but other Departments are also involved in combating what is one of the drivers of the immense costs our national health service faces. Innovation is happening all the time, and she will know that we are bringing forward and making accessible on the NHS particular drugs to help people suffering from obesity issues. However, we need to tackle all the factors in this crisis, and if she were to apply for a debate on this particular topic, I think it would be well attended.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for taking up the issue I raised the other week about legal aid fees in asylum cases. I did as

she always encourages people to do and raised it also at Home Office questions this Monday. The Immigration Minister said:

"I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the problem with our asylum system is not a lack of lawyers; there are plenty of legal representatives around."—[*Official Report*, 3 July 2023; Vol. 735, c. 540.]

Then I read in yesterday's *Financial Times* that the Government are consulting on a 15% increase in legal aid fees for lawyers working on deportation cases, to attract solicitors to take on such cases and tackle the backlog of asylum claims. Would it not be helpful if we asked Ministers not to weaponise asylum cases, lawyers and so on, but to focus on measures that will reduce the backlog?

Penny Mordaunt: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are focusing on measures that will reduce the backlog. We are also focusing on measures that will target the finite resource this country has to help genuine asylum seekers, those in need and refugees, many of whom are languishing in camps across the world. That is why we have brought forward legislation, which has recently been debated in the House of Lords. We will bring it back to this House, as I announced in my business statement, and I encourage him and his Opposition colleagues to back those measures, which will mean that we can have an asylum system fit for purpose.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Last week, I met my constituent Rose Elgie, who attends St Teresa's Primary School in Darlington. She is deeply concerned about the destruction of orangutan habitats as a result of deforestation caused by unsustainable palm oil production. Can my right hon. Friend outline what the Government are doing to reduce our reliance on palm oil, and will she find time for us to have a debate on how we can help to save orangutans and their habitat?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend will know that we have a number of incredible forestry programmes around the world. There is—off the top of my head—one forest habitat in Indonesia that is larger than this country. That is a particularly supporting habitat with a large colony of orangutans whose existence would otherwise be threatened. Some of the forestry programmes that we have had in place in this country and around the world are decades old. That is testament to the impact that this nation has had on those matters. The Government have made absolutely sure that we will continue to have that impact globally.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Billions of pounds were wasted on useless personal protective equipment, and there is no plan in place to build a stockpile for future pandemics. In addition, there are no proper records of £3.3 billion of NHS test and trace purchases, and No. 10 has simply written off £14.9 billion of covid supplies in the past two years. Democracy is about accountability, so will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out who she thinks should be held accountable for that colossal, appalling and eye-watering waste of taxpayers' money?

Penny Mordaunt: First, the covid inquiry is under way at the moment. It will determine what particular things it will look into. We in this House have scrutiny

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through Select Committees—most notably the Public Accounts Committee—of all those matters. Secondly, products that are bought in those circumstances have a shelf life. As a Member of Parliament who spent pretty much most of the first year of the pandemic on the phone to all colleagues every day, I can tell the hon. Lady that the sentiment of this House and the Members in it is that we moved heaven and earth to get as much PPE as we could to the frontline for NHS and care staff. I would rather answer questions from her about value for money than apologise to her because we did not take those actions at the time.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): A recent freedom of information request has revealed that, in the past seven years, Labour-run Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council has spent just £11,000 on Dinnington, a town with a population of about 12,000. That equates to about 30p per person per year. By contrast, in the March Budget the Conservative Government awarded Dinnington £12 million to rejuvenate its high street. Does the Leader of the House agree that only the Conservatives can reverse the decades of Labour-led decline in Dinnington, and that anyone who cares about Dinnington should vote for Julz Hall, the Conservative candidate in the upcoming Dinnington ward by-election?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is right that the Government are putting our money where our mouth is. We need to give communities the capital they need to regenerate and to attract further investment. I wish Julz, who I understand initiated the plan to save the high street and was a great force for good in securing that bid, all the best in the forthcoming election. Other candidates are available, who I am sure will be listed on the BBC website.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I will assume that the hon. Gentleman asked for a debate or a statement.

Alexander Stafford: I did.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Good.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As the longest serving Member on the Labour Benches, I have seen some real changes in my 44 years here. One thing that is disturbing me at the moment is the Government's propensity to put quite junior Ministers forward to answer very important questions. I do not know whether members of the Cabinet are on holiday, but could we see more of them?

This year marks the 75th anniversary not just of the NHS but of the World Health Organisation. Many of the challenges we face in health will be worldwide pandemics. Can we have a debate to consider intently how we can improve the performance of the WHO? Perhaps it needs more resources, but let us not take it for granted.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that I take a great deal of interest in ensuring that those in Departments—be they parliamentary clerks, Ministers or permanent secretaries—understand what this House needs and the respect that needs to be afforded to it.

From personal experience, I know that even the most senior Ministers—those in the great offices of state—are frequently here, the Home Secretary being a prime example. I shall ensure that, on our regular training, we convey the hon. Gentleman's sentiments.

The Backbench Business Committee is just one means by which the hon. Gentleman may secure the debate he seeks. I shall certainly ensure that the Secretary of State hears his remarks.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Labour-led Cheshire East Council has proposed to close all libraries for at least one and a half weekdays every week. In my constituency, that will affect libraries in Alsager, Sandbach, Holmes Chapel, Middlewich and Congleton. Does the Leader of the House agree that members of Congleton Town Council and others are absolutely right to oppose that inexplicable proposal, bearing in mind its negative and, indeed, potentially damaging impact not only on young people's learning but on many of my least well-off constituents, who depend on libraries for welfare checks, bus applications, computer use for job applications, to read the local papers, and many other everyday essentials?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is quite important to ask the Leader of the House in such a way that it is relevant to the business, rather than just asking whether she agrees with the comments that have been made.

Penny Mordaunt: I remind my hon. Friend that DLUHC questions are on Monday—it will be jam-packed. I agree with her: that is a crazy solution to a problem of constrained resource. Why have an asset, with all those overheads, just to shut it for part of the week? I encourage her council to be a bit more entrepreneurial by generating income, working with partners, asking for business support and doing the many other things that councils up and down the country have done to secure such vital services, including, in some cases, community asset transfers. I hope that, in addition to securing a debate and asking a question on Monday, she can also get her council to buck up.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Wholesale energy prices for suppliers may have returned to normal, but Bonar Yarns in my Dundee constituency, which has produced specialist textiles and supplied some of the world's largest sporting venues for more than 100 years, is facing closure because of what looks like price gouging. The company changed ownership earlier this year, but I understand that the existing energy supplier, Brook Green Supply, has quoted a 400% increase without adequate explanation and despite no increase in usage. Many businesses are being held to ransom with high energy costs. Can we have an urgent statement from the UK Government on what reforms they are considering to end the corporate daylight robbery by energy companies, which is putting businesses and communities at risk?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that we take that type of matter seriously. He will know that, because of the findings of the Competition and Markets Authority, we are introducing a "pump watch" scheme—to use FairFuelUK's terminology for it—and ensuring that suppliers are pricing fairly so that where the wholesale price drops, the change is passed on to, in that case, motorists. He will know that we take those matters

seriously. Given that the relevant Department is not coming to the House until after recess, I shall make sure that it has heard what he has said. We want fairness, and competition—true competition—is part of that. That is why the Prime Minister commissioned work on those very matters when he was Chancellor.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Can we have a debate about section 106 developer levies? Labour-run Kirklees Council is taking in hundreds of thousands of pounds from housing developers for local infrastructure, but local people are losing confidence in the system. They are not seeing that money invested in local schools, roads and health services in the communities that are being impacted by the large housing developments.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We need to have transparency on this, which is why we are introducing a new infrastructure levy through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. That will increase transparency about what is being funded through developer contributions in line with local priorities, which should be being set by local people themselves. Again, this is an advert for DLUHC questions on Monday, and I am sure he will be there.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Can we have a debate on the negative impacts that Labour-run Bradford Council's clean air zone tax is having on local businesses in not only Keighley but in Shipley and Bradford city itself, as well as the negative impacts it is having on local residents in villages such as East Morton, which are experiencing much higher levels of traffic congestion and speeding as a result of motorists taking alternative routes to avoid Labour's ridiculous tax on hard-working people?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. Across the country, there are good and sensible schemes that are tackling air pollution. The issue that so many people have with the type of scheme that his constituents and, most notably, residents and businesses in London are having to endure is that it is just a revenue-raising exercise. It does not take into account someone's ability to make the transition that is being asked of them. It is not just affecting these areas; it is affecting everyone. There are traders in my constituency that want to come and provide services to London. There will be traders and businesses in constituencies surrounding my hon. Friend's that need to get into those communities, and they are being priced out of doing that. We should be supporting people to keep more of the money they earn, for their businesses to thrive, and we need to innovate. That is how we are going to make this transition.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on a very sad record that will be broken by the end of this summer: the highest ever number of homeless households in temporary accommodation in London? The long-term health and educational attainment of our citizens is at risk. Does the Leader of the House agree that in the current climate, with the mortgage crisis, unaffordable rents going up by 20% in some London boroughs and very long queues for social homes because of the lack of money from the Government to build them, we desperately need to tackle the housing crisis in London and beyond?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that, although there is more to do to ensure that everyone can have a warm, secure home and to increase home ownership to the levels that we want to see, our record on home building is considerably better than her party's. We want to do more. There are initiatives and pushes, particularly in London, to build up, not out, and to increase the volume of housing stock. We must do these things. She will know that there is a questions session on Monday when she can raise this matter, but I also encourage her to raise it with the Labour Mayor of London.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The excellent prehabilitation and cancer care team at Medway Maritime Hospital have shared data with me which states that 97% of patients need prehabilitative care before intervention with cancer treatments. They are currently awaiting a decision by the Kent and Medway integrated care board on future funding. Will the Leader of the House raise this matter with the Department of Health and Social Care, so that an urgent decision can be made, and can we have a statement on the Floor of the House on prehabilitation and cancer care?

Penny Mordaunt: I encourage my hon. Friend to raise this matter directly with the Secretary of State on Tuesday, but he will know that the Secretary of State has been collecting data from integrated care boards to understand which areas are performing well and which are behind the curve. That will be hugely helpful in ensuring that we have the right focus at a local level and that all our constituents are enjoying outstanding care.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): Evidence has emerged from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem that the Pfizer covid vaccine rolled out across the world was not the same, nor was it manufactured in the same way as the vaccine trialled on 44,000 volunteers and subsequently given emergency use approval. If Ministers were unaware of that, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has potentially committed a criminal act. No one could have given informed consent because the public were misled. This also explains the huge difference between the Pfizer data and our own yellow card data with regard to adverse events. Can we have a statement from the Government at their earliest convenience?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which is appropriate for business questions because I am here to advise Members on what they can do to progress the issues that are of concern to them. The hon. Gentleman could raise this with the relevant Department on Tuesday. Of course, if he thinks there has been any wrongdoing, he has many courses of action available to him. He can raise awareness. He can apply for debates. He was sat next to the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), although he is no longer in his place—he could have a word with him. He can table an early-day motion. He can raise it in questions on the Floor of the House. He could write to the Cabinet Secretary, and I would expect him to do so on such an important matter. He could get in touch with the covid inquiry. He could raise this in the media. He could ask a Select Committee to look at it. He will know that other serious matters have been referred to the police. But he

[*Penny Mordaunt*]

knows all of that—he has been in this place for 13 years—and we look forward to seeing which of those actions the hon. Member will take.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): The UK Government are determined to level up constituencies like Ynys Môn, and I am delighted that Anglesey was awarded £17 million in the latest round of levelling-up funding to regenerate Holyhead. The memorandum of understanding asks recipients to work with DLUHC and the Government regarding levelling-up branding on projects in receipt of these funds. Does the Leader of the House agree that the branding is an excellent opportunity for my Plaid Cymru-led council to demonstrate to the good people of Anglesey the difference that UK funds are making to their everyday lives? Can we have an important debate in Government time on this branding?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting this investment into her constituency and on not only putting its origins on the record on the Floor of the House, but doing so in front of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—she has done herself proud. I always try to find positive ways forward, so perhaps I can suggest that she goes to her local authority and suggests an alternative plaque that says, “Regeneration of Holyhead was made possible because of UK taxpayers.” I think that is something we could all agree on.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The motherhood pay penalty means that mothers with two children take home 26% less income than women without children. A report by the Fawcett Society shows that the pay penalty hits black and minoritised women the hardest, with the intersection of sexism and racism compounding disadvantage. There is more than enough evidence of the need to take serious action to deal with these inequalities—for instance, by making flexible work the default, specifically by means of an advertising duty, and by making ethnicity pay gap reporting mandatory for employers with more than 100 employees. Can we have a debate in Government time on the implications for women of the UK Government’s refusal to do those things?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I do have to correct her, because the Government Equalities Office and other areas of Government are doing those things. We have had pioneering work on highlighting the gender pay gap, and huge amounts of work went on in the race disparity audit, so those things are looked at. However, if the hon. Lady is really concerned about cost of living issues for particular households, the Scottish Government might like to consider their tax policies.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Like all our constituencies, Southend West has countless NHS heroes, such as Tracy Reed. This week, she celebrates 42 years of service as an end-of-life clinical lead, for which she is Essex Partnership University Trust’s hero of the week. However, we also have many unsung heroes, such as

Friederike Englund, who runs Macmillan support at Southend hospital. Could we please have a debate in Government time on a new NHS medal to recognise long service, such as we already have for the police, the Army, the Post Office and the fire service?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on mentioning a few of the unsung heroes in her constituency—I am sure all of us would want to echo the thanks she has given them. She will know that the committee on the grant of honours, decorations and medals is the policymaking body that gives advice on these matters, and we did give the George Cross to the National Health Services of the United Kingdom in recognition of their service, particularly in response to the pandemic. However, I suggest to my hon. Friend that she writes to that body with her very interesting proposal.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Yesterday, it was reported that some 150 Christians were killed in Nigeria’s Plateau state in the first three weeks of June alone—seven men, women and children each day. On Tuesday this week, 4 July, the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which I chair, released a new report highlighting the increase in violence that targets Christians and other minorities and how it disproportionately affects women and girls. I know that the Leader of the House is tremendously interested in these matters, as I am, and indeed as others are. Will she please raise the recommendations in that report with the appropriate Minister?

Penny Mordaunt: Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman on behalf of all of us for continuing to raise these matters each week. It is very important that we send the message that our eyes are on those groups that are suffering terribly in particular parts of the world. We do have one more Foreign Office questions before the House rises for summer recess, and I know the hon. Gentleman will need no encouragement to be there—he will be there. He will also know that earlier this year, the Foreign Secretary launched the international women and girls strategy, giving that ongoing work an update. We will continue to do all we can to speak out for the plight of all peoples who are being oppressed, particularly women and girls, and to champion their freedoms, including their freedom of religion and of belief.

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

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Building Safety and Social Housing

1.3 pm

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): I beg to move,

That this House has considered building safety and social housing.

Six years on from the night of 14 June 2017, we remember all those affected by the fire at Grenfell Tower. Six years on, 72 months on, 72 lives lost, and thousands more—bereaved families and residents in the north Kensington community—whose grief endures. I know that I speak for not just me, but right hon. and hon. Members across this House, when I say that those most affected by the fire are never far from our thoughts and prayers. It is a particular honour to welcome survivors and bereaved family members to the Gallery for today's debate, including representatives from Grenfell United and Grenfell Next of Kin.

It takes determination and courage to come and be counted, and to remain so resolute. Like so many in this House, I have been humbled to meet Grenfell community members and know the power of their testimony. Each has their own compelling and moving story to tell, and their own harrowing and unforgettable perspective on events that night. They have been united in their fight to uncover the truth and bring about change, and I hope that we in Government and across this House have been able to listen and to learn from them. I want to take this opportunity, as I do at every opportunity, to apologise again for the role of the Government and others in failings that allowed the horrifying events of 14 June 2017 to unfold. As you will hear today, Madam Deputy Speaker, I share their determination to see the truth uncovered, make change happen, and have all those responsible held to account so that justice is delivered.

The need for all of us in Government to learn from—and never repeat—the scandalous mistakes of Grenfell could not be more profound. I was clear, I hope, when I first became Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, that discharging my responsibilities to those most affected by this tragedy by honouring their loved ones with a worthy legacy was my absolute priority. That meant putting right some of the many wrongs that the bereaved survivors and immediate community have had to face and endure. I am pleased to be joined in that mission by my ministerial colleagues: the Minister of State for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and my noble Friend Baroness Scott of Bybrook, who was first appointed by my predecessor to the independent Grenfell recovery taskforce in the immediate aftermath of the fire. Her long experience of representing the needs of all residents as a former council leader has been invaluable, and I am deeply grateful to Jane for her work.

I am also pleased that today, the House has the opportunity to both honour the Grenfell community and continue to hold the Government to account. As I said last year, I want this debate to take place annually, so that there is no let-up in the opportunities for scrutiny of this Government's actions and those of future Governments. It is vital that everyone across this House can satisfy themselves that the Government are meeting their commitments and lasting change is being made. Like all Governments, we should be judged on our actions, not just our words, and all actors—including this Government—must take on board some quite tough lessons to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again.

It is clear that the past actions of many fell well short of the standards that the Grenfell community—the bereaved survivors and local residents—deserved. That is why, with my Department, I remain wholly committed to supporting the independent Grenfell Tower inquiry, through which we may understand the truth about the circumstances leading to the tragedy and see justice delivered for the Grenfell community. That community was unforgivably and inexcusably let down. Evidence given before the inquiry and reporting by distinguished journalists such as Peter Apps point out that in the months and years before the fire, people's concerns went unheard and ignored, and in the days and weeks after the fire, the institutions that were supposed to help victims were found wanting. I hope that uncovering the circumstances that led to the fire will bring at least some relief and comfort. With the inquiry having concluded its oral hearings last year, Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his inquiry team are now preparing their final report and recommendations. Also importantly, the independent Metropolitan police investigation into potential criminality continues in parallel. It is of the utmost importance to community members that that investigation is able to operate as they seek the justice that they deserve.

The Government have accepted in principle all the recommendations in the Grenfell Tower inquiry's phase 1 report. So far, we have implemented 10 of the 15 recommendations focused on central Government; a significant amount has been done, but there is more to do. The remaining five recommendations are in progress, and I continue to work closely with the Home Secretary to make sure that we deliver on all of them, particularly the recommendation to mandate personal emergency evacuation plans—PEEPs—for disabled residents. One feature of the Grenfell tragedy was the way in which those living with disabilities were particularly vulnerable.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): As the Secretary of State has said, it is now six years since the Grenfell fire, but new data gathered by Inside Housing shows that only a fraction of high-rise social housing blocks—fewer than one in five—have been retrofitted with sprinklers or fire alarms. A lack of funding is a key reason for that, so can the Government really claim that they are doing everything possible to prevent another Grenfell when people are still living in high rises without those protections?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. I know he has a lifelong interest in social housing and cares very deeply about the fates of tenants in those conditions. I would never say that we have done everything that we should. I do believe that significant progress has been made, not least in remediating high-rise buildings and making sure that everyone who should play their part. I will say a little bit more about it in a moment, but he is right to focus on how, when it comes to fire safety, it is not just the external cladding, which was of course the principal cause of the fire at Grenfell, but internal safety measures that we need to look at. Has progress been fast enough? No. Does resource need to be allocated? Yes. So I do agree with him that more requires to be done.

I was reflecting, just before that very helpful intervention, on the particular fate that disabled residents faced at Grenfell, and the vital importance of making sure that

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we have personal emergency evacuation plans in place. I hope to be able to update the House with the Home Secretary in due course.

As the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, a broad range of issues affect building safety overall. Of course, one finding of the Grenfell Tower inquiry will inevitably be a recognition of systemic failures in the way in which we dealt with building safety, because the public, residents and indeed the Government put their faith in the building and approving of high-rise blocks and in the construction products being supplied for those high-rise blocks. We believed that the law was being followed and that the right thing was being done, but this trust was misplaced and abused. Industry profits, as we now know, were prioritised over safety and the safeguards that should have been observed were flouted.

We are now, with the help of all parties in this House, fixing the broken building safety system and we are seeking redress. I have been clear that those responsible—those at the apex of the building industry—must take responsibility. As of today, a total of 49 developers, including the 10 largest house builders, have signed our developer remediation contract, and I am grateful to them for showing such leadership. All developers that have signed the contract now have a legal duty to get on with remediation.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As I am sure the Secretary of State knows, one key recommendation of the Hackitt review was to set up the Building Safety Regulator. So he will understand the concern when amendments have been tabled to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill giving the Secretary of State powers to scrap the building safety regime via a statutory instrument. If the No. 1 thing that the state needs to do is to keep its citizen safe, can he explain why those amendments have been tabled, and under what circumstances he would use that power to get rid of that regulator without proper scrutiny in this House?

Michael Gove: I absolutely would never do anything to undermine the position of the Building Safety Regulator. Indeed, I have been working with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Health and Safety Executive to make sure that we have the right team in place, the right person as regulator and the right powers for the regulator. All the legislation that we are bringing forward—not just the previous building safety legislation, but the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill—is designed to strengthen the hand of the regulator. I would be delighted to talk to the hon. Lady in greater detail outside this House to provide reassurance.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about the remediation of buildings. He knows the interest of a company in Glasgow South West that does great work in removing cladding and so on, but it has come across stumbling blocks with insurance companies and insurance premiums. Could he say a bit about the discussions he has had with the insurance industry to make sure that this work is done?

Michael Gove: Yes, the hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. In talking about the shared responsibility that so many have, I have stressed that the Government

have a responsibility, as does the construction sector, and insurance companies certainly do. It is the case that insurance companies, unfortunately, are charging premiums that I believe are way above what they should be. That is impeding the capacity of individuals to get on with their lives and it is imposing costs that are unnecessary. The Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who is the Minister responsible for the implementation of the building safety regime, has been talking to the Association of British Insurers, individual insurance companies and insurance brokers to try to make progress. There has not been as much as I would like, but, again, I will update the House in due course, as I know my hon. Friend will as well.

I mentioned developers, and it is the case that developers are taking responsibility for all the necessary work to address life-critical fire safety defects in buildings of over 11 metres high that they either developed or refurbished in England during the 30 years to 5 April 2022. There are more than 1,100 buildings in scope that are unsafe, and the cost will be £2 billion. Again, I am grateful to developers for shouldering that responsibility. Developers must also keep residents informed about the progress of these works. As I know from my own constituency, it is absolutely vital that residents are involved in that process.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I recognise that the Government have started to do some work, particularly on ACM cladding on buildings over 18 metres high, but it has been very slow. Some of the work on 11 to 18 high metre buildings is some distance away. That is really worrying for homeowners who are trapped in those properties. Can the Minister look at how that could be speeded up? Has work been done to look at different types of cladding, because different types of cladding other than ACM are also unsafe?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises two important points. Yes, absolutely, we are now moving to accelerate support for those living in buildings between 11 and 18 metres high. The cladding scheme we are bringing forward has all the energy that Homes England, the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), and the Department can deploy behind it. On her second point, of course it is the case that, while ACM was responsible for this particularly horrific tragedy, and also previously responsible for fires in the Gulf and elsewhere, there are other forms of cladding that are also a risk and that we need to remove and have been removing.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I also pay tribute to the families and the survivors who have come here today. While the Secretary of State is rightly focusing on the systemic failures that led to this disaster and on the responsibility of the big players, the agencies and indeed the Government themselves in the lead-up to the disaster and in the immediate aftermath, will he pay tribute to the community groups that stepped forward so impressively on the ground, including some council workers—I am thinking of councillors such as David Lindsay and others? Does he recognise that they were not given a proper voice in the period preceding the fire and that we should do more to engage community groups?

Michael Gove: Yes, and I am so grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. One of the things that struck me about the North Kensington community and all those affected is the way in which community groups have played such an important part. There are faith groups, including the local Roman Catholic, the local Anglican and the local Methodist churches, and the Al-Manaar mosque. Pre-existing charities such as the Rugby Portobello Trust have been very energetic in providing support, but there is a wealth of other groups, such as the Lancaster West residents association. Of course, those formed in the shadow of the tragedy, such as Grenfell United and Grenfell Next of Kin, all testify to a rich social fabric and to community activism of the best kind. I know he has championed that; he knows—even though he now represents a seat in the west of England—that the work he did with the West London Zone, which is committed to improving social mobility in that area, was an exemplar.

On building safety, I must make it clear that the developers will be held to account for their actions. Those who have made these commitments—again, I am grateful to them—are now eligible to join our new responsible actors scheme. Subject to the will of Parliament, the scheme will come into being this summer.

We are using other levers to hold the worst actors to account over building safety, because it is not just developers who share in the responsibility for putting things right. We are pursuing the most egregious cases of people who have a responsibility—freeholders and others—through our new Recovery Strategy Unit, and other means have yielded or are beginning to yield results. To date, the RSU has started legal activity against three significant freeholders that have responsibility for 19 buildings to protect residents and to ensure safety. These include Wallis Partnership Group Ltd and Grey GR Ltd Partnership, a company ultimately owned by Railpen Ltd. It is vital that all of us recognise that, when it comes to the responsibilities of pension fund trustees, which are the freehold owners in this case, they have a responsibility not just to the beneficiaries of the pension fund, but to those who are living in the homes whose freeholds they own.

Critically, we are also bringing pressure to bear on those involved in the manufacture of the construction products that were there, and were used and abused, in the run-up to the Grenfell tragedy. Three construction project giants—Kingspan, Arconic and Saint-Gobain, the parent company of Celotex—are all coming under pressure. In the last few months, I have written to these companies and invited them to meet me to explain their plans to contribute financially to remediation works on unsafe buildings. I have also written to their investors and assured them that the sights of my Department are trained on these manufacturers, and that there will be legal and commercial consequences should they fail to make satisfactory arrangements. I believe that responsible investors can join all of us in this House in bringing pressure to bear, because their wider obligations to society and their commercial interests are one and the same.

As the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) mentioned, we need to work together to ensure not just that the most serious safety problems are dealt with, but that all safety problems are dealt with. However, it is the case that people living in high-rise buildings with the most dangerous cladding,

ACM cladding—like that on Grenfell Tower—have received the support and the change needed. Some 96% of the buildings with ACM cladding have now been made safe, or have work under way, and all buildings in the social housing sector with ACM cladding have been addressed.

The Building Safety Act, as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), speaking for the Liberal Democrats pointed out, has given us additional regulatory powers, which we shall not hesitate to use. The new building safety regulator will be responsible for overseeing building safety in residential buildings above 18 metres, and it will take enforcement action where necessary.

Building safety, of course, is at the heart of the Grenfell tragedy, but I want to make two other brief points before yielding the floor to others. One is the vital importance of making sure that all of us recall how important it is to listen to the voices of those in social housing. For too long, the voices of too many social housing tenants were ignored. People living in substandard homes told us what was wrong. They described appalling conditions. They enumerated with distressing accuracy the dangerous oversights that led them to feel unsafe in the place that they should have felt most secure. We must never let those voices go unheeded again. We—all of us—must be guided by them as we improve the living conditions and rights of social housing tenants across the United Kingdom.

At last year's debate, I had just announced that the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill in the Queen's Speech was due to be debated in both our Houses. I am pleased that we are now on the verge of Royal Assent. The Bill codifies our commitment to transform the experience of social housing residents, ensuring that landlords deliver the safe and decent homes that all residents should expect. The legislation was brought forward, of course, as a direct response to concerns raised by members of the Grenfell community, but as that legislation passed through both Houses, we have been forcibly reminded about the need to strengthen it further.

The tragic death of Awaab Ishak in 2020, aged just two, as a result of respiratory conditions generated by the grotesque circumstances in which he was being brought up by the housing association that should have attacked damp and mould far earlier has also led to changes to that legislation. Awaab's law now requires social landlords to deal with damp and mould complaints to a strict timetable and will ensure that all tenants have the protection that they deserve.

Thanks to the work of Grenfell United and others, that Bill includes provisions to ensure the professionalisation of the housing sector—a consistent demand of the bereaved residents and survivors, and a demand consistent with making sure that those who work in housing get the recognition and, indeed, the respect they deserve as they acquire that additional qualification.

Abena Oppong-Asare: A lot of us MPs get a lot of housing cases, and I still get cases in which constituents are being blamed for the type of accommodation that they live in. I have cases right now where constituents are being blamed for their lifestyle. This is not filtering through, Minister. This is a real problem, and it is important that, while you are talking about all the things that you are achieving, there is still a lot of work to be done—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is important to address the Minister not directly, but through me.

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Issues of damp and mould are not a consequence of lifestyle. In fact, when that allegation is made, there is sometimes behind it an unhappy and prejudiced attitude towards some communities and some individuals. We need to call that out, and the housing ombudsman has been clear.

I should also say that I do not believe that I should take credit for these steps; it is about this House and everyone here who has worked together with people outside this House, including Grenfell United, Awaab Ishak's family, campaigning journalists such as Daniel Hewitt and Vicky Spratt and, above all, the campaigner Kwajo Tweneboa. I think he has done far more than any Minister has to ensure that we get the message on social housing.

The final thing that I want to cover are the particular needs of the community itself. The Grenfell tragedy encapsulated what had gone wrong with our building safety system and what had gone wrong with the way we treat people in social housing. But there are real needs that the community continues to feel. I want to reaffirm the commitment made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the former Prime Minister, in the terrible aftermath of the fire. She said that the Government would be there in that community long after the cameras stopped rolling. She has taken a close personal interest in ensuring that we continue to support the community. Baroness Scott and I will continue to work with other arms of Government, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the NHS, and the independent Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission to ensure that the community has the ongoing support that it needs through the conclusion of the inquiry and beyond.

The tragedy at Grenfell Tower was one of the worst civilian tragedies in our history, and the bereaved survivors and immediate community will never forget, nor should they, and nor should we. We seek in this debate and in the work of Government and Parliament not only to honour the memory of those who died, but to build a legacy in their name: safer and greener homes, better social housing, and a lasting commitment to those affected by these terrible events. This Government, this House and, indeed, our whole country have a responsibility and a stake in the future of Grenfell and the community. Across this House, we have pledged to remember the lives lost and to seek truth in their names, and we will honour them by the legacy they inspire.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister, Matthew Pennycook.

1.26 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The fire that engulfed Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017 killed 72 people—18 were children and many, as the Secretary of State said, were disabled. The inferno wiped out entire families, ripped others apart and traumatised a community. The fear that Grenfell residents must have felt on that night is truly unimaginable, and those who survived will be forever scarred by what they experienced.

In the days after the fire, as pictures of the smouldering and charred building were broadcast across the country and the world, there was a collective feeling across Britain that not only did we now have no choice but to confront issues that had been disregarded for far too long, but that the sheer horror of what happened would not allow us to forget. But the truth is that even events as traumatic as Grenfell will fade from our collective consciousness unless we work to ensure they are remembered. For that reason alone, this debate is essential. While we lament the fact that the Government did not ensure that it took place on or around the anniversary date, we nevertheless welcome the fact that we have the opportunity today to commemorate the fire and its victims, to consider again the circumstances leading up to and surrounding it, and to debate its wider ramifications.

On 14 June this year, I took part in the Grenfell silent walk, as did several other hon. Members present. As it always is, it was a profoundly moving experience. At the end of the walk, the magnitude of the human loss is brought painfully home as the names of each and every one of the 72 men, women and children who perished in the fire are slowly and methodically called out to those assembled in stillness. But this year's walk felt different, because alongside the usual grief and loss, one could sense a palpable anger among the crowd of an intensity that I have not witnessed before. Listening to those who spoke at the rally near the base of the tower at the end of the walk, it was clear that that anger is borne not only from the ever-present knowledge that what happened could have been avoided if shortcuts were not taken, reckless and unforgivable decisions were not made, and repeated warnings were not ignored, but from the fact that, six years on, the prospect of justice appears so distant.

On these Benches, we recognise, as we always have, the need to await the final report of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, but we understand the frustration and outrage that the community evidently feels as the years pass by without justice having been secured for their loved ones. The pursuit of justice will go on, as it must, yet the survivors, the bereaved and the wider Grenfell community, to whom the Opposition again pay tribute today, have always been clear that securing wider change and a lasting legacy is equally important to them. Amid all the setbacks and frustrations that they have experienced, it is important that we recognise that they have already helped to change things for the better. But when it comes to decisively and markedly improving standards in social housing and making sure that all buildings across the country are safe, there is still so much more to be done.

When it comes to improving the quality of social housing, tangible progress has been made over the course of the past 12 months. We pressed for it to be strengthened further, but we have worked with the Government to ensure the rapid passage of the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill through this place. Improved as it was by a number of Government concessions, we very much look forward to it receiving Royal Assent in the near future.

As the Secretary of State will know, operationalising that Bill will require a number of further measures, including determining the specific requirements that will flow from Awaab's law; reviewing existing guidance on the health impacts of damp and mould in homes; and putting in place the new consumer regulation regime

and updated regulatory standards. We would be grateful if the Government updated the House during the debate on progress on all those fronts.

While overhauling the regulation of social housing is a necessary step to improving its quality across England, legislation alone is unlikely to be enough. We recognise that many social landlords provide good-quality, safe and secure homes in which individuals and families can and do thrive. We also appreciate fully the challenging context in which social landlords have had to operate over recent years, including the significant costs of building safety remediation works, but we are convinced that many social landlords need to ask themselves difficult, but essential questions about the quality of some of the homes they provide and the service their tenants receive, as well as examining afresh their culture and processes. The recently published “Better Social Housing Review”, overseen by the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing, is a welcome development in that regard, and we look forward to seeing how individual providers implement its recommendations over the coming months and years.

We also recognise that progress has been made over the past year when it comes to addressing the building safety crisis. I particularly welcome the Secretary of State’s comments on product manufacturers. We encourage him to explore and exhaust all possible options that the Government have to hold them to account. In the course of the past year, some leaseholders have been given legal protection; some developers have entered into a legal agreement to remediate unsafe buildings that they have either constructed or refurbished; and some lenders have agreed to offer mortgages on blocks of flats with safety issues, but if we ask the hundreds of thousands of people still living in unsafe buildings across the country whether they expect the building safety crisis as it affects them to be resolved fully by this time next year or even this time two years hence, the answer we will receive from the vast majority is a resounding no.

The Secretary of State is right that all ACM issues on social housing blocks have been resolved, but we still do not know the full extent of the crisis as it affects social homes, because providers are ineligible to apply for support unless their financial viability is threatened. The overall pace of remediation across the country remains glacial. Shamefully, Grenfell-style ACM cladding, which should not be on any building in this country or any other country, is still present on 40 high-rise buildings in England six years on, and just 37 non-ACM buildings have been fully remediated out of the 1,225 that made applications to the building safety fund.

All the evidence suggests that only a small proportion of leaseholders in unsafe buildings have seen remediation works begin and a far larger proportion has no identified date for the commencement of works and no estimated timescale for completion, including many in buildings covered by the developer remediation contract. As a result, despite some lenders being willing in principle to offer mortgages, six years on from Grenfell the majority of leaseholders in privately-owned buildings are still trapped. Within their captivity, many are being bled dry by service charges that more often than not have escalated sharply as a result of soaring buildings insurance premiums. That is a scandal that the Government have singularly failed to step in and decisively resolve over multiple years, despite continuous pleading from Members from across the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise for not being here for the first words of the debate. Can I confirm that the hon. Gentleman is saying that what leaseholders need is what social tenants have got: the problem needs to be identified and it needs to be fixed, and then the funding should happen? To wait for the funding is the wrong way round.

Matthew Pennycook: I hope the Father of the House will accept that we have argued consistently since the start of this crisis that the Government should step in and fund and then use their power to recover as we go forward, because too many leaseholders are trapped. That is not just in the context of this problem, but due to the wider inequities of the leasehold system, and we need to tackle that problem in due course.

Richard Burgon: I thank the shadow Minister for his thoughtful and detailed remarks. Taking him back to a point he made about ACM cladding, survivors of the Grenfell fire and the bereaved are keen to see ACM cladding banned globally. As he mentioned, it is on 40 blocks in the UK as it stands. Would he like to see it effectively banned globally and removed from those 40 blocks in this country?

Matthew Pennycook: ACM should not be on any building in England six years after the fire, and it is shameful that it is, but my hon. Friend is right. The Government should use their authority and the experience they have gleaned over the past six years to make the case worldwide, because this material should not be on any building. It is dangerous, and it should never have been put up in the first place.

While all trapped leaseholders are feeling the strain, in relative terms some are better off than others, because the Government made the political choice to provide some with legal protection from the costs of historic non-cladding defects, while leaving others exposed to bills that will not only lead to financial ruin in many instances, but will have a material impact on the progress of remediation in buildings where such non-qualifying leaseholders are large in number. Even at this late stage, I urge the Secretary of State to reconsider the arbitrary division of blameless leaseholders into those who qualify for protection under the law and those who do not, as well as beseeching him to ensure that the Government finally grip and drive from the centre an accelerated programme of remediation across the country.

To conclude, six years on from the horror of Grenfell, things have changed, but they have not changed anywhere near enough. If we are to ensure that everyone has a secure, decent, affordable and safe home in which to live, far more still needs to be done, and done quickly. If it is not, we will be back here again next year, marking the seventh anniversary of the fire, still bemoaning the fact that too many social tenants are being let down and too many buildings are not being made safe, with the lives of too many blameless leaseholders destroyed. We owe it to the survivors, the bereaved, the wider Grenfell community and the legacy they want to see established to ensure that that is not the case.

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

1.36 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Like others, our thoughts and prayers go to the Grenfell community as we remember them in this debate. It is worth remembering that the Grenfell fire killed 72 people due to flammable cladding, and this House remembers the lives that were lost. It is also worth remembering that during the platinum jubilee celebrations, 72 seats were left unfilled at a street party to remind the community of the lives lost. Each place at the table was set with a name card, napkin, plate, cup and flag. Yvette Williams, a Justice4Grenfell campaigner, said:

“Five years on, a toothless public inquiry and millions still trapped in their homes by flammable cladding—and still no justice. There have been no lessons learned and little action taken. As people up and down the country enjoy street parties, as they quite rightly should, we want to let the powers that be know that our community will always remember the 72 who died needlessly here that night.”

A total of 6,247 people were referred to the dedicated NHS Grenfell health and wellbeing service. Of those, 1,476 were children. Dr Sara Northey, who runs therapy for children and young people at the dedicated NHS Grenfell health and wellbeing service, has described the scale of the trauma as “unprecedented”. She said:

“This is an unusual trauma as it affected a whole community and is definitely ongoing. Grief doesn’t just go away. But what is striking is also the strength people have in the relationships here and the connection people have. At the heart of the trauma is a shattering of safety. We have seen a lot of avoidance of things that remind children of fire. A bonfire or candles on a birthday cake can be quite triggering. Some are worried about electronics in the home and need to check things are switched off. Children are being, kind of, hyperaware of safety in a way that most children don’t have to be.”

I hope that Ministers will tell the House that, while it is important that we concentrate on building safety, they are committed to ensuring that these health and wellbeing services will still be there and maintained to help the people of Grenfell. As the Secretary of State rightly said, there should be an annual debate not just to discuss building health and safety, but it should also ensure that the health and wellbeing of that community is maintained.

Michael Gove indicated assent.

Chris Stephens: I see that the Secretary of State agrees; I thank him for that.

The Scottish Government are spending every penny of consequential funding they receive on this programme of work, with committed spend of £1.3 million. The Scottish cladding remediation programme is designed to ensure that there is no cost to property owners and residents for the procurement and production of a single building assessment for each building. The Scottish Government first have to carry out comprehensive and technical assessments to understand the extent of the problem. The vast majority of buildings in the initial phase of the Scottish Government’s programme have secured fire engineers, and a new streamlined process for commissioning the assessments will help to identify at-risk buildings more quickly.

The safety of residents and homeowners in Scotland is of the utmost priority as the Scottish Government work to tackle cladding safety issues through our single building assessment, which has been expanded to more than 100 buildings. We will create a register of buildings that will provide assurance to the public following the completion of any necessary remediation works. If experts

identify an issue that needs immediate action to safeguard residents, the Scottish Government will take action and expect developers to do likewise on their buildings.

This can be a complex and time-consuming programme. A number of assessments are either at final or pre-final reporting stage, with discussions on remediation under way. I hope that, at the conclusion of the debate, the Minister will update the House about the discussions that Ministers are having with the devolved Administrations. It is about funding and the Barnett consequentialities that kick in when the UK Government spend money.

The Scottish Government have strengthened and will continue to strengthen the building standards system in Scotland, with the building standards futures board established to undertake a programme of work to strengthen the system. The Scottish Government have legislated to improve fire safety by banning developers from using combustible cladding on residential and other high-risk buildings above 11 metres. Scotland was the first part of the UK to ban the highest-risk metal composite cladding material from any new building of any height.

Since 2005, new cladding systems on high rise blocks of flats have had either to use non-combustible materials or pass a large-scale fire test. The building standards legislation removes the option of a fire test, completely prohibiting such materials from use on domestic and other high risk buildings such as care homes and hospitals above 11 metres. In October 2019, the Scottish Government strengthened guidance in relation to combustible cladding, means of escape and measures to assist the fire service. The regulations were passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament to protect lives and property following the tragic Grenfell Tower fire.

I have outlined some of the work being done in Scotland. On behalf of the Scottish National party, I want to emphasise that our thoughts, prayers and love go out to the Grenfell community.

1.43 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State that we should have an annual Grenfell debate. It would be better to have it on, or as near as possible to, the anniversary date; it is somewhat disrespectful that we have waited nearly a month to have it this year. I am sure that the silent walks will continue. I have tried to attend them, at least on the anniversary, and I have noticed how, over the six years, the mood has changed from grief to frustration about the lack of progress from all sides—whether the Government or the inquiry—and now to real anger. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), was also there, and I am sure that he agrees on that point. I therefore do not recognise much of what the Secretary of State said about what is happening.

What seems to be happening is that, every year, there are more complex issues and while there has been some degree of resolution, more questions are raised and there are more problems to resolve about the causes and spread of fires. That, to a large extent, is to do with cladding, and not just ACM cladding. There are many other reasons why fire spreads through high rise buildings in particular. The families want to see a complete ban on ACM cladding on all buildings not only in this country but internationally. I hope that the Government will campaign for that to happen, because it is not only in the UK that tragic fires such as Grenfell have happened.

There are huge issues with the design of new buildings. That is evolving all the time, as we see in the two-staircase issue, as well as in remediation. It is to some extent easy to set new building standards for new buildings—well, it can be done—but we are lagging behind substantially in doing remedial work on existing buildings. Much of this comes down to finance. That is not just for individual leaseholders, who in certain circumstances will still have to pay out large sums of money, or where money is not forthcoming up front; it is also for social tenants, because social landlords are not getting the same degree of financial support as leaseholders, and social landlords have competing priorities as to what they spend their money on. Although I would like to, I will not take the time to deal with all those issues. I will deal with just three issues in detail.

First, there is the causes of fires. The cause of the Grenfell fire was what I am holding in my hand: a crimp, which is a small piece of wiring that costs a few pence. As I am sure people will guess, I am not an expert in these matters, so I am grateful to Richard Farthing, chairman of the Hammersmith Society, who has a background in electrical and electronic manufacturing. He sent me the expert report on the cause of the Grenfell fire. I will not go through all the technical details, but its short conclusion is:

“A probable cause of the fire is a poor crimp connection...an overheated wire connector within the compressor relay compartment for the fridge freezer (Hotpoint Model FF175BP) from Flat 16.”

It is as simple as that: a little component, costing a matter of pennies, which was either not fitted properly or not manufactured properly, caused a fire that led to the deaths of 72 people. Of course, there were many other issues of causation in Grenfell and elsewhere, but that draws attention to the lack of quality control in manufacturing processes.

The second issue on cause, which I encounter every month—not a month goes by when I do not hear about this, usually in a social housing block of flats in my constituency—is fires caused by lithium batteries. I say fires, but they are usually explosions. This is an extraordinary problem that the London Fire Brigade and, I am sure, fire brigades across the country are very much aware of.

A couple of weeks ago, three people were taken to hospital after a fire broke out in a flat in West Kensington due to a converted e-bike catching fire. What happens is that people buy a bike and want to convert it into an e-bike, so they buy a kit and a battery. Many of these things are bought second hand and are cheap, with faults in manufacture, so they overheat and literally explode. Anyone who does not believe me should look at the London Fire Brigade's Twitter feed, where they will see explosions that completely engulf a room of a flat—sometimes the whole flat—within seconds. If compartmentalisation works—the fire is kept in that flat because of the construction of the doors and walls—and the occupants of the flat escape, there may be no serious injuries, but if that does not happen and the fire spreads, as it quite easily can, it is almost impossible to contain. That is about a lack of regulation. Why are we allowing such kits to be sold? Why are we allowing people to use them in high-rise buildings in that way? As I said, probably once a month I go and view the site of a fire caused by exactly that somewhere in my constituency, and it is only a matter of time before there are more fatalities. There have been fatalities through lithium batteries in that way.

The third issue on cause again comes from personal experience. The year before Grenfell, in a high-rise block of flats, Shepherd's Court, on Shepherd's Bush Green, a faulty tumble dryer caught fire and destroyed the flat. Hundreds of thousands of them were manufactured, mainly by a large company called Whirlpool under names such as Hotpoint and Indesit. They were cheaply made, cheap to buy and often sold second hand, and they are causing hundreds if not thousands of fires across the country. There is a lack of design prowess. Whether it is the crimp, quality control, the batteries, lack of regulation or lack of design, there is a crisis across the manufacturing and design sector.

I commend to the Secretary of State a newly published book by Professor Shane Ewen of Leeds Beckett University, “Before Grenfell: Fire, Safety and Deregulation in Twentieth-Century Britain”. It says:

“the Grenfell Tower fire was a disaster foretold—the culmination of successive decades of deregulation, corporate greed and institutional failure to learn from the lessons of past multiple-fatality fires.”

It is a very good read and I recommend it to the Secretary of State. It indicates that the crisis did not begin and certainly did not end with Grenfell, but has been going on a long time—the result of either deliberate Government policy or Government neglect to take care of the issues.

The second issue is design. As is often the case, I am grateful to the Royal Institute of British Architects, which has been pushing the issues of design and remedial work to high-rise buildings. Its particular ask is the trigger point for a second staircase. I think that people are familiar with the issue of having at least two staircases. Extraordinarily, hitherto, whereas non-residential buildings over 11 metres had to have a second staircase, a residential building can be as tall as you like. I know that because just overlooking my constituency in north Acton is a 50-plus-storey, newly constructed block that has one staircase in it. I am pleased to say that, due to the action of the Mayor of London, those seeking planning permission for blocks of flats over 30 metres are required to go back and put in a second staircase. A submission from RIBA, experts in this field, states that that should apply to any residential building over 18 metres. I would like the Government to adopt that.

When refurbishing, it may be difficult to put in a second staircase. There, the ask is that evacuation lifts, sprinklers and centrally addressable fire alarm systems be put in. Those do not have to be fire alarms that any resident can activate. In the wake of the Grenfell tragedy, the “stay put” policy increasingly does not work. I understand why it was maintained, and it works in many cases, but it does not work if residents—completely understandably—fear for their lives and evacuate the building. If a decision is made to evacuate a building, there has to be a way of telling people in that building. Alarm systems that are controllable at least by the fire service are an important part of that equation. I cannot for the life of me think why we are not retrofitting sprinklers into high-rise buildings. They will stop 99% of fires. Many, many tragedies could be avoided if that happened.

My final point is the consequence. This debate is partly about social housing more generally, but I am not sure we have time to go into all aspects of that. I would like to address the crossover between fire safety and social housing providers, and the pressures on their resources. I was prompted to do so after reading an

[*Andy Slaughter*]

extraordinary interview that the Housing Minister, the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), gave to Inside Housing a couple of days ago. It states:

“When asked what housing associations should prioritise without additional funding from government, and facing pressure to build, retrofit stock and meet building safety and historic disrepair costs, Ms Maclean replied: ‘It’s up to them.’”

That shows an absolute tin ear to the current pressures on social landlords. They want to develop new stock—again, completely contrary to what the Housing Minister said in that interview, the number of social rented homes that this Government have created is appalling low, standing at 7,644 last year. She said in the same interview:

“We’ve delivered more social rented homes in this government than under the last Labour government.”

These facts are easily discoverable: the current Government have built less than half the number built by the previous Labour Government.

That is only one aspect of the crisis in social housing. We have heard about damp, mould and disrepair, which need to be dealt with. Retrofitting needs to be dealt with—at a cost of about £23 billion—as well as building safety, which is what we are talking about today. Why are social housing landlords in such a plight? The answer is that they lost 60% of the social housing grant under the austerity Government. Due to rent controls and other matters, they are unable to come up with the resources they need. It is so bad that the smaller associations are going under or are having to merge into much larger associations.

The whole sector is being distorted by the financial pressures. The big landlord group G15 says that out of the £6 billion it will need to pay for remedial work due to fire safety measures, it will have to find £4 billion itself. That means that its tenants and leaseholders will have to find that money, because there is no other readily available source. Shepherds Bush Housing Group, a formerly well-respected local medium-sized housing association, has just had to be taken over by Guinness, a much larger association, because it simply cannot financially survive with all the pressures on it.

There is an existential threat to the social housing market. Previous Conservative Governments decided to move from council housing to housing associations in a big way. The Government will have to rethink where they are on those issues because it is no longer sustainable for housing associations to go forward with the financial support that they have.

When the Housing Minister winds up the debate, perhaps she will correct some of the errors that she made in that interview, and perhaps she will address a more listening ear to social landlords. They perform an extremely important function. I heard everything the Secretary of State said about that; the rhetoric is all well and good, but the actuality is that tenants are living in poor conditions and people are in temporary accommodation—we have the highest levels ever—because no decent social housing is being built and maintained in this country. That is what tenants and leaseholders are looking for, not warm words and empty rhetoric.

1.58 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I welcome this debate, six years on from the Grenfell tragedy. No amount of words and speeches can remove the grief and pain

inflicted on the families and friends of the 72 lives lost to the fire. We will never forget. The scars will be with the community and with our nation for generations to come. I pay tribute to the families, survivors, the community and Grenfell United for their voice and for campaigning so consistently—despite their own grief—for change, transparency and justice. Lessons have not been learned. Countless people still live in buildings with hazardous cladding. Although I welcome the Building Safety Act and its good intentions, progress has just been too painfully slow. During covid we saw how fast the Government can move when they need to, in stark contrast to their slowness in setting up the building safety fund, which did not even account for the number of people or blocks affected. Registration took so long and then had to be extended, still without providing huge amounts of money to developers. They were then so slow to bring developers to the table. It is their faults, their mistakes and their errors, but it is people who are paying the price.

For more than three years since I was elected, I have been supporting thousands of constituents in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields in 30 blocks with unsafe cladding. Only one—only one—has had its cladding fully removed. The scaffolding went up and was up for quite a long time. It has now been removed and the residents are now in a safe building, but in all the other blocks either the cladding is untouched and they do not know when it will be removed, or, for a couple of blocks, the scaffolding is up and the cladding is being removed. But why, six years on, has there been so little work? I speak to constituents constantly who are furious that their cladding has still not been removed, and that reflects the situation up and down the country.

Just this week I had a meeting with residents, developers and managing agents of one of those developments. The residents were asking, “Is our building safe?” All the developers could say was, “Well, it’s not, not safe.” That is not good enough if you are living in that building, worried about what will happen at night. So much money has been spent on waking watch—many residents call it sleeping watch—which really has not worked. Was it necessary? In the meeting this week, I heard from one person who said she could not renegotiate her mortgage because of lenders’ building safety concerns, so her mortgage costs were going up by £2,000 a month. Another has had to borrow from friends and family. He, too, was unable to renegotiate his mortgage because of those concerns. They could not be given a comfort letter by the developer, which is one of those that has signed the developer pledge, because it could not guarantee the work would be done to a high enough extent for mortgage lenders. People still have the mental distress of living in what could be unsafe homes; unable to let them, they cannot move on with their lives—have a normal life—despite spending so much money on a home. The big questions they have for the developers are, “When will they even start the work for my development?” and “When will it finish? When will this be over?” That is what they are asking.

I want to come on to talk about the actions the Government have taken, but the trouble is that every action they take and every question they eventually answer leaves about two more unanswered. It is not acceptable that after all these years, I must still—with many other Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who has done so much to campaign on this issue—come back to the

Chamber. What will happen to the vast majority of people living in social housing who have still not had sprinklers retrofitted in their blocks? As *Inside Housing* reported, fewer than 20% of high rise social housing blocks have been fitted with sprinklers and only 12% with fire alarms. Instead, there needs to be work, block by block, with the residents of those blocks on what needs to happen to keep them safe.

What will happen to the 140,000 leaseholders in England who are living in mid-rise buildings with “life safety” fire risks? There has been no update on the medium-rise remediation fund since the pilot scheme was launched for only 60 blocks. What will happen to the unknown numbers of people who live in buildings under 11 metres with lethal cladding still on them, which likely house disabled residents, not to mention the unresolved issues that leaseholders have had with EWS1 forms? What will happen to leaseholders who have non-cladding defects, but cannot afford the £15,000 spending cap in London or the £10,000 spending cap outside London? What will happen to people living in the almost 12,000 buildings with non-ACM flammable cladding? Why did the Government water down the personal emergency evacuation plans for disabled people, and go against the recommendations of the inquiry? I am glad that the personal emergency evacuation plans were mentioned by the Secretary of State, but there are so many more questions about when it will be actioned. Will the Minister enact the Financial Conduct Authority’s recommendations on spiralling insurance costs, which were also mentioned in the debate? That is a huge issue for many of my constituents. Many leaseholders are suffering and even going bankrupt. They face increases of over 500% on their insurance costs. What will happen to those people? Will they be forgotten, or do the Government have a plan?

Without robust and swift enforcement, the Building Safety Act 2022 is toothless. Will the Secretary of State say why a deadline was not put in place for when developers have to remove their cladding, rather than the vague ask of “as soon as reasonably practicable”? Is there any plan to have a deadline? Will the developers who signed the pledge, which is welcome, be given a final deadline? Will residents know when they are likely to be out of the nightmare they are facing? Developers just seem to be dragging their feet while costs are rising. The Secretary of State mentioned a legal duty on developers who signed the pledge to get on with remediation. It would be far better if that “getting on with it” was given an actual date, which would focus their minds, help release so much of the concern and worry, bring down insurance costs and provide the comfort that mortgage lenders say they need.

The Department has only shared details on threatening to take one developer to court if it does not agree to remediation works. I think the Secretary of State said there may be two more in process, but whether it is one or three that is such a small number. What serious consequences are there currently for the countless other developers who have refused to sign the remediation contract or have delayed works? Can the Minister state how often the building safety regulator will call in the accountable person and what the enforcement will be?

As the Secretary of State said, Kingspan, Arconic and Saint-Gobain are the manufacturers whose cladding was installed in Grenfell Tower. It is still going on many

other buildings. I am glad action is being taken, but they still have not paid a single penny towards remediation costs. As their profits soar, taxpayers are footing the bill of their negligence to the tune of £5 billion. Enforcement needs to be more than just a letter asking them to pay. Where is the accountability? What is the hold up? Where is the justice?

I am glad that the voice of social housing tenants has been mentioned, because that is at the heart of the issue. That includes temporary accommodation tenants who often have very little voice. They do not know how long they will be placed for. They do not know where to go to have their say. Often, additional work is not done by councils to enable them to have a voice, yet they may be raising the very issues, the equivalent of which were being raised by Grenfell residents before the tragedy. Their voice needs to be heard. Government support should be built into the system to reward councils that give their social housing tenants, including temporary accommodation tenants, a voice that leads to actual change. Additional work and support is needed to ensure those tenants know their voice can be heard, but they need to be listened to. If that lesson of Grenfell is not learned, we may see more tragedies that could have been stopped.

Grenfell was not an isolated incident, but the result of decades of unfettered deregulation of our safety. Our hospitals are crumbling. Our homes are riddled with toxic mould and lethal cladding. One-fifth of all firefighters have been axed. A year before Grenfell, the Conservatives voted against making homes fit for human habitation. The truth is that it took the tragedies of Grenfell and baby Awaab’s death from mould for the Government to even think about improving safety standards. Previously, I have called for a Minister for mould, because of so many cases I know of where families’ health has been put at risk from the mould they suffer in their homes. The pace and scope of action has been woefully inadequate and consequently there is very little to prevent another tragedy happening again. That terrifies me.

My constituents are exhausted. Campaigners on cladding are exhausted. I am exhausted. Grenfell United is continuing on bravely, but their justice needs to be seen. The legacy of Grenfell, the tragic deaths of 72 wonderful lives, must be justice and certainty that this will never happen again. How has this not been sorted out six years on? It will go down in history as one of the great failings of this Government. All my constituents want is to live in a home that is safe, to buy a home that they know is safe, to be able to sell that home if they need to, and not to have to pay for the mistakes of others. My final question to the Minister is this: is that too much to ask?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. We are about to come to the winding-up speeches. Following the conclusion of this debate, there will be a statement on Iran from the Foreign Secretary. Any Members wishing to question the Foreign Secretary on his statement should make their way to the Chamber now.

2.10 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): May I first associate myself with the comments of the Secretary of State in welcoming the families and friends of those involved in the Grenfell tragedy, and the survivors, who are in the Public Gallery today?

[Paula Barker]

It is a privilege to respond to this debate on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. As has already been said, Opposition Members were disappointed that no time was afforded for a debate nearer to the time of the anniversary of the Grenfell tragedy back in June, but I thank all Members who have contributed to the important debate that we have had this afternoon. We have heard several excellent speeches dealing with both the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the Grenfell fire and its wider ramifications—those ramifications being the trauma that survivors live with each and every day, and also the trauma experienced by the families and friends of the victims and those who reside in the wider community.

In one of the richest boroughs of our capital, what the Grenfell fire shone a light on was rampant and unchecked inequality, and, alongside that, a housing crisis which to this day remains unaddressed, with too many of our people in homes that are uninhabitable and dangerous—and, lest we forget, with people still on social housing waiting lists, waiting for a place to call their own. In the aftermath of tragedy and the loss of human life, we can only begin to remedy the sense of loss and human suffering with accountability, truth and justice, and, most important, by vowing never to bear witness to a repetition of the events that unfolded on 14 June 2017, and vowing never again to lose a two-year-old boy like Awaab Ishak—who died because the social housing provider would not act on the complaints from his family—to the scourge of damp and mould.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) was right to say that the scale of the trauma from Grenfell was unprecedented. He was also right to speak of the need for health and wellbeing services to be maintained. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) spoke movingly about the important issue of social landlords not receiving the same amount of support as leaseholders. In his usual knowledgeable fashion, he also spoke about the crisis across the design sector and the lack of regulation, the financial pressures on social landlords, and the existential threat posed by those factors.

I welcomed the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), especially when she compared the speed with which the Government had moved during the covid crisis with the slowness of progress in this area, and referred to the many unanswered questions. She spoke of the need to reduce insurance costs and the assurances required by mortgage lenders, and it was a poignant moment when she also spoke of the need for those in temporary accommodation to have a voice.

All those Members made earnest contributions to the debate, and I thank them for that, because, after all, these matters are too important, too central to human dignity, not to be afforded time in this place—or, indeed, the corridors of power in Whitehall. The community of Grenfell need answers, and they deserve answers. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), I was unable to join in the recent Grenfell walk, but I echo his observation that there was a real sense of anger and frustration this year. As we know, at the end of the Grenfell walks the scale of human loss is painfully brought home as the name of each one of the 72 men, women and children who perished is called out to those who are present.

Of course we await the outcome of the Grenfell inquiry, as we must, but I hear those cries of vexation, those calls for justice. Opposition Members eagerly anticipate the contents of the inquiry's final report, and look forward to our institutions acting on its recommendations and delivering the three key tenets that the community expects: accountability, truth and justice.

When it comes to decisively and markedly improving standards in social housing and ensuring that all buildings are safe, there is still much to be done, although, as has been said, progress has been made over the past 12 months in improving the quality of social housing. Opposition Members wanted the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill to be strengthened further, but we worked with the Government to ensure its rapid passage through this place. What happens next will be pivotal to cementing the difference that the legislation should make. The Government have that responsibility and the social housing sector bears its responsibility, too. The National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing shone a spotlight on this issue in their report entitled "The Better Social Housing Review". The sector must act swiftly on the report's seven recommendations, not least the first, which states:

"Every housing association, and the sector...should refocus on their core purpose and deliver against it."

The Opposition recognise that progress has been made in other areas, particularly building safety, but it remains too slow for far too many. As has been pointed out today, some leaseholders have been given legal protection, some developers have entered into a legal agreement to remediate unsafe buildings that they either constructed or refurbished, and a small number of lenders have agreed to offer mortgages on blocks with safety issues, but ultimately that is entirely inadequate. Remediation work has been painstaking and laborious, and has not even begun in too many instances. Those who have walked around any of our major cities containing high-rise blocks over the last few years will have seen shells of apartment blocks, which remain to this day. The cladding was quickly removed, but what now for the people and families at the heart of this story? Evidence suggests that only a small proportion of leaseholders in unsafe buildings have seen remediation works begin, while a far larger proportion have no identified date for the commencement of works and no estimated timescale for their completion. Our people deserve better.

The Government have not finished the job and we urge them to deliver the change that many are still crying out for. They must step up and look at this entire agenda in the round. The Fire Brigades Union is right to condemn them for the fact that in England there are currently fewer fire safety inspectors who are competent to carry out audits and serve enforcement notices than there were in the year after the Grenfell Tower fire. Why is that?

I also ask the Government to heed the calls of the Local Government Association, which is saying very clearly that councils and fire and rescue services need clarity on what is expected of them as regulators alongside the Building Safety Regulator. A significant amount of secondary legislation still needs to be approved by Parliament to implement the new building safety regime and, of course, effective delivery of that new regime depends on adequate resources for both councils and fire and rescue services. I would welcome updates on that from the Government.

Good-quality, safe homes are the bedrock of human dignity. Housing must never take life; rather, it should preserve the sanctity of life. Our people should be allowed to grow, flourish and experience a life well lived, but for too long, the opposite has been the case.

2.18 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): It is a pleasure to conclude the debate on behalf of the Government.

Six years on—as the powerful and moving contributions to the debate have illustrated—the still unimaginable events of 14 June 2017 continue to demand searching answers from us as a country about who we are and who we aspire to be. They reaffirm the unshakeable commitment across this House to those most affected: the commitment to provide long-term support for recovery and the rebuilding of shattered lives, and to provide a legacy worthy of the 72 men, women and children who lost their lives. We honour their memory, and the courage and dignity of the bereaved and the survivors in the Grenfell community. I am pleased to see them represented here today; it was humbling and a privilege to have a conversation with a few of them before I came to the Chamber. Their quest for truth and justice and their campaigning, in the interests of others, to reform systems that so grievously failed them is humbling and inspiring in equal measure.

As we have heard, the issues raised by those in the Grenfell Tower community had been present for many years. Their calls for change went unanswered and their concerns were ignored. They were failed by the institutions and mechanisms developed to support and protect them. As the Secretary of State has said, we are determined to learn from the past so that no community ever again suffers as they have. More than anything, that must mean people being safe in their homes.

As the Minister responsible for housing, I am aware of the heavy debt we owe the Grenfell community. Over the past year, that has involved making homes with the most dangerous cladding safer, protecting leaseholders from unfair and punitive remediation costs, getting those responsible to face up to their financial and moral responsibilities, and fundamentally overhauling and strengthening the entire building safety system.

The Grenfell community has also rightly kept up the pressure on my Department to ensure that we never again ignore the voices of people living in social housing, and that it provides the safe, decent homes and respectful, good-quality services that they expect and deserve. Awaab Ishak's tragic death underlined the urgency of that work, which we are taking forward through the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, amended to include Awaab's law—new requirements for social landlords to address hazards such as damp and mould within a fixed timeframe.

There is, of course, much more to do, and I do not underestimate the toll that six long years of waiting for the truth and for justice to be done has taken on the people of North Kensington. Like them, we keenly await the publication of the Grenfell Tower inquiry's final report—we have already begun implementing recommendations in the phase 1 report—and the outcome of the ongoing Met police investigation. We also look forward to seeing a fitting and lasting memorial delivered at the Grenfell Tower site through the Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission, working in partnership with the community. I join the

Secretary of State in paying tribute to the commission's work. However, beyond truth and justice, the greatest legacy we can deliver is a continued commitment to listening, learning and acting to secure a better future for all—a profound commitment that I know is shared across the House.

Let me turn to some of the points raised by hon. Members in the debate. We heard from the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), from the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and from the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), as well as from the two Labour spokespeople, the hon. Members for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) and for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker). I thank them all for their contributions.

We recognised that sprinklers could play a greater role, so we lowered the threshold for the provision of sprinkler systems in new blocks of flats from 30 metres to 11 metres in 2020, following a consultation on sprinklers and fire safety measures, through changes to approved document B. Sprinklers are only one of a range of measures that can be provided in buildings, and building owners are already bound by a clear obligation to ensure that existing buildings have a suitable and sufficient fire risk assessment in place. Retrofitting sprinklers is not always the right option; other fire safety measures, such as measures recommended by phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, may be more appropriate for an individual building.

I was asked how people living in buildings under 11 metres can be helped when they face expensive bills for remediation. It is the ultimate responsibility of building owners to ensure that residential buildings of all heights are safe, and the consensus is that the level of risk tallies with the height of the building. The risk to life is usually lower in buildings under 11 metres in height, which are very unlikely to need costly remediation to make them safe. Indeed, a fire risk appraisal of external walls conducted in accordance with the PAS 9980 principles will often find that lower-cost mitigations are more appropriate in low-rise buildings. Nevertheless, my Department has committed to looking at buildings under 11 metres where remediation costs are involved on a case-by-case basis. We think that is the right approach.

We have banned ACM cladding on all new builds. At the end of May 2023, 96% of all identified high-rise residential and publicly owned buildings in England had either completed or started work to remove and replace unsafe cladding, and 450 buildings—92%—no longer have unsafe ACM, with 84% having completed ACM remediation work. We continue to keep up the pressure to ensure that that job is finished.

Fleur Anderson: Is there a date by which the Minister would like to reach 100% removal of ACM cladding?

Rachel Maclean: Of course, we would all like to see that happen much more quickly. That is why we are continuing with the legislative measures that we have set out, including the Building Safety Act and all the other work that goes behind that, as the Secretary of State said.

I was asked about social housing regulation. The direction of travel is clear: residents have spoken and reform is coming to the social housing sector. We are committed to implementing the new regulatory regime enabled by the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill. I thank

[Rachel Maclean]

Opposition Members for assisting us with passing the Bill. The new regime will be implemented in 2024. The Secretary of State will consult on any directions to the regulator, and the regulator will then need to consult on its proposed consumer standards. That is just part of a wider programme of work to drive up the quality of social housing and reduce the number of non-decent rented homes by 50% by 2030. That includes tougher regulation and a strengthened housing ombudsman service, a review of the decent homes standard, and providing residents with more performance information.

Mr Deputy Speaker, 72 months since the Grenfell community lost 72 family members, friends and neighbours, the enormity of what happened that night in June 2017 remains inescapable. Those who never made it out of the tower paid with their lives, in the homes where they should have been most safe, for collective failings, including on the part of the Government, for which we have apologised. Six years on, those left behind continue to wait for answers and for those responsible to be held to account, not just today but every day, as they count the cost of precious lives cut short—six years of missing seeing loved ones grow up or grow old; missed life milestones; meals unshared; ordinary, everyday memories unmade. No apologies—no words—are enough to right those wrongs.

As the Secretary of State said, we will be judged not on our words but on our actions—actions to make homes safer and greener; to improve social housing and amplify the voices of residents; to make sure that those responsible step up or face the consequences; to provide long-term support for the Grenfell community for as long as it takes; to learn from the past, get to the truth and see justice done; and to ensure that everyone in our society has a safe, secure place to live that they are truly proud to call home. Let that be Grenfell's abiding legacy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered building safety and social housing.

Iran

2.28 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the threat that Iran poses to the United Kingdom and the actions that His Majesty's Government are taking to counter it.

Since protests began in Iran in September last year, the Iranian regime has dramatically increased its attempts to silence dissent, which have never been confined to Iranian territory. While our police, intelligence and security agencies have been confronting these threats for many years, their seriousness and intensity have increased in recent months. In the last 18 months, there have been at least 15 credible threats to kill or kidnap British nationals and others living in the UK by the Iranian regime.

We have evidence that Farsi-language media outlets operating out of the United Kingdom and the individuals who work for them have also been targeted. One such company is Iran International. As the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), told the House on 20 February, Iran International's employees have been threatened with kidnap and murder. They have also been subjected to a debilitating campaign of aggressive online harassment. Such threats are a direct attack on press and media freedom, and they are a direct attack on public safety. This Government will never tolerate such threats on British soil or on the territory of our friends and allies.

We know from working closely with our international partners that these Iranian menaces extend beyond the UK to the rest of Europe and the wider world. In March 2023, an Iranian-orchestrated plot was stopped in Athens. We have seen similar attempts in the United States of America, Türkiye, France and Denmark. Such brazen activity is unacceptable. These actions demonstrate the Iranian regime's increasing desperation in the face of its unpopularity at home and isolation abroad.

The first duty of His Majesty's Government is to protect the British people and those who have made their home here in the United Kingdom. Whenever necessary, the Government will not hesitate to defend the freedom of the press. My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary leads our work on countering Iranian state threats. Our police, security and intelligence agencies are working together around the clock to identify, deter and prevent Iranian threats to our national security. My right hon. Friend the Security Minister leads work to protect the integrity of our democracy from foreign interference through the Government's defending democracy taskforce.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office leads our work on sanctions. We have already designated more than 350 individuals and organisations linked to the Iranian regime, covering its military, security and judiciary. We have sanctioned the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety. Our diplomatic network is co-ordinating with our friends and allies around the world, including the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the European Union, to reinforce our response.

The cowardly attacks planned by the Iranian regime on British soil violate the most elementary rules of diplomatic relations between states. I have twice summoned Iran's most senior diplomat in London to explain his Government's activities, most recently following Iran International's decision temporarily to relocate its broadcasting services. It is intolerable that any media outlet should be forced to leave the United Kingdom because the Iranian regime is threatening to kidnap or murder its journalists.

I have no doubt that the whole House will share my outrage. There is clear evidence that the Iranian regime continues to prepare operations against individuals in Europe and beyond. We have made representations to the Iranian Foreign Ministry. We emphasise, in no uncertain terms, our determination to pursue any Iranian agent who would harm the UK or our allies. We will also continue to work with our international partners to identify, expose and counter the threats made against us.

The UK is clear that we need to go further, so today I am announcing further measures that constitute a toolkit I would prefer not to use, but the decision on whether I do so is firmly in the hands of the Iranian regime.

First, we will establish a new Iran sanctions regime. This will be the first wholly geographic autonomous sanctions regime that the UK has created since leaving the European Union. It will give us new and enhanced powers to counter Iran's hostile and destabilising activities in the UK and around the world, allowing us to impose asset freezes and travel bans on more of Iran's decision makers, and on those doing its bidding.

In particular, we will have broader powers to target those involved in the regime's efforts: to undermine peace, stability and security in the region and internationally; to proliferate arms or weapons technology from Iran; to undermine democracy, respect for the rule of law and good governance; and to carry out other hostile activities towards the UK and our partners, including threats to our people, property or national security. We expect to introduce the necessary legislation in Parliament later this year.

Secondly, today we have designated a further 13 individuals and entities responsible for serious human rights violations inside Iran. This package of sanctions includes: five senior officials from Iran's notorious prison system, which is rife with torture and abuse of prisoners; further measures targeting the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, as the organisation that enforces social and cultural norms that oppress Iranian citizens; and six key actors responsible for suppressing freedom of expression online, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' cyber defence command and the Supreme Council for Cyberspace.

Our actions are a direct response to the escalation of Iran's reprehensible behaviour in the UK. We are not seeking to escalate; our aim is to prevent and deter hostile Iranian activity on British soil and on the territory of our partners and allies. Let us remind ourselves that Iran is selling drones to Russia, attacking its neighbours and even attacking its own people when they stand up for human rights and the most basic freedoms.

It is my fervent hope that there will be brighter days ahead for the relationship between our two countries, but we cannot take any steps in that direction until the

regime ceases its deplorable activities. Until that day comes, we will remain steadfast in our efforts to stop Iranian aggression and to protect the United Kingdom.

I commend this statement to the House.

2.37 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving me advance sight and notice of his statement.

In the last year, the charge sheet against the Government of Iran has grown and grown. They have funded violent militias across the middle east. They have supplied drones to Russia that menace Ukraine's cities, kill civilians and destroy infrastructure. They have continued to pursue their nuclear programme, in breach of international commitments. They have brutally suppressed the protests of young Iranians who dared to demand a better future. In the last 12 months, they have executed more people than almost any other country in the world. They continue to detain UK-Iranian dual nationals, including Morad Tahbaz and Mehran Raoof. And they continue to harass and threaten dissidents, even those who have made their home here in the United Kingdom.

That the security services have foiled 15 plots against British-based individuals shows the scale of this hostile activity. This worsening extraterritorial threat must be met with strong and clear action. We cannot tolerate efforts to harass, silence or threaten the welfare of regime critics here in the United Kingdom, and we must ensure that Iranian and British journalists can operate without fear or intimidation.

At the end of last year, I called for the United Nations Human Rights Council to urgently investigate Iran's crackdown on protestors and for the Government to bring forward stronger sanctions against the Iranian regime. Labour has also called for a new joint FCDO and Home Office state threats cell to co-ordinate this action in government. So we welcome the measures that the Foreign Secretary has announced today.

The Government will be aware of the long-standing strength of feeling in many parts of the House and from members of the Iranian diaspora on the question of proscription of the IRGC. Labour proposed a new mechanism for proscription for state-linked actors in the National Security Bill, but the Government, unfortunately, did not support it. I understand, of course, that there are diplomatic dimensions to this question, but I am sure the House would welcome an update from the Foreign Secretary on this issue.

I also want to ask the Foreign Secretary about the fate of UK-Iranian dual nationals. Labour has for a long time called for a new legal right for consular assistance, to help protect British nationals, but the Government have rejected that. In April, the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs put forward proposals to overhaul the way the Foreign Office tries to secure the release of British nationals overseas. Today, the Government have largely rejected those ideas too. Is the Foreign Office complacent on this issue? What steps will it take to bring British nationals detained in Iran and elsewhere home?

Finally, I wanted to ask about the future of the joint comprehensive plan of action. We supported the nuclear agreement as the best approach to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. We remain determined and committed to that vital non-proliferation goal. However,

[Mr David Lammy]

there is a clear and ongoing pattern of Iran breaching the JCPOA's terms, preventing monitoring and verification, and enriching uranium past the point of any civilian justification. It has also continued to violate UN Security Council resolution 2231, including in its ballistic missile activities. The UK has a responsibility as one of the signatories of the JCPOA to take a leading role in containing Iran's nuclear ambitions and its related activities. So may I ask the Foreign Secretary about the prospects of negotiations on what some are calling a "less for less" deal?

Iran is a country with an extraordinary and ancient history. Its courageous people, who have risked their lives over the past year in pursuit of freedom, deserve a Government who respect their rights. Until that day, Labour will continue to support action to hold the Iranian regime to account.

James Cleverly: I echo the right hon. Gentleman's comments about the Iranian people. I have said it before, but I will say it again: our quarrel is not with them. As he says, Iran is a country with a huge and fabulous history, and a sophisticated people, but, sadly, they are being let down badly by those in positions of leadership.

The right hon. Gentleman asks us to update our position on proscription. I have discussed it at the Dispatch Box before: we will always keep under review the response to Iranian state threats and other threats, some of which I have set out in my statement. The IRGC is sanctioned in its entirety and certain individuals within it are individually sanctioned as well. As I say, we do not regularly comment on future proscriptions or designations, but we always keep our options under review.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a point about the nature of our consular support. The Government's position is that we do not need a law for us to do right by British people overseas, and we extend consular assistance to British nationals without the need for legislation instructing us to do so. We do so even when the House's attention is not focused on those individuals. There are many cases where we have had very successful consular outcomes for individuals who have never come into the consciousness of this House. We seek to do that work always with the best interests of those British nationals at our heart.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that in certain circumstances it is particularly difficult for us to discharge our duty and responsibility for consular services in respect of Iran, particularly for British dual nationals, as Iran does not recognise dual national status. Nevertheless, we will always seek to do right by those people who are incarcerated around the world, including those who are still in custody and incarcerated in Iran.

The right hon. Gentleman speaks of the JCPOA and is absolutely right to say that the UK is focused on ensuring that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons technologies or capabilities. We work in close co-ordination with our friends in the E3 and the United States of America on that. It is a regular subject of conversation that I have with Foreign Minister colleagues from across the Quad, and I can reassure him and the House that preventing Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons technology will remain the priority in our Iran strategy. We will continue to explore ways of deterring Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon and preventing this from happening.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome this new geographically autonomous sanctions regime, which is an important step in demonstrating that defence is not an escalation and we will be strong at home. I also welcome the referral yesterday of Iran to the International Court of Justice as a result of the shooting down of the Ukrainian aircraft in 2020, which the UK is doing with our allies. Again, that is a good step. As the right hon. Gentleman said, this morning we did release the response to our report on hostage taking. I urge the Foreign Secretary to update us on Morad Tahbaz, because it matters that his name is heard time and again, particularly given how ill he is.

Finally, given that we have now created an autonomous regime, may I urge my right hon. Friend to consider a regime in respect of the Chinese communist party? It has sanctioned those in this House, it continually perpetrates transnational oppression and this week alone it has put bounties on the heads of three individuals who have sought refuge in this country. May I also ask him to haul in the Chinese ambassador to state how unacceptable that is and how obscene and in breach of international law it is?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend raises important points, and I welcome her comments on the structures we have put in place today and will be putting forward, with legislation, to the House in due course. We recognise that no one element of our response on its own will resolve all these issues, but the effect is cumulative. I assure her that we continue to work in close co-ordination with our international allies to maximise the impact of our sanctions response and to ensure that Iran recognises, as she said, that this is a response to its actions. If it does not like this response, it should change its actions.

As for sanctions on other nations, my hon. Friend will know that we do not routinely speculate on sanctions that we may bring forward, but the House and the Department have heard the point she has made. I assure her that whenever I have interactions with representatives of the Chinese Government, I raise the issues of Hong Kong, the sanctioning of British parliamentarians and our fundamental disagreement with the actions of that Government in relation to the Uyghur Muslims at every opportunity.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for prior sight of his statement. Let me begin by putting on the record the Scottish National party's broad support for this wide-ranging package of measures to be taken against the regime in Tehran. He was absolutely right when he said that the exporting of international terrorism by Iran cannot and will not be tolerated. Much of what is in the statement is what we on these Benches, and indeed this entire House, have been calling for, for some time. May I helpfully suggest that the legislation that will come before the end of the year needs to come as quickly as possible? If he could put even a rough date on when that might happen, it would be helpful.

I am pleased that action is being taken against those who are complicit in doing this brutal regime's bidding, be they military, security or judiciary. I welcome the news that five of the most senior officials from that

barbaric prison system have been sanctioned, particularly those in the notorious Evin prison, where Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was held. Such prisons have been used as a brutal tool of repression against those many brave young women who recently stood up against the regime; they have been held, tortured and murdered within that system.

Will the Foreign Secretary explain why the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has been sanctioned and not proscribed? We were told six months ago by the Minister for Security, the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), that the IRGC was to be proscribed as a terrorist organisation. Many of us, on seeing the statement being heralded, would have thought that would have been a part of it. Will the Foreign Secretary explain the difference between a sanctioned organisation and a proscribed organisation?

Finally, in the light of Iran's continued support for Russia's illegal war in Ukraine, why has his Department not tightened up further the Iran-specific export controls and sanctions on dual-use companies, to stop the export of materials to Iran from the UK that can subsequently be made into weapons?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the measures that we have taken. He asks once again about proscription. He will have heard my earlier response that we always keep options available.

Within his question, he outlines one of the key issues, when he says that his party is calling on the UK Government to proscribe the IRGC, and goes on to ask for an explanation of the difference between proscription and sanction. I recognise that people see proscription as the most desired outcome, without necessarily understanding that much of what they suspect they want to see from what they believe will be the outcome of proscription is actually already in place, such as asset freezes and travel bans.

As I say, the suite of responses is kept constantly under review, but I can assure him that, as we have set out in the statement today, we will always take actions that we believe are in the best interests of protecting British nationals, both here and overseas, and those Iranians who have made their home in the UK.

He asks about the timetabling for legislation. The House will understand that I will need to discuss that with the Leader of the House and the business managers, but I assure him that we regard our response to Iran as a priority and will seek to bring that legislation forward with as much expediency as we are able.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): A constituent of mine has repeatedly raised serious concerns about connections between the Islamic Centre of England, the IRGC and the Office of the Supreme Leader. He also believes there could be such connections between the Supreme Leader and an Islamic centre in Manchester. What are the Government doing to ensure that UK-based charities such as those two centres can never be a threat in any way to the security of Iranian dissidents in the United Kingdom?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. My Department has discussed that with the Home Office. Indeed, I have discussed it with the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I reassure

her and the House that he takes the actions of the organisations that she has mentioned very seriously indeed. We wish to ensure that the Charity Commission also full discharges its duty to ensure that any organisation under its remit is not used to harass or persecute foreign nationals, or indeed British people, here in the UK.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Issues faced by Iranian citizens, especially women, are raised with me frequently by constituents in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton. I have been stopped in the street many times to talk about this issue. British-Iranian dual national Morad Tahbaz has already been mentioned in the statement. He remains arbitrarily detained in terrible conditions in Iran, almost four years after he was sentenced in 2019. Could the Foreign Secretary say more to the House about the last time he raised Morad's case with his Iranian counterparts? What strategy is in place to secure his release, difficult though that is?

James Cleverly: The last time I had face-to-face contact with a representative of a Minister of the Iranian regime was in 2021, but my officials regularly raise consular issues, including detainees, with our Iranian counterparts. I can assure her and the House that this remains a priority. I have met Morad Tahbaz's family on a number of occasions and the Minister for the region, Lord Ahmad, met them very recently—I think within the last few weeks. This remains a priority for us, and I can assure the hon. Lady that we will continue to work with the United States of America, as he is a trinationals, to bring about his permanent release and ability to come home and rejoin his family.

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): In welcoming these sanctions, may I ask the Foreign Secretary to look at Iran's activities elsewhere? He has already mentioned the provision of Russian drones. I hear rumours that Iran has also provided drones to the Polisario in southern Algeria, which could destabilise a very fragile peace with the Moroccans in Western Sahara—a space that is governed by the UN. Indeed, it is perfectly credible that the Iranians are also involved in places such as Tigray and South Sudan, destabilising a whole continent as a lever of political power.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend, who knows the continent of Africa and its politics incredibly well, is absolutely right to highlight the fact that Iranian malign activity is not restricted to its own near neighbourhood or, indeed, the United Kingdom. We look very carefully at the credible reporting of the support through military equipment not just to Russia in its attack against Ukraine, but to militia groups and other military groups in the region and across Africa. I can reassure him that we will take that into consideration when it comes to any future sanctions response that we have towards the Iranian regime.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I welcome the statement and look forward to supporting the legislation so that it can pass as quickly as possible. We are all anxious to do whatever we can to support the people of Iran. Mahsa Amini was an inspiration to women not just in her own country, but across the world. The fact that the people who did this to her—the IRGC—have not been held to account is itself a tragedy.

[Layla Moran]

Will the Foreign Secretary back the campaign to rename the street of the Iranian embassy after her, so that every business card, every email, every piece of post that they have to receive and send has her name on it? It worked for South Africa and Nelson Mandela. I think the time is right to do it for her now.

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the courage of Iranian women—courage that is genuinely beyond measure. I have seen open-source footage of Iranian women, and actually Iranian men, standing up against the so-called morality police and others. She will know that the naming of thoroughfares is a decision not for central Government, but for local government. None the less, she makes an incredibly important point. Perhaps the planning committee of the local council might take her suggestion on board.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Earlier this year, the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union hosted an event for BBC Persian where we heard incredibly powerful testimony from the journalists who were reporting on the very instant to which the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) referred—those women's protests. The freedom of those journalists to report is under great threat from the Iranian regime, so I welcome very much what my right hon. Friend has announced today, but can he confirm the Government's support both for the continuation of the BBC Persian service and that Iran International will be able to return to the UK?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend echoes the Government's strength of feeling about media freedom. I can reassure her and the House that, in my conversations with the very senior leadership of the BBC, I made a specific point about the importance of BBC Persian as part of the wider, positive influence on the world that the BBC World Service has had. We came to a funding arrangement with the BBC World Service to ensure that, certainly for the life of this Parliament, no language services will be closed. I recognise that, in times of disinformation and oppression, the voices of truth and freedom, as personified by the hard-working colleagues in the BBC Persian service, are more important than ever.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am slightly puzzled that the Foreign Secretary just told the Liberal Democrat spokesperson that foreign policy decisions can be passed to local authorities—I do not know what the Levelling Up Secretary would say about that. I am concerned very much by what the Foreign Secretary said a few moments ago in relation to my constituent Alireza Akbari who, as he knows, was executed earlier this year. The Foreign Secretary said he had not had any contact with the Iranian regime for two years, and I know that the family wanted him to do that. People such as Morad Tahbaz remain in custody in Tehran. Does he not think that he should be doing more to try to get them released, and that talking to the regime may be necessary?

James Cleverly: I know the hon. Gentleman had a long career in local government before coming to this House, so perhaps he will understand that street naming is not a foreign policy issue.

Andy Slaughter: It is in this case.

James Cleverly: It really is not.

I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we do have regular and senior contact with representatives of the Iranian Government. The Iranian regime, through their own actions, have made it harder for me to engage with them. However, that is not a blanket ban on engagement. I can assure him that the plight of detainees, and our desire to have them released and returned home, is a very high priority in all the conversations that we have at all levels with representatives of the Iranian Government.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I welcome the action that my right hon. Friend has announced to the House this afternoon. I think it is important that the House should remain united and clear-sighted about the need to confront Iran's behaviour. He mentioned Russia's use of Iranian drone technology in Ukraine, and we understand that Putin is seeking to acquire Iranian ballistic weapons technology as well. It is my understanding that a sunset clause in the joint comprehensive plan of action, if activated by the UK and the EU, would allow that to happen from October. Can the Foreign Secretary give a strong assurance to the House that he will work in lockstep with our colleagues in the EU to make sure that that does not happen?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point with regard to our policy towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Working to ensure that Russia is not supported through military equipment exports is one of our priority functions, and that is particularly true with regard to Iranian technologies, whether drone technologies or others. I take the point that he makes about the sunset clauses in the JCPOA; we are very alive to that and it is a conversation I regularly have with my E3 and United States counterparts. I can reassure him that preventing that brutal technology from falling into the hands of Russia or indeed anyone else remains a priority for the Government.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Iran has made no secret of its efforts to arm, fund and train Palestinian terror groups in the west bank. The leader of Palestinian Islamic Jihad has even said that its terrorists depend on Iranian-supplied weaponry. That is the very same group that has turned Jenin into a city of terror. I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree that we should condemn this destabilising activity. Does he also agree that such horrendous examples doubly underline the need for the very welcome toolkit of measures he has announced this afternoon—the need not just to have them in our arsenal, but to use them?

James Cleverly: I commend my hon. Friend on the passion and consistency with which he champions this issue. I completely agree that that support for violence and terrorism, not just in the west bank but more broadly across the middle east, is completely wrong and we will always stand up against it. The sad truth is that the Palestinian people suffer because of the export of Iranian violence into the region. We continue to work, as a cornerstone of our foreign policy, to bring about peace between the Israeli people and the Palestinian people. That is not helped by the violent interference of Iran, and we will continue to take action to deter and prevent it.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I very much welcome this package of strengthened sanctions. Last week, I attended the Free Iran Global Summit, which was attended by a range of former Prime Ministers, former Vice Presidents, former Foreign Ministers, representatives from 52 Parliaments and around 10 Members and former Members from across this place, which, of course, roundly condemns the gross violations of human rights in Iran, particularly the 300 uses of the death penalty and the oppression of women, but also the killing of 70 innocent children through shooting and poisoning. The conference discussed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. I heard what my right hon. Friend said about proscription of the IRGC in its entirety, but will he assure me that he will keep that step under very close review?

James Cleverly: I can assure my hon. Friend that we take a thoughtful but firm and decisive approach to our posture with regard to Iran. I will always keep all options under review. We will always act in what we believe is the best interest not just of our own security, but of the safety and security of our friends in the region, and, indeed, of the Iranian people who find themselves brutalised by their own Government, as she said. When I say that we keep these things under review, I genuinely mean it. In terms of our response, nothing will be put permanently off the table or beyond use. The announcements that I made today, added to the pre-existing sanctions packages, give us a powerful tool of deterrence for Iranian behaviour that we intend to utilise fully if Iran's behaviour does not change.

I will finish on this point. The power is in Iran's hands. Were it to change its behaviour, stop funding terrorism and militia groups in the area, stop pursuing nuclear weapons and stop brutalising its people, we would be able to change our posture towards it. The power is in its hands.

Backbench Business

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

3.6 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House supports the work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association; asks for parliamentary time at the earliest opportunity to change the status of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association from a UK charity to an international inter-parliamentary organisation; and calls on the Government to effect that change.

May I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting this timely and important debate? In the debate, I speak on behalf of CPA UK executive members, Members of Parliament who value the work of the CPA, and, indeed, parliamentarians from across the British Islands and Mediterranean region—the region of which we are a part in the CPA. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members here—including the Labour Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who will respond for the Liberal Democrats, and many others—have enjoyed, benefited from and participated in many different CPA activities. That organisation is held dear in the hearts of parliamentarians both in the UK and abroad.

However, the CPA is at a turning point and needs the UK Government to act now to help secure its future. In the UK, only the Government can change the status of the CPA from a local UK charity to a bespoke international inter-parliamentary organisation, because the Government need to allocate parliamentary time to allow a short piece of primary legislation to be passed. It has for many years been acknowledged that the CPA's status as a UK charity is not appropriate for an association of equals. The CPA membership includes parliamentarians from South Africa to Singapore, Ghana to Guyana and Canada to Cyprus, and all are equal members of the organisation, which is one of the oldest Commonwealth organisations.

Its status as a UK charity is completely out of kilter with the reality of the organisation's work. The CPA was founded back in 1911 to promote the advancement of parliamentary democracy, but continuing to be a UK charity today simply reinforces an outdated vision of the Commonwealth and the UK's place in it. Long-standing demands for recognition of its modern status as a bespoke international interparliamentary organisation reached boiling point at the general assembly meeting in Halifax, Canada, last year, where it was decided that unless substantial progress had been made to change the status of the organisation within 12 months, members would resolve to move the headquarters from the UK.

A change in status will allow the CPA to more effectively serve its members, removing damaging frictions caused by an inappropriate status, making clear that all members are on an equal footing, to reflect the modern view of the Commonwealth, and representing the CPA's own principles of equality and diversity. In the UK, that requires primary legislation.

To assist the Government, I have retabled a short Bill, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (Status) (No. 2) Bill, which was first introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset

[*Dame Maria Miller*]

(Mr Liddell-Grainger) around a year ago, to make those changes quickly and at no cost—I reiterate: at no cost. It is a point that has already been agreed with Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials, leaving no policy differences between the CPA and the FCDO in taking this issue forward.

The Bill has widespread cross-party support both here and in the other place but requires parliamentary time to be passed. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), is on the Front Bench, having picked up the reins on this at relatively short notice; I very much appreciate that, and I know the whole House will. I hope she will be able to confirm today that parliamentary time is being made available, because our time is running out.

Over the many years of discussion between the CPA and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, before it became the FCDO, policy differences, by and large, have been resolved. In particular, the change in status is not seen as coming under the International Organisations Act 1968, because the CPA does not fit those criteria, and that issue was dealt with when others were chairing the organisation. My Bill, which the Minister will have seen, would therefore require a bespoke status, not a status under that Act, which would have caused problems. The new Bill has no extra costs for the UK taxpayer over and above the tax advantages already available to a UK charity, which the CPA is.

If we do not make significant progress on this legislation before the summer recess, the UK's hosting of the CPA's secretariat will be lost. That will create a real risk for the whole organisation, given the very different views on its possible future. An apparent lack of prioritisation in the UK places in question our commitment to the Commonwealth institutions themselves, and, indeed, our reputation could be unnecessarily diminished, all for not making this very small change that requires legislation.

As the Minister will be aware, the CPA has given good notice of its concerns and the need for change. To put it simply, parliamentarians from many countries take issue with having to make CPA subscription payments from their taxpayers' money to a UK charity.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing the debate, and I want to put on record my and the Liberal Democrats' support for her Bill, which should be very simple to pass. From my dealings with other parliamentarians across the world, I know that the fact that the CPA is held here, in the mother of Parliaments, matters a lot to them. They feel that it is important to see how it is done by the oldest institution, and we also gain a huge amount from it. Does she agree that the loss of that would be unconscionable to this place?

Dame Maria Miller: Yes. Many Members here today will have known the value of meeting incoming delegations and being part of outward delegations. It gives us, as parliamentarians, an understanding of the world in which we are operating, in the same way that other organisations do, including the Inter-Parliamentary Union—we are pleased to have the chair of the British Group of the IPU, my right hon. Friend the Member

for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), with us today. These organisations are valued by parliamentarians, and we need to ensure that the Government are aware of that and take appropriate action.

I want to reiterate the reason why this change in status is so important. Countries that are members of the CPA make payments, ultimately, from their taxpayers' money to a UK charity. Those concerns are held most strongly by parliamentary colleagues in the Africa region of the CPA. That is understandable: it is incongruous at best for them to be making payments for membership of an international organisation when it looks on their books as if they are making payments to UK charities. We have to understand that, and sympathise and empathise with it.

Other organisations have already ensured that they are structured in an appropriate way. French legislation underpins the CPA's francophone counterpart in Paris, the Assemblée Parlementaire de la Francophonie, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union has a Geneva headquarters agreement with Switzerland. The need to follow those international examples is particularly true for an international institution such as the CPA, which is all about the importance of parliamentary democracy, and the Commonwealth charter to which we and our fellow member states are signed up commits us to that.

This Parliament's actions regarding the CPA's status may appear peripheral to some, but in fact, they spill over into our relations with very near family members. Other members of the British family that are involved in the CPA include the devolved legislatures in the UK, the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories. They are all active members, and they too support the need to resolve this situation. The Government need to take that much more into account, not least because those organisations are concerned that they could be damaged by association should Westminster not be able to resolve this amicably. All also look to His Majesty the King as Head of State, as do the 14 other realms. At the coronation in May, we saw the huge importance attached to the Commonwealth, with His Majesty now head of the Commonwealth in succession to Her late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth.

At its April meeting in Gibraltar, the CPA executive agreed to continue to support efforts to persuade the UK Government to make the necessary changes, but—to be very clear—that is contingent on achieving new legislation by the time that the CPA's Commonwealth parliamentary conference takes place in Ghana at the end of September, just a few short weeks away. The House should know that the CPA executive is already working on a relocation package for the secretariat, including a timeline and procedure for assessing future host countries. This is not a hollow threat: it is something that is already happening. To restate, should the UK not pass new legislation by the end of September, the organisation will proceed with relocation outside of the UK from October 2023.

There appears to be absolutely no reason why the Bill should take much parliamentary time, given the clear support for it in both Houses—my right hon. Friend the Minister will have heard that already from Opposition Members. It involves no additional costs for the UK taxpayer. It has been suggested that any change in status would create an unhelpful or unwelcome precedent, but with respect, that argument does not bear any

scrutiny at all. The CPA's case is unique. It is an international inter-parliamentary organisation headquartered in the UK. There are no others. When we pressed for examples of comparators, not a single one on the list could make a similar case. Some were international organisations, undoubtedly worthy but headquartered elsewhere and with no particular link to the UK. There were territories or groups of states and Governments—again, completely different and not parliamentary in category, and obviously not headquartered in the UK. Legislation to recognise the status of the CPA and the secretariat's location here in the UK does not create a precedent, so that cannot credibly be cited as a reason for inaction.

Parliamentarians from around the globe tell us that they would like the CPA secretariat to remain in London. London works well as a location for the secretariat: here on the parliamentary estate, the secretariat can attract talented staff from a diverse pool. Hosting the CPA is a small but important example of the UK's soft power, and I hope my right hon. Friend the Minister can use her good offices to ensure that time is given to pass the modest Bill required to change the status of the CPA in the time remaining before the annual assembly meeting in September. That would demonstrate not only our commitment to the Commonwealth, but the importance of strong democracies around the world.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will call the Front-Bench spokespeople at the end of the debate.

3.19 pm

Sir James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I am sorry to tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I have been an abject failure, but it is okay because it is not I who is going to be blamed. Sadly, it is going to be the Minister and the Secretary of State, and it is going to be on their watch that CPA International has to leave London.

Even back in 2006, when I visited India, I remember these issues being raised. In the four years that I had the privilege of being in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, working with the Minister of State, I think I had the largest number of Commonwealth countries in my portfolio, but I never took the lead, although I did advocate for making this change. When I was the chair of the CPA, prior to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), for around two or three years, I tried to move these things forward, but it was never the issue of the day. Let us face it: it is not the biggest issue of the day today, with Iran and what is going on in Russia, but it has to be an issue at some point.

In April, when I stood in for my right hon. Friend in a Westminster Hall debate, I said that, if we did not do something in April when everyone met in Gibraltar, the CPA would hardcode in a process that involved having to leave the United Kingdom. That process is now hardcoded in. People are coming forward—whether it is the Malaysians; South Africa, perhaps with the support of other African countries; or Canada—and there are very credible propositions to take the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association International branch away from the UK. This is not just a matter of pride. With the King being the head of the Commonwealth, it brings something closely located to the monarchy, to the British tradition and to this Parliament—a safe,

secure place, through which people travel on a regular basis. It can conduct CPA business while doing other things internationally, which might not be the case if it were located in a country a little further away.

While I failed to move this forward successfully, it will be the Foreign Secretary and the ministerial team who will get the blame. There is an opportunity to grasp this nettle. The incremental change we have seen over the last decade just is not going to cut it. A few weeks ago, I asked the Prime Minister about this, and he was optimistic in his reply. I believe the Foreign Secretary wants to find a way forward, but we need to see a strong indication from the Minister today that we have a commitment to try to sort this out. In the King's Speech, if not earlier, we need an absolute commitment that legislation is going to be taken forward to solve this problem. This really should not be what we are talking about in this House. Please, please make this my last speech on this subject, and please turn my failure into a success.

3.22 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) on securing his debate. I want to make three specific points regarding the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association: first, the governance arrangements; secondly, the role of inter-parliamentary organisations; and, finally, the work that the CPA leads on in the very important world of modern slavery, on which it is a great leader.

Starting with the governance arrangements, I absolutely support my right hon. Friend in everything she has said. I attended the Commonwealth parliamentary conference in Halifax last year, where this was the No. 1 topic. This is not a bluff being called or a suggestion we will all get over. This is a matter of central importance to members of the CPA globally. They really do find this an incredibly sensitive issue, and we need to show sympathy and respect for that position and help them.

Dame Maria Miller: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising the issue of our conference last year, and she has reminded me of some of the conversations I was having with Members of Parliament, particularly from places, such as Canada, where we are negotiating trade agreements. It is these Members of Parliament who want to see consistency from the UK around our relationship with them as nations, but also as members of the Commonwealth.

Karen Bradley: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. I think there is a statement that the UK Government could make here, which is about taking leadership and about demonstrating that we want to be active and sympathetic players in global events.

On not being able to take this step—this very simple step—I think my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (Sir James Duddridge) is a former Whip, as I am, and I recall opposed private business evenings when, after the day's business had finished on a Wednesday, three hours were set aside for opposed private business. I doubt this would be opposed. I think we could get this through incredibly quickly, and we would not be asking the House to take much of its time to approve this measure. But it is such an important step, and I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister and

[Karen Bradley]

the Whip on duty—the Vice-Chamberlain of His Majesty's Household, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill)—to really press this point home with the business managers. A piece of legislation is ready to go, and it has universal support in this House and in the other place. It would be such a great thing if those of us going to Ghana this year for the CPC could stand up, hold our heads high and say, “We listened and, as the UK, we took the steps you asked us to take.” That would make an enormous difference.

My second point is around the importance and value of multilateral organisations, particularly those for parliamentarians. As the chair of the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union and an active member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK, I want the House to know that those organisations present such important opportunities. Looking around, I do not think that anyone here has not been on a delegation for at least one of them. We also have the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which I am very honoured to co-chair, the British-American Parliamentary Group, and we now have our new EU friendship group. These things are very important. If we do not understand what we are doing here as parliamentarians and understand what is happening in other Parliaments, we simply are not going to develop and learn or be able to tackle important global issues.

We all have a common goal here. The Inter-Parliamentary Union recently hosted an important inter-faith dialogue in Marrakesh that marked the first time that it has brought together civil society, faith groups and parliamentarians; it was the first time that we saw together in one room representatives from all the major faiths on this planet. They were all there talking about our common goals, such as climate change and global migration, which affects us all. Parliamentarians have a real role to play not only in helping Governments to get the necessary legislation through in these areas, but in influencing our constituents, organisations and those around us. The CPA is the only organisation that includes all the devolved legislatures, the provincial legislatures, the state legislatures, the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies. Parliamentarians from all those organisations take part in CPA events, and that is such a powerful and important thing for helping us to understand that we have shared problems that require shared solutions.

That takes me on to the shared problem that we have regarding modern slavery and human trafficking. CPA UK has been a world leader on this issue. When I was the Minister for Modern Slavery in the Home Office in 2014, CPA UK was leading the work that could be done by parliamentarians around the world. The Commonwealth has an important role to play in tackling this issue, full stop, because it contains source countries, transit countries and destination countries for victims of trafficking. The leadership that the Commonwealth can show helps to change legislation globally, and the CPA helps to ensure that legislation changes at a parliamentary level in every one of our Parliaments.

I have taken part in many events that CPA UK has hosted here. I have spoken about issues at global delegations, and I cannot praise CPA UK and its team enough for the global lead that they play. This is such an important organisation. The Government have an opportunity

here to do a very small thing with a bit of Government time to get this legislation through. It would make an amazing difference, and it would absolutely solidify CPA UK and the CPA's place in this Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As a former chair of the CPA and the IPU, I do not know whether I should be declaring an interest, but I just have—no pressure, Minister!

3.28 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Before I begin my speech, I want to put on the record my thanks to Jon Davies, who is our retiring chief executive of the CPA. CPA UK has benefited enormously from Jon's diplomatic skills and diligence over the years. Like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I should perhaps declare an interest as a member of the executive committee of CPA UK.

Karen Bradley: I have only just spoken, so I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. He reminds me that we heard about Jon Davies's incredible diplomatic skills at yesterday's AGM. We also heard from our hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) that Jon Davies is able to remove bird poo from Members of Parliament in the most discreet way imaginable. I think we should put on the record that that is a great skill, and one that CPA UK has valued. [Laughter.]

David Mundell: I do not think there is anything that can be said in response to that particular point, but I know Jon to be multiskilled from my own experience of him.

I begin by slightly disagreeing with my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (Sir James Duddridge), which I have of course never done previously, in that this issue does impact on major global issues, particularly Russia. My experience, having twice led a delegation to South Africa, is that Russia very much wants to extend its influence into South Africa and into Africa. It is exactly the inertia of the UK and its colonialist views that are used to take that forward. The delegation I led was denounced in the South African Parliament by the Economic Freedom Fighters, which to be fair is an extreme group. Its members stood up and decried our delegation as neo-colonialists and condemned the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Not acting on this issue gives succour to people making that argument, and it gives succour to Russia, which fanned the flames of that argument. Last year, I met the Deputy Speaker of the South African Parliament as part of the delegation, and that was the first issue he raised with me. A year later, I met him again, and what had we done? My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) had had a debate and effectively had a brush off, but we had done nothing to move this issue forward. We are not able to convince Commonwealth colleagues that we are taking this issue seriously if we simply do nothing. We can have this debate today, where we are placated at the end and nothing happens, but action is required.

Sir James Duddridge: I intervene not to compliment my right hon. Friend on his tie, but to make a more serious point on the meeting yesterday, which was attended by Mr Speaker, who, like you Mr Deputy Speaker, has a passion for these things. I am not sure how these things operate, but is there an opportunity to have some type of Speaker's conference or an informal meeting where Mr Speaker brings together the Leader of the House and the Foreign Secretary, gives them tea and maybe chocolate biscuits, locks the door and does not let them out until we have resolved this issue?

David Mundell: Engagement with Speakers from across the Commonwealth is important, because at the session I attended in South Africa, the Speaker of the South African Parliament had just returned from a conference in Russia, from which overtures were being made. Honestly, if I had to go back to South Africa—it would be a great pleasure to do so again—a third time, I would have to say to South African parliamentarians, who want to be supportive of the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, that yet again we had done nothing.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) has set out, it is so straightforward to take action. It does not require Government funds. It requires a small amount of time, it has cross-party agreement and it could be done. Essentially, we are in the position of running out of excuses for why we are not doing it. There will be real implications. As has been set out, the CPA will leave London. It will leave this Parliament, and we will be diminished because of it.

Secondly, along with my right hon. and hon. Friends, I met the Speaker of the Ghanaian Parliament, where we discussed our concerns about prospective LGBT legislation, and in effect asked for that legislation to be reflected on and asked him and his fellow parliamentarians to take the issue seriously. But how can we do that credibly when he says that he wants us to take steps to amend the status of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association—I suggest that is much easier for us than the changes we want him to use his influence to make in the Ghanaian Parliament—and we do nothing? That undermines our credibility. Surely we cannot allow that to happen.

I hope that the result of the debate will be different from those of previous debates and questions raised on the matter and that the Minister will take forward the Bill promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) before the Commonwealth conference in Ghana to maintain our credibility as a nation and as a Parliament, and maintain the presence of the CPA in the UK.

3.36 pm

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for securing this important debate on the status of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I echo many comments made by colleagues. We must address the status of the CPA before the upcoming parliamentary meeting in Accra in September. I am here as a member of the CPA's executive committee to lend my support and to try to persuade the Government that we must change the CPA's status from a UK charity to an international inter-parliamentary organisation.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's Bill to address the issue and ensure that the CPA does not relocate to another Commonwealth country. The UK branch of the CPA is well known and one of the most active in the Commonwealth. We have been talking about this issue for several years. In 2018, the CPA presented the UK Government with the business case for the status change, which stated,

"In all respects the CPA operates in practice as an international inter-parliamentary organisation, but the CPA has the legal status of an English charity. It would not usually be expected that an organisation such as the CPA would be a charity, given the nature of the CPA and the work it carries out."

Let me give some examples of issues that arise owing to the CPA having been a charity since 1971. The CPA as a charity is limited in its ability to carry out certain activities that promote democracy, human rights and democratic values and protect the rights and privileges of parliamentarians. That is because, as we know, restrictions on charities prevent them from pursuing political purposes. The CPA has also been unable to sign up to certain international statements and communiqués because of its charitable status. We have been unable to join other international organisations in speaking out against events in Commonwealth countries. Recent examples include the unlawful imprisonment of parliamentarians, not being able to speak out about the treatment of parliamentarians, and the situation over the Rohingya. Those examples show exactly why we must change the CPA's status. I recently met the CPA secretary general, and he is fully supportive of the status change.

There will be some serious consequences if we do not change the CPA's status to an international inter-parliamentary organisation. First, I believe, as several right hon. and hon. Members have alluded to, that if the UK does not make that change, the CPA headquarters will relocate to another Commonwealth country. We can think of our proud tradition with the CPA founded in the UK Parliament back in 1911, and it has always been here. We do not want to lose the opportunity of having more than 50 Commonwealth Parliaments turning to the UK Parliament for advice, guidance and best practice and to uphold Parliamentary democracy. The CPA relocating from the UK would damage the UK Parliament's relationship with other Commonwealth Parliaments.

Secondly, we must listen and respect the voices of other Commonwealth parliamentarians who have expressed strong dissatisfaction. Other colleagues have mentioned the concerns raised by other Parliaments; for example, just last year, the southern African region of the CPA Africa group expressed its displeasure at the UK's hesitancy to legislate to change the status of the CPA, and said that it believes it is disadvantageous to Africa. The South African National Assembly's Deputy Speaker, Mr Tsenoli, has also expressed concerns that the CPA Africa region contributes close to 60% of the CPA budget, and that money is only to be used in the CPA in the UK. Changing the status would allow more CPA Parliaments in Africa and other regions around the world to have greater confidence in our work. It is important that today we are seen as equal partners—that is what the Commonwealth is all about.

Thirdly, as a UK charity, the CPA cannot achieve observer status at the United Nations. We currently do not have diplomatic status or international recognition. It is important that we change that as soon as possible, which can be achieved by turning us into an international inter-parliamentary organisation.

[*Theo Clarke*]

I have been a member of the CPA executive as a new Member of Parliament. I can truly say that it is a remarkable and impactful organisation. Just last month, I chaired its women and trade workshop here in Parliament, looking at promoting human rights through international trade. There were discussions on bilateral and regional trade, looking at how we can advance human rights standards globally, which reminds me of the importance of the CPA. Bringing together parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth and ensuring that we are learning best practice is one of the areas that the CPA promotes and supports.

I was also delighted back in 2021 to attend the World Trade Organisation's Public Forum in Geneva. My trip was supported by the CPA through its trips budget. At that meeting, I had the privilege of meeting Dr Ngozi Okong'o-Iweala, the WTO director general, and of speaking at the eastern African trade for resilience forum. That is an example of where CPA does vital work for us as UK parliamentarians.

I strongly support the need for us to change the status of the CPA from a UK charity to an international inter-parliamentary organisation. We do fantastic work. It would make the UK more respected at the CPA, which is a brilliant, fantastic organisation. Fellow parliamentarians around the world have said to me that they are looking for us to sort this out. I hope the Minister will provide the commitment we need at the Dispatch Box today to ensure that we can go to that meeting in Accra in September. I hope that the Government will find parliamentary time to approve the Bill.

3.42 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Commonwealth Day 2023 marked a new chapter in the age of decolonisation: a new monarch with a new perspective towards the Commonwealth. The annual theme was "Forging a sustainable and common future", and intended to highlight the promotion of peace and sustainability, and the Commonwealth's work on change. The day also marked the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Commonwealth charter, which sets out Commonwealth principles on human rights, democracy and development.

The head of the Commonwealth used his Commonwealth Day message to discuss harmony with nature and securing the planet for generations to come, as well as the diversity of the Commonwealth nations. That significant and historic milestone is the perfect opportunity to reflect on the impact of the Commonwealth, acknowledge the damage of British colonial history and begin to pave the way to more conscious, respectful and thoughtful relationships with Commonwealth countries.

We are already beginning to see the tides change. In recent months, people across the world are reassessing what the Commonwealth means and how it can be adapted for the benefit of all, to better match a 21st-century world. We in the Scottish National party are particularly mindful of the role of the Commonwealth as an advocate for the needs of smaller and more vulnerable states, and for the inclusion of marginalised people and communities. I wish to reaffirm the SNP's policy of joining the Commonwealth post independence, because we want to join the world, not be apart from it. On independence, Scotland will continue to play a role in the Commonwealth

and the wider Anglosphere. That will help to further unlock the potential of a powerful, international Scottish brand and worldwide diaspora.

The Scottish Government are already working on efforts to acknowledge and act on the legacy of colonialism. Their 2022 global affairs framework focuses on the need to decolonise development and reinforce the fact that projects must be partner-led rather than donor-led, as is too often the case. They pledged to appoint a decolonisation officer within an independent Scotland Department of International Development. The Scottish Government explicitly referenced their colonial past when announcing their £1 million contribution—subsequently increased to £2 million—to fund loss and damage caused by climate change. A key recipient of the fund will be the Commonwealth country of Malawi. Former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon framed the contribution not as an act of charity, but as reparation for the damage driven by countries in the global north.

Through its promotion of parliamentary democracy and good governance specifically targeted at parliamentarians, the CPA provides a vehicle for us to collaborate with our parliamentary colleagues across the Commonwealth and advance these causes. However, we must recognise, as others—I think everybody—have stated, that the CPA's status as a UK charity is not appropriate for an association of equals from across the Commonwealth and that it reinforces an out-of-date vision of the Commonwealth and the UK's place in it. We must listen to our partners, in particular those from the African region of the CPA who hold this view most strongly, on their real concerns about the appropriateness of charitable status and the fact that their Parliaments make subscription payments from their taxpayers' money to a UK charity. It is therefore important that the status of the CPA is changed from a UK charity to an international interparliamentary organisation, and that it is done so immediately. That would take little parliamentary time and would involve no additional cost to the UK or to UK taxpayers.

With a resolution agreed to retain the right to withdraw from the organisation should a change in status not be concluded by the CPA's annual conference this October, there is a real danger that the organisation may fragment, which would be a serious blow to the UK's soft power. At a time when other countries are pushing a very different version of governance in many parts of the world, this is not a time to reduce the UK's commitments and role in the world. For while the Commonwealth adopted a charter full of laudable aspirations about justice, democracy and human rights, the organisation has an unimpressive record in enforcing adherence to those values. As parliamentarians, we must stand up for those values through the CPA.

To take just one example, the Commonwealth took no action when, in January 2021, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni clung to power after a deeply flawed election. In May 2023, the Ugandan President signed into law one of the harshest anti-LGBTQ laws in the world. It stipulates capital punishment for "serial offenders" against the law and the transmission of a terminal illness such as HIV/AIDS through gay sex. It decrees an abhorrent 20-year sentence for "promoting" homosexuality. The legislation also requires friends, family and neighbours to denounce people in same-sex relationships to the authorities. One Ugandan MP, Sarah Opendi, suggested that gay men should be castrated.

While Uganda is the most egregious recent example, such anti-gay rhetoric and politicking is replicated across the Commonwealth. Homosexuality remains a criminal offence in two-thirds of the Commonwealth. Brunei, another Commonwealth country, made gay sex punishable by stoning to death, with public flogging for lesbian sex, in 2019. Malaysia, a Commonwealth member, is one of only a few countries to criminalise gender non-conformity, while also penalising oral and anal sex with up to 20 years in prison and mandatory whipping, Human Rights Watch reported last year. The Commonwealth must stand for the rights of minorities, LGBTQ+ and persecuted communities in member states, and organisations such as the CPA must play a key role in that.

The UK was the Commonwealth Chair-in-Office between 2018 and June 2022. I think that we can all now recognise that this was a missed opportunity to drive meaningful social change. In March 2020, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) spoke in this House about the fact there was little time remaining to make a positive impact. She stressed that the UK should be making haste after two years of painstakingly slow progress. We can all appreciate that there was a global pandemic, and no one will be in any doubt about how difficult that was and how it hampered these efforts. However, the lack of urgent effort by the UK Government to regain ground following the pandemic has been particularly concerning.

The UK Government should have used the extended four-year period in Chair to ensure that the Commonwealth nations, many of which are developing countries, got the covid vaccines they desperately needed, alongside the rest of the global south. Instead, the UK Government hoarded vaccines and disgracefully blocked a WTO TRIPS—Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights—waiver. Indeed, in July 2020 Commonwealth leaders from all 54 member states issued a joint statement including a commitment to ensure

“equitable access to quality health services and safe, effective and affordable medicines and vaccines for all”.

Sir James Duddridge: As one who was involved in that process, while accepting criticism, I do not think it is entirely founded, given the background to the vaccines we were getting. Will the hon. Gentleman at least commend the United Kingdom Government for the COVAX facility, and for actually getting the vaccine in place? Perhaps there is a slightly more balanced scorecard and I would be even more positive about our involvement than the hon. Gentleman, but will he note those successes?

Chris Law: I fully take on board the hon. Member’s explanation of how dealing with covid was a success in the early days, but, as we saw, as time went on, it began increasingly to fail. There are lessons to be learnt. Last autumn, for example, I was in Cape Town looking at a company called Afrigen and its hub to reverse-engineer mRNA to supply vaccines to countries that were suffering through the worst stages of the pandemic and, in many cases, had no access to vaccines from the global north. I would like to see the UK Government support that work, because there is a vital opportunity for home-grown small hubs to make vaccines for their own communities.

Most egregiously of all, during the UK’s four years as Chair, the UK Government pulled significant aid spending out of key Commonwealth nations in another sign that the UK does not—or seems not to—care about

the Commonwealth nations. That sends the wrong message to all our Commonwealth partners. Let us take Pakistan, for example. For the fiscal year 2023-24, the UK Government have decided to cut bilateral aid by more than 50% compared with the previous year. Analysis by the Commonwealth Innovation Fund projected that the number of people in extreme poverty in the Commonwealth would rise from 209.9 million in 2019 to 237.1 million in 2021. That is disgraceful, and some blame must be laid at the feet of the UK Government.

The UK cannot claim to have a compassionate, co-operative and international outlook while simultaneously slashing its contributions to lower-income countries, including many in the Commonwealth. The moral and economic leadership on this from this UK Government has been wanting, as I have said repeatedly in the House. If the Commonwealth as an organisation is to continue, it must adapt and become an organisation fit for the 21st century. Bringing the CPA into line with other parliamentary organisations around the world by urgently changing its status before its annual meeting later this year would be a vital step. If we are to have the modern and inclusive Commonwealth that we all desire, action must be taken, and we need to see that action urgently.

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

3.52 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and may I say how exciting it is to see you in the Chair, given that you are a great champion of the CPA and, indeed, hosted a visit from another Speaker just this week? That, of course, was the Speaker of the Cyprus Parliament, who is also a great supporter of the Commonwealth. The visit gave us an opportunity to renew our efforts to establish a peace deal in Cyprus, and also gave us a tiny taste of the importance of this network to us all.

Many of us have benefited from the CPA’s work, either taking part in outbound delegations or hosting visiting delegations here in Westminster. It is crucial that we support the Government in order to effect this important legislative change. I am also aware of those who work tirelessly behind the scenes supporting the operations of Parliaments throughout the Commonwealth—our Clerks, for example—spreading best practice and discussing the key values that we all share: good governance, democracy and human rights. The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) gave a very good example today of the LGBTQ challenge, and I thank him very much for that.

I want to put on record that Labour is keen to see the CPA headquartered here in Westminster—we think that is right and proper. We also agree that being the “mother of all Parliaments” gives us a wonderful track record when it comes to promoting that. Our way of doing things, with a fused legislature and Executive system, is commonly known as the Westminster System—I grew up with it myself, down under—and we should be proud of the CPA’s ongoing role in bringing together and liaising between the Parliaments of the Commonwealth family from the very building that inspired the way in which most of the Commonwealth is governed today.

This debate has given us a great opportunity to praise the Commonwealth more widely as the modern institution it now is—one of which we can all be proud. As well as

[Catherine West]

being visited by the Speaker from the Cypriot House of Representatives earlier in the week, just last night we heard the Climate Minister from Vanuatu, Ralph Regenvanu, speaking about the challenges surrounding climate change. Vanuatu is, of course, a very important member of the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth has continued to evolve from a post-colonial grouping, as it was at its inception, to a voluntary organisation with a growing membership and global network. It is particularly involved in the empowerment of our young people, given that so many Commonwealth countries are predominantly young; we think of Pakistan, for example, as a very young nation.

Organisations in my constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green jumped at the chance to participate in the Queen's Green Canopy project for Her late Majesty's diamond jubilee, inspired by the fact that organisations throughout the Commonwealth were similarly committed to that project to increase tree cover—a vital step in tackling climate change in far-off places such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, which are so regularly subject to intense changes in climate. The current head of the Commonwealth, His Majesty the King, has dedicated his life to the issue of climate change, and I am sure he will continue to champion that.

Today's debate is vital in supporting that good work and ensuring that the CPA is not forced to uproot itself. Concerns have been raised about whether the CPA, as a UK registered charity, is in an appropriate form to continue to support the Commonwealth, given its disparate nature and the competing needs and engagement of the Parliaments it champions. That has been raised at the highest levels. Baroness Scotland, the secretary-general of the Commonwealth, has been pressing for a change in status. She has been vocal about the need for the upcoming CPA conference in Ghana to be a point of resolution for an issue that has hung over the organisation for 30 years.

Just this year, the Foreign Office has committed to working with the CPA to find a solution, and Members have suggested practical ways forward. Last month, the Prime Minister went further, confirming the Government's view that they do not wish the CPA to relocate away from Westminster. As has been noted during the debate, our French partners have addressed a similar issue with the Francophone version of the CPA. Will the Minister outline any further update on what the Prime Minister told the House last month and at Prime Minister's questions just the week before last, and signal how the Government intend to sort the issue out?

Before I conclude, let me put on the record the importance of the work in this area by women; it is terrific that both the IPU and the CPA are chaired by women here in our Parliament. I know how encouraging that is when we have delegations and how much can be shared in women-only forums. We are committed to keeping all that going, from a position of strength, once we have sorted out this minor detail.

To be clear, if no action is taken, in the very near future we will run the real risk of the CPA having to leave Westminster. We clearly have the political will—we can see that today—and the support of the Commonwealth family. Our departing chief executive has done a fantastic job, as has our current secretary-general, the former

Member for Enfield, Southgate and for Liverpool, West Derby. We have some fantastic people behind the scenes supporting the CPA's important work.

If we fail to get this right, it will deal a real blow to the role of this House and of the Government on the world stage. It will be seen as a symbol of our lack of commitment—our inertia, as someone said during the debate—and damage the potential of this growing and unique global organisation just at the time we should be redoubling our efforts to engage with our Commonwealth partners and seeking to expand the Commonwealth.

3.58 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) for securing the debate and for her dedication to the Commonwealth, including as chair of the executive committee of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK. I thank all Members who made passionate and very clear speeches about the urgency of this issue.

As colleagues have said, the CPA is a valued partner in all parts of the Commonwealth, strengthening parliamentary oversight and democratic accountability. The UK Government have partnered on a number of projects to support Commonwealth parliamentarians and to address issues from gender inequality to climate change, among others that Members have raised. That work has made a substantial contribution to supporting democracy and human rights across the Commonwealth. I thank the CPA for its work, and I look forward to the FCDO and the CPA continuing to work together closely in the years ahead.

The Foreign Secretary wrote to the secretary-general of Commonwealth Parliamentary Association International on the issue of the organisation's status on 21 March 2023. He acknowledged that the status question is complex, but he was clear that he does not wish to see CPA International have to relocate. He committed the FCDO to working with CPA International to find a solution that is acceptable to all sides, including through legislative means if possible and necessary.

Since then, FCDO officials have been in discussion with CPA International to understand the need to vary its present charitable status and to consider how best to address these concerns. Although this work is ongoing, important progress has already been made.

Dame Maria Miller: My right hon. Friend comes to this issue quite fresh, which is possibly an advantage. There have been numerous mentions of the work between the FCDO and the CPA since March. Perhaps she could write to me to detail what work has happened, because I am not aware that any meetings have taken place.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend is right that I came fresh to this at midday today, but I will happily take it away. My officials in the box will support me in providing that information.

My right hon. Friend is right that finding the right way through to secure a workable change to the organisation's legal status is important. The challenges on privileges and immunities, which may come at a cost to the taxpayer, such as through visa control exemptions, clearly have to

be worked through, but it has been helpful that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) has given us some useful practical examples of the limitations of CPA International's present UK charitable status. I thank her very much for her enormously helpful contribution.

Sir James Duddridge: A Speaker's Conference on this issue has been suggested. If Mr Speaker were to invite the FCDO for tea and cake, would my right hon. Friend commit ministerial time to attending to thrash through these issues? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) said, there have not been an awful lot of meetings or progress since March.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I have worked with my hon. Friend on many issues over the years, and chocolate biscuits were always an attraction. Were Mr Speaker to offer chocolate biscuits and cake, I would find time in my busy diary to join such a gathering. We are all of one mind in wanting to find the best way to solve some of these issues, but it is clearly outside my purview to set that running.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke for tabling her private Member's Bill, which has been designed to advance the status issue. It is extremely frustrating that there are no sitting Fridays left in this Session, but the Bill sets out a helpful basis for ongoing discussions.

Dame Maria Miller: My right hon. Friend is right that the Government have not allocated any further sitting Fridays, for whatever reason. Of course, ten-minute rule Bills can be taken at any time. It is down to the discretion of those who manage the business of the House, which is the Government. They could find time, even though there are no sitting Fridays. Surely she could undertake to go away and consider that, perhaps with the help of the Leader of the House, who looks after such things.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend pre-empted me. It was interesting to hear the expertise of my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) who, in her many roles over the years, has discovered some of the perplexing and magical powers that exist within Parliament, and I know the business managers have heard the suggestion of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. I am happy to commit to taking this away, and to discussing with the business managers what other routes might be available.

Sir James Duddridge: If a ten-minute rule Bill were tabled for the end of business on every day between now and the summer recess, I am sure there would be someone to speak to it if we finished early. And if we did not finish early, the Bill simply would not be moved. I am pretty certain that we will not go to the moment of interruption every day over the next two weeks, so there is a window of opportunity.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend's extremely helpful suggestion is duly noted, by all, I am sure.

Karen Bradley: If we look at Monday's business, we see that we may have an opportunity then; she might want to take that to the business managers.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank my right hon. Friend for her helpful and clear perspective on what is going on in next week's schedule. As I say, and as the Foreign Secretary set out clearly in his letter, we are absolutely committed to finding a mutually acceptable solution so that we can ensure the CPA does not have to relocate.

I wish to reassure right hon. and hon. Members that the UK's commitment to the Commonwealth itself is unwavering. We provide significant bilateral aid to Commonwealth countries, which totalled more than £1 billion in 2021. We also fund and support a wide range of Commonwealth initiatives and programmes, including through the CPA.

As we look towards the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Samoa next year, the UK will work with partners, including the CPA, to deliver tangible benefits in our three priority areas, which the Foreign Secretary has set out: trade, climate and values. He has a personal and deep commitment to seeing a thriving and successful Commonwealth. That is one of his key priorities, which we all work towards in the FCDO.

On trade, first, we want to boost trade and investment between Commonwealth countries. Encompassing more than 2.5 billion consumers, the Commonwealth is an enormous contributor to the global market network. Our shared language and shared institutions create what we refer to as the "Commonwealth advantage", because it can reduce the average cost of trade between members by 21% compared with trade with the rest of the world. It was a real honour to be the Minister who brought in the developing countries trading scheme earlier in the year, which of course provides huge opportunities for the Commonwealth, as well as for others.

Climate is a subject that has been raised by a number of Members, as it is such a crucial and urgent issue for all countries on our great planet. The Commonwealth is really driving enhanced action on climate change and the environment, particularly to support its smaller or more vulnerable members, including 25 small island developing states. One of those is Vanuatu, which the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) mentioned. I had the great privilege of visiting it last year, when I sat in a school that had been washed away the year before by storms ripping through the village on the beach. We understand that those are the sorts of issues where we want to work together with our Commonwealth partners, in practical terms, to find solutions and to enable access to the climate finance needed to help them deliver that.

David Mundell: I fully accept what my right hon. Friend is saying about our commitment to the Commonwealth. She has set out a number of positive things that are being done, but does she not accept that other forces want to destabilise the Commonwealth and do not want to see it continue in its current form? Does she accept that doing nothing on this issue is the sort of thing that feeds into that narrative?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there are those who wish to destabilise the international order and rules-based system, and that the positive, co-operative nature of the Commonwealth demonstrates what friendship and long relationships can bring together. It does not suit those who wish to disrupt the successes of those relationships. We have to

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

continue to work on that and, importantly, find how the Commonwealth can maximise its incredible potential to deliver so much on democracy, good governance, human rights and the rule of law. Those are areas where the CPA has great expertise and helps to underpin all those Commonwealth member states in being committed to upholding those shared values, which are enshrined in the Commonwealth charter, and standing firm against those who would wish to disrupt the positives that those values bring to citizens across the world.

Among other work, importantly the UK Government are supporting the CPA's project on strengthening parliamentary oversight and effectiveness in tackling gender-based violence and modern slavery project. The project will enable Commonwealth Parliaments to be more active and effective in addressing violence against women and girls, and the challenges of modern slavery. It will lead to the development of measures, including robust legislation, to reduce gender-based violence and modern slavery in supply chains.

To drive this three-pronged agenda, our mantra needs to be continuous improvement of Commonwealth institutions, building on the reforms agreed by the heads of Government in Kigali. We will work with the Commonwealth secretariat to ensure quick progress ahead of CHOGM 24.

To conclude, this Government will continue do all we can to strengthen the Commonwealth and ensure it delivers clear purpose and value for all its members, large and small. We look forward to continuing our work with the CPA in pursuit of this and finding a solution to ensure it does not have to relocate.

4.10 pm

Dame Maria Miller: This has been a very positive debate. I thank all Members who have taken the time to be here today for their positive and important contributions.

The international ramifications, mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), cannot be underestimated by the Minister and her colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Undermining our credibility with so many nations with which we are seeking active trade agreements is a banana skin that we need to remove.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) brought up a number of pertinent issues about restricting the work of the organisation. It is wholly within our power to be able to change the status of the organisation so that it can do the best that it can.

Above all, the debate has focused on the need to respect our fellow parliamentarians around the Commonwealth, who have asked us to find a way to change the status of the organisation. We owe them the respect to demonstrate that we are able to do that, and not be characterised as "Matron knows best", which is a very poor look for us.

I hope the debate has uncovered ways that can be found to secure the legislative change required. We must not continue to argue about whether that is needed or not, because it has been requested, or continue to look for barriers in terms of parliamentary time, but opportunities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (Sir James Duddridge) is right that where there is a will, there is a way. There are creative minds in this place to enable the Westminster delegation to go to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in September and October, to acclaim the Government's action and to show that we are sensitive to the opinion of Commonwealth parliamentarians, so that we are not dictating through inertia, but facilitating the change they are asking for. We must not leave this valuable organisation open to what could be a very difficult decision to leave the UK and find a home elsewhere. That would be tragic, and I do not think that is what my right hon. Friend the Minister wants to see.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House supports the work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association; asks for parliamentary time at the earliest opportunity to change the status of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association from a UK charity to an international inter-parliamentary organisation; and calls on the Government to effect that change.

PETITION

Laughton Common Footpath and Speed Reduction Scheme

4.12 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I rise to deliver a petition on behalf of my constituents in Rother Valley, calling on Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to install proper road safety measures to protect people who are using Laughton Common Road, and Rother Valley roads more widely. This follows the tragic death of a young man named Josh, who was killed earlier this year. The petition, signed by nearly 1,400 of my constituents, will work to ensure no such tragedy happens again and demands that Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council does more to save lives on our roads.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Rother Valley,

Declares that road safety and traffic calming measures must be installed on Laughton Common Road; notes that the safety of the bridge on this road must be assessed and strengthened; further declares that a safe footpath between Laughton Common and Thurcroft must be installed following the loss of life on Laughton Common Road in the last few weeks.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons call on the Government to urge Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to install speed monitoring devices on this road and provide a footpath between Laughton Common and Thurcroft.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002842]

Physician Associates

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Scott Mann.)

4.14 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I applied for this debate to discuss the use of physician associates in the national health service and I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this important subject to the attention of the House today.

This issue was raised with me following the very sad death of Emily Chesterton, the daughter of my constituents Marion and Brendan Chesterton, who are in the Public Gallery today. Emily died in November 2022 after suffering a pulmonary embolism. She was just 30 years old when she died.

Emily was a budding actor in musical theatre. She studied at the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts and performed in numerous productions. She was also a winner of the Hammond House poetry prize in 2018. Emily's mother, Marion Chesterton, describes Emily as active and always willing to help others.

Emily and her partner, Keoni, moved to London from Boothstown in my constituency to pursue their careers in the arts. They registered with their local GP surgery, the Vale Practice in Crouch End, north London. Emily had been diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome and had also contracted covid-19 late last summer.

My constituent, Marion Chesterton, said that Emily had been feeling unwell for a few weeks before she made an appointment at the Vale Practice on 31 October 2022 as she had calf pain and was breathless. Emily believed that this appointment was to see a GP, but the person she was booked to see at the practice was a physician associate.

A physician associate does not have the depth of training that a general practitioner would be expected to have, as they are not a doctor. A physician associate can practise after just two years of training. Importantly, physician associates are intended to supplement more qualified staff, not to replace them.

After a short appointment, the physician associate diagnosed Emily with a sprain and possible long covid. She was told to rest and take paracetamol. At no point during the appointment at the GP surgery was Emily made aware that the person who had diagnosed her was not a doctor.

A week later, on 7 November, Emily began to feel very unwell. Her leg was swollen and hot and she struggled to walk a few steps without becoming out of breath. She made another appointment at the Vale Practice and saw the same physician associate. It appears that this was a short appointment and that Emily's legs were not examined.

The physician associate suggested that Emily's breathlessness was due to anxiety and long covid and prescribed propranolol for the anxiety. In messages Emily sent on this day, she described seeing "the doctor" and it appears that she was never told that the person she was consulting for medical assistance was not a fully qualified GP.

In its serious incident report, the Vale Practice states that patients should not see a physician associate twice for the same condition, and guidelines make it clear that physician associates cannot currently prescribe, with

any prescriptions needing to be signed off by a supervising GP. It appears that the oversight of prescribing medication was missing and that this system failed in Emily's case.

Later in the evening of that same day, 7 November, Emily's health deteriorated while she was out for a meal with her partner and parents. She took a propranolol tablet as advised by the physician associate. Emily's mother, Marion Chesterton, told the coroner's inquest into Emily's death that Emily immediately became drowsy and that they all soon left the restaurant, with Mr and Mrs Chesterton driving Emily and Keoni back to their home in Crouch End.

On returning home, Emily became very ill. Her partner, Keoni, recalled to the inquest that she lost her pulse and he had to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation on her, which recovered the pulse. Keoni then called an ambulance.

Mr and Mrs Chesterton then returned to Crouch End to be with their daughter. Marion Chesterton recalled that, when she saw Emily, she was squatting on the stairs. She sat with her daughter as they waited for the ambulance. Marion said:

"Emily asked me in a quiet voice to please help her, and I tried my absolute best to keep her calm, stroking her hair, holding and supporting her on the step as best I could, reassuring her that all would be well, not to panic, that I loved her...I noticed that she had lost some responsiveness, that she was extremely clammy, and her lips were turning blue. Her breathing had become very laboured, and she was rasping."

Mrs Chesterton recalled that the ambulance arrived not long afterwards, around 45 minutes after Keoni made the first phone call. Emily suffered a cardiac arrest on the way to the hospital. Her family had to say their goodbyes while she was still on the machine which was pumping her heart for her.

Keoni recalled that staff at the A&E department at Whittington Hospital, where Emily died, told him that the propranolol tablet "definitely wouldn't have helped" Emily's condition. Staff had to give her an antidote to the drug.

The circumstances that led to Emily Chesterton's death were investigated by a coroner, with a hearing at St Pancras Coroner's Court on 20 March 2023. The coroner heard from representatives of the Vale Practice, Emily's mother, Emily's partner and the physician associate who had seen Emily.

Messages from Emily to her partner and family at the time of her appointments were also shared with the inquest. These messages evidence Emily's belief that she was seeing a doctor. They also evidence that the appointments with the physician associate were short and that Emily was not examined fully.

The conclusion of the coroner was:

"Emily Chesterton died from a pulmonary embolism, a natural cause of death. She attended her general practitioner surgery on the mornings of 31 October and 7 November 2022 with calf pain and shortness of breath, and was seen by the same physician associate on both occasions. She should have been immediately referred to a hospital emergency unit. If she had been on either occasion, the likelihood is that she would have been treated for pulmonary embolism and would have survived."

That is a heartbreaking statement, making clear the failings in the health system, which should have supported Emily with appropriate care.

Further failings were evidenced in the incident report from the Vale Practice, which was provided by the practice to the coroner. Failings of the physician associate identified by the GP practice include not introducing

[Barbara Keeley]

herself to Emily during the appointment, not allowing Emily's partner to accompany her into the consultation room despite this request being made and despite Emily being vulnerable because of her illness, not exploring the potential causes of Emily's breathlessness, not documenting the severity of covid-19 that Emily had suffered from a month earlier, not exploring why Emily felt "clammy", not documenting whether oxygen saturation readings after exertion or respiratory rate readings were taken, in line with clinical guidelines, and not referring Emily for an electrocardiogram, blood tests or other clinical investigations, also in line with clinical guidelines.

Crucially, the physician associate did not seek medical advice after seeing a patient who had presented twice in one week with significant risk factors for pulmonary embolism, such as polycystic ovary syndrome, recent contraction of covid, calf pain and breathlessness, and she sent Emily home without consulting a doctor. The practice later raised concerns about the physician associate's knowledge and understanding of what appropriate investigations she should perform in a patient presenting with symptoms post covid, about her ability to recognise an unwell patient and escalate such concerns to a doctor, and about her over-confidence and lack of insight into the limitations of her own clinical knowledge and practice.

Two weeks after conducting the serious incident review, the practice made a collective decision to terminate the contract of the particular physician associate, as she appeared to be unable to co-operate with the practice's supervision requirements. Then

"a decision was made not to employ physician associates going forward".

Despite that, Mrs Chesterton tells me that the particular physician associate is still practising medicine in the NHS in London as a locum. She asks, "How is this possible?"

This case raises serious questions about the wider use of physician associates in the NHS, and particularly about allowing the provision of unsupervised one-to-one consultations in general practice. NHS information says that physician associates are graduates who have undertaken relevant postgraduate training and that they work under the supervision of a doctor. They will have been educated on a medical model with basic medical skills, but they lack formal professional regulation and they do not have prescribing rights. Most physician associates work in general practice, acute medicine and emergency medicine.

The physician associate role was introduced into the UK 20 years ago—I have to say that before looking into this case I had never heard of the physician associate role, but it appears it has been around that long—in an attempt to address workforce shortages in underserved primary care practices. The role was based on the physician assistant role in the United States, which dates back to the 1960s.

Physician associates are expected to be under the supervision of a designated medical practitioner, but that does not appear to have been the case with the lack of supervision that occurred in the case of Emily Chesterton. When qualified medical professionals such as GPs are already stretched, it is easy to see how tasks such as checking the notes and work of a physician associate could be missed.

There is also the problem of the title of the role, which Marion Chesterton told me sounds

"extremely grand, even grander than a General Practitioner".

She suggested that the name should change to "doctors apprentice", "learner doctor" or "probationary doctor" to avoid confusion, and it should be made very clear who patients are seeing.

Marion Chesterton also told me:

"We only discovered that the medic treating Emily was not a doctor the week before the inquest. This caused us extreme distress."

She asks:

"Could something be put into place to keep families fully aware earlier on in the process?"

Crucially, it is very concerning that there is no statutory registration system for physician associates. There is only a voluntary register. In July 2019, the Department of Health and Social Care announced plans for the General Medical Council to regulate physician associates, pending the passing of new legislation. After a consultation in 2021, the timetable for regulation has been beset with delays. The Royal College of Physicians and the Faculty of Physician Associates have called these delays "frustrating and disappointing". It was not until February this year that the draft legislation was published and put out to a public consultation.

When will the Government respond to the consultation and when does the Minister expect the legislation to regulate physician associates to be debated and approved? It has been, as I said, 20 years since the role was introduced. In 2018, as the Minister may know, the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) promoted the Physician Associates (Regulation) Bill, a private Member's Bill. In 2019, the Government committed to regulating physician associates. That was four years ago now.

The Royal College of Physicians and the Faculty of Physician Associates have led the RegulatePAsNow campaign since May last year. The Faculty for Physician Associates said:

"We believe that regulation is fundamental to ensuring that physician associates remain a safe and effective workforce in the future."

We also know that regulating physician associates has public support. A petition calling for the statutory regulation of physician associates was signed by nearly 6,000 members of the public.

It is clear that the legislation underpinning the regulation of medical practitioners is now in urgent need of reform. The Medical Act 1983 is now 40 years old, and the General Medical Council has described it as

"complex, overly prescriptive and slow to adapt to change."

It has taken the Government too long to recognise that, and progress is happening at a snail's pace.

What will the Minister do, from today, to ensure the safety of patients being treated by physician associates? What measures will he introduce to ensure that patients know the role and qualification of the person they are seeing when attending appointments in general practice settings? Those questions are becoming increasingly pressing as more people enter the physician associate role. There are currently more than 3,000 qualified physician associates working in the UK. Although the numbers look relatively small at the moment, the General

Medical Council expects them to grow steadily in the next few years, with one study estimating a projected growth of 1,000% per year.

Growth in the number of physician associates will be turbocharged by proposals in the Government's recently published NHS long-term workforce plan. The plan aims to more than triple the number of physician associates in the NHS workforce in the next 12 years. By 2037, they will total 10,000, with around 1,300 trained annually from this year, and 1,500 trained each year in 10 years' time. In response to the Government's long-term workforce plan, Latifa Patel of the British Medical Association said that the proposed wider use of physician associates "must come with clear boundaries around expectations, and not impact on the training of medical students and doctors."

The coroner concluded that the poor quality of care given to Emily Chesterton by the physician associate at Vale Practice contributed to her death. That concerns me deeply, and it should concern the Minister, too. The Government must now move quickly to regulate physician associates and learn from the events that led to the sad and tragic death of Emily Chesterton.

I want to finish with the words of Emily's mother, Marion:

"We feel extremely let down by the care provided by the GP practice. We have lost our precious, beautiful, kind, loving, talented and irreplaceable daughter, and this must not be allowed to happen to any other family."

4.28 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): Let me start by thanking the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for securing this important debate and for her very powerful speech. It was very difficult to hear her recite Marion's words.

First, on behalf of the House, may I pass on my sincere condolences and sympathies to the hon. Lady's constituents, Marion and Brendan Chesterton, in relation to their daughter Emily. No family should have to suffer the loss of a child, and my heart goes out to them and, of course, to Emily's friends and wider family. Having personal experience, I know that no words from me could ever take away the pain or the suffering of losing a child, but I certainly understand the need to understand why and how this happened, and the need for an assurance that any lessons that can be learnt will be learnt, that necessary changes are made and that all steps are explored, so that any future families will not go through a similar tragic loss.

I have had sight of the hon. Lady's recent letter to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Although I will not be able to answer all the specific questions she raised today—not least because I have not yet had a chance to read the coroner's report or had specific information from NHS England—I will ensure that she receives a full response to the letter and the points and questions contained therein.

Improved patient safety and care lay at the heart of the NHS long-term workforce plan, which, backed by significant Government investment, shows our determination to support and grow the healthcare workforce. As set out in the plan, roles such as physician associate play an important role in NHS provision, but critically, healthcare teams remain supervised and led by clinical experts. It is right that we include a range of roles and skills in our multidisciplinary teams that

can offer personalised, responsive care to patients. Giving staff access to continuing development, supportive supervision and, importantly, protected time for training is a core responsibility for all employers in ensuring patient safety.

As set out in National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, we are clear that the onus is on the individual professionals to properly explain their role to patients, especially if there is a likelihood of this not being automatically understood. I know that NHS England has produced patient-facing materials that have been shared widely with GP practices to support patient awareness and the understanding of roles.

Physician associates are healthcare professionals but with a generalist medical education, who work alongside doctors, providing medical care as an integral part of a multidisciplinary team. Physician associates can work autonomously but, importantly, always under the supervision of a fully trained and experienced doctor. They add new talent to the skill mix within teams, providing a stable generalist section of the workforce that can help ease the workforce pressures that the NHS currently faces.

As the hon. Lady rightly said, across the UK there are currently approximately 1,500 PAs working in hospitals and a further 1,700 PAs working in primary care settings. Physician associates are qualified and trained health professionals, and people will usually need a bioscience-related undergraduate degree to get on to one of the training programmes available, which typically last for two years. The training involves at least 1,600 hours of clinical training, including 350 hours in general hospital medicine and a minimum of 90 hours in other settings, including mental health, surgery and paediatrics. Some become physician associates after working in another healthcare role, such as a nurse, allied health professional or midwife.

As the hon. Lady will be aware, physician associates are not currently subject to statutory regulation, and I heard her call in that regard. It is important to note that, as an unregulated role, physician associates are not able to prescribe. In order to prescribe, as she rightly pointed out, a role needs to be added to the Human Medicines Regulations 2012. Any prescribing decisions must be made by a regulated professional such as a doctor. Work is ongoing to bring this role into regulation under the General Medical Council in an appropriate way.

The Faculty of Physician Associates at the Royal College of Physicians provides professional support to PAs across the United Kingdom. In terms of standards, the faculty reviews and sets standards for the education, training and national certification of physician associates. The faculty also oversees and administers the running of a managed voluntary register, which is a register of fully qualified PAs who have been declared fit to practise in the United Kingdom. I understand that the majority of qualified physician associates are on this register.

When complaints are received and upheld in line with the faculty's code of conduct processes, it can suspend a physician associate from the voluntary register. We would strongly recommend that employers only consider recruiting PAs who are on the voluntary register. It enables supervisors and employers to check whether a physician associate is qualified and safe to work in the United Kingdom.

Barbara Keeley: I take what the Minister has said about the training and voluntary registration aspects, which I did speak to, but could he comment on the situation we seem to have been in? The GP practice had concerns about the physician associate's knowledge and understanding of what investigations she should perform, her ability to recognise an unwell patient, and her overconfidence and lack of insight into the limitations of her own knowledge. Those are the issues that the GP practice itself reported. Does the Minister share my concern that it is a very serious thing to have had a system like that, and, surrounding that, to have the fact that the reception function in that practice did not realise that it should not refer an unwell patient to a physician associate twice within a short period of time? If these are meant to be safety measures, they are not working, are they?

Will Quince: I hear what the hon. Lady says. In response to her questions, we very much need to look into the exact details, and I hope I will be able to respond to her with full answers when I have received both the coroner's report and further information from NHS England regarding the practice itself. On the face of what she has just said, the situation is concerning and it certainly adds weight to her calls for the register to be non-voluntary and for regulation and legislation in this space. I will come on to that issue in a moment, because it is a case well made.

The physician associate role is in no way a replacement for any other member of the general practice team—that is an important point to make. They work in conjunction with the existing team, and are complementary to it. Physician associates can help broaden the capacity and skill mix within the practice team to help address the needs of patients in response to the growing and ageing population faced by constituencies up and down the country, including the hon. Lady's constituency and, indeed, mine. However, let me be clear: the employment of a physician associate does not in any way mitigate the need to address the shortage of GPs, nor does it reduce the need for other practice staff.

I will talk, not about the specific case that the hon. Lady described—I do not have those details—but about the generalities of the responsibilities of a supervising doctor, which may be relevant in this case. Physician associates are dependent practitioners: they are working with a dedicated consultant or GP supervisor. They are able to work autonomously but, vitally, with appropriate support, and the General Medical Council has published guidance for doctors who supervise physician associates. The supervision of a qualified physician associate is similar to that of a doctor in training or a trust-grade doctor, in that the physician associate is responsible for their actions and decisions. However, the medical consultant or GP supervisor ultimately retains responsibility for the patient.

The hon. Lady has called for regulation. As she alluded to, the General Medical Council is well advanced in developing regulatory processes for physician associates once the necessary legislation is in place, and regulation will give the GMC responsibility for, and oversight of, physician associates and anaesthesia associates in addition to doctors. That will enable a more coherent and co-ordinated approach to regulation and make it easier for employers, patients, and of course the public to understand the relationship between the roles. The hon.

Lady asked specifically when that legislation will come forward. We intend to lay legislation before the House at the end of this year, which will allow the GMC to commence the regulation of physician associates by the end of 2024—legislation by the end of this year, and then a year for it to be put in place.

The General Medical Council has published future professional standards for physician associates. Among other things, that includes working within the bounds of professional competence and knowing when to refer, or indeed to escalate, to a colleague within the practice. Those standards also cover communication with patients, including the importance of physician associates explaining what they do and how their role fits in with other members of the medical team. Once regulation commences, the GMC will be able to investigate concerns raised about physician associates, and in serious cases will be able to prevent a physician associate from practising, either on a temporary or a permanent basis.

Barbara Keeley: I want to go back to the point I made to the Minister about the title of physician associate, which I have used a lot and so has he. The point is that it does sound rather grandiose as the name of a role in clinical practice for a person who has trained for only two years, and it is confusing. I have been steeped in health and social care matters in this place—I have been a member of the Health Committee and had Front-Bench responsibility for it—and I had never heard of physician associates, so it does seem confusing. The title itself is confusing.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I gave careful thought to the point she raised in her speech. Although the terms she used were doctors in training or trainee doctors, physician associates are not doctors in training and they are not doctors. They are very different, but they are a part of a multidisciplinary team. I will take away what she says. She is right that they have been in place for well in excess of 10 years, but nevertheless there is still a relatively small number of them. However, there are plans to significantly grow their number, so I will take that away.

Personally, as part of my own experience of the NHS, I have never seen a physician associate, but when I have been in general practice, I have often seen a paramedic, a physiotherapist or a pharmacist and they have made their position very clear at the outset of the appointment. I think we need to ensure that, regardless of the title—I will take that away and look in some detail at whether it needs to be changed—they are properly introducing themselves and their role, making it very clear to patients that they are not a doctor but are working under the close supervision of one, and making it very clear that they are not able to prescribe but a doctor can. I think that is the most important point, but the hon. Lady raises a very good point about the title and I will consider that very carefully.

Barbara Keeley: I think this is actually related to the confidence one has or does not have. The Minister says he takes advice from pharmacists, as do most of us, but we tend to know in that circumstance that it is a pharmacist we are talking to. There are receptionists, physios and all these types of people working in GP practices, but this was a person who to all intents and

purposes looked like a doctor. That knowledge of the short period of their training, and of what they can actually do and not do, really ought to be more visible.

Will Quince: I hear what the hon. Lady says, and I will certainly take that away and give it considerable thought. If she has any particular ideas in this regard, given her experience on this matter, I would of course be very happy to meet her to discuss this further. It is really important, certainly ahead of legislation, that we get this right.

Before I close, I would again like to reiterate my deepest condolences to the family of Emily, and I thank the hon. Lady once again for bringing this debate to the House. As we develop and progress with changes to the NHS workforce, it is absolutely vital that robust governance and supervision sit at the heart of the multidisciplinary model, because at the heart of everything we do must be patient safety.

Question put and agreed to.

4.43 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 6 July 2023

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

State Hostage Taking

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Philip Davies (in the Chair): We begin with a Select Committee statement. Alicia Kearns will speak about the publication of the Government response, HC 1596, to the sixth report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, “Stolen years: combatting state hostage diplomacy”, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call hon. Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement and call Alicia Kearns to respond to those in turn. Questions should be brief, and Members may ask only one question each. I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Davies; it is a joy to make the statement under your chairmanship. I thank the House for making time for this important statement today.

Before I address the substance of the report, I pay tribute to all the former hostages and families who contributed to the inquiry, many of whom are here today. I know that today’s discussion will not be easy for them. Their testimonies were raw, incisive and driven by a determination to ensure that other people and families do not endure the pain that they have survived—and it is a tale of being a survivor. To constructively propose that we learn lessons was the goal of our report, and that is why the families contributed to it—because they want to ensure that we can better get our people home.

I also pay tribute to all those in this place who have worked tirelessly on behalf of their constituents who have been unfairly detained abroad. Interestingly, our report showed that, where Members of Parliament engage, a far more impressive response is received from the Government and far more attention is garnered for the individual’s case. Of course, it would be remiss of me not to thank the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff who do work tirelessly to try to get people home, but ultimately we are calling for change and improvements.

State hostage taking is, as we all know, the action of failing, autocratic and desperate states. We heard testimonies of how hostages were drugged, beaten, emotionally tortured and deprived of access to consular support, let alone the love of their families, which can give them the strength to continue. They are all survivors. Today, we have people who are being arbitrarily detained and held hostage for political leverage and advantage across the world. This is an opportunity for us to say as a Parliament that we urge all countries to immediately release those being held. In particular—I am sorry not to be able to

list the names of all those being held—we call for the release of Vladimir Kara-Murza, Jimmy Lai, Morad Tahbaz and Jagtar Singh Johal. We call for the release of all those British citizens who are being unjustly detained.

It is really important that the Government take a zero-tolerance position on every incident of arbitrary detention, because the British citizens involved are not afforded their consular rights; they are not treated in line with international standards, and they end up being used as diplomatic pawns. That is where the Government must bring maximum pressure to bear, because the first priority of Government is to keep our people safe, and we are seeing an alarming increase in states actively pursuing the kidnapping of hostages as a form of foreign policy. State hostage taking and arbitrary detention are heinous and destructive and are stealing years and years of the lives of those held hostage and their families.

As I have said, this is about blackmail, and the Committee found that the Government’s approach is lacking. Disappointingly—I am really disappointed, because we had not seen this from them until now—the Government did not sufficiently engage with our recommendations and the evidence and experience of detainees and their families. In the past, every time we made a recommendation, they were taken in turn, one after another, and dealt with in real detail. This time, there were some recommendations where there was no response at all from the Government; it was almost as if they wanted to pretend that the recommendation did not exist. That is not the sort of response we normally see from the Government, so I was deeply frustrated by it.

We identified a number of key risks in the way the Government currently handle cases. First, we found a lack of consistency in the way information and updates are shared with the families of those being held hostage or arbitrarily detained. We found a lack of consistency in the way information and updates are shared more generally. We found that ministerial reshuffles have slowed progress on securing a hostage’s release, and there was no evidence of institutional knowledge being shared to ensure that that was not the case. Concerningly, we also found a trend of negotiations being deprioritised against other diplomatic priorities. Look, I am a former Foreign Office civil servant: geopolitics matters, but the ultimate job of the Foreign Office is keeping our people safe and getting them home. If we cannot do that, there should be a fundamental question about whether we are delivering as the Foreign Office.

Having reviewed the evidence, as well as international best practice, it became clear that handling hostage cases has to be designated to a specific senior official. We have seen that work in the US and the difference it has made to getting people home. We called for the creation of a director for arbitrary and complex detentions. That individual would have a mandate for co-ordinating responses to cases, acting as a consistent point of contact for families, organising cross-Government action and cutting through the silos that we know affect these cases, leading the UK’s response in multilateral fora and having a direct line to the Prime Minister, because that is how we get people free. I have sat in Cobra and National Security Council meetings where we, as officials, discussed what we could do to get people home, and it was only in that way that we ever made a meaningful difference and progress. We must have an individual

[Alicia Kearns]

who has that sole focus and who knows every single family, such as Roger Carstens in the US. He is an incredible individual—yes, it has to be the right individual—and he knows every single family and every single case. The fact that I am going to him to ask for help with British cases demonstrates how effective he can be and why we are so disappointed that there was a lack of meaningful engagement with this proposal.

In addition to that key recommendation, we looked at the lack of consistency and accuracy in public statements made by the Government in specific cases. Sometimes—this is deeply concerning—basic levels of consular access were not even afforded by the Vienna convention. We know that that is not always in the hands of the Foreign Office, but it should be making complaints and making sure that the host Government knows that that is unacceptable. There were cases where people said to us, “No, it’s not our duty to go and stand outside a court,” while an arbitrarily detained person is being held and heard under appalling and completely illegal circumstances. If a Foreign Office official is not willing to stand outside a courthouse, no matter how dangerous that is, what does that say about their commitment to the British national who is potentially being drugged and beaten and who is most certainly terrified for their future? We have a duty to be there. When we have been, as in Mexico, where the ambassador stood outside, despite the fact that it was a Mexican individual who had murdered, we secured the first ever prosecution of a democratically elected—well, elected—individual for ordering the murder of a civilian. It makes a difference that we show up. Too many families feel that we do not show up and that they get standardised responses week after week.

It is therefore imperative that we use every means at our disposal to ensure even the most basic level of consular access for detained UK citizens. That means working with our allies—it is a shame that the Canada conference was cancelled—but the reality, as I hear time after time from counterparts, is that when we get together in multilateral fora, the first two hours are wasted on fighting about what arbitrary detention means. That was one the subject of our recommendations: let us decide what “arbitrarily detained” means. If we can have a definition that we use internally, we might have a chance of getting a multilateral definition agreed. The fact that we do not have one internally is a big problem.

State hostage taking and arbitrary detention are not the same, and the problem is that the Government’s current approach involves a poor classification of consular cases, which results in confusion and less effective management of cases. The incoherence in classification has created bureaucratic delays in a number of cases and damaged momentum on releases. We have found that several terms were being used to classify hostages, with Ministers and officials completely reluctant to clarify how they had reached each classification. Even when there were international determinations that someone was being arbitrarily detained, the Government did not recognise that. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council that stands up for multilateralism, we should be accepting international conclusions where a British national has been arbitrarily detained.

This confusion and inconsistency has actively harmed release efforts. The Committee therefore urges the Government to formalise and publish guidance outlining the exact criteria for determining whether the detention of a UK national by a foreign state should be considered arbitrary. There will be cases where that is difficult to ascertain, but ongoing assessment with the involvement of the family is recommended, because the family are advocates—they understand the individual and know what support they need. It is crucial that they feel they are part of the process and are not being treated as an inconvenience, which is something we heard time and again.

We conducted the inquiry in good faith. Our sole objective is to improve our ability to secure the release of UK nationals unfairly detained abroad. The recommendations we made were based on evidence and the testimony of those who came to speak to us about the cruel reality of state hostage taking.

I welcome the fact that the Government have accepted some of our recommendations to improve services provided to victims when they get home. When some people who had secured release came back, the Government met them, and there were an impressive first few days and a significant care and support package. What is worrying, however, is that it might be three or six months on when that traumatised individual is ready to share and say, “Actually, this is what I needed, and these were the missed opportunities. When those people who locked me in a room were saying these appalling things, which I had not done, I overheard their chatter, and this is what I took away that was a missed opportunity for you.” We need to do more of that.

I am disappointed. I have never made a statement before on one of the Committee’s reports, but I am doing it today because I am deeply disappointed by the lack of FCDO engagement in other areas. There seems to be an unwillingness to admit that improvements can be made, and there seemed, frankly, to be a bunker mentality during some of the hearings we had. Most concerning is that fact that the consular Minister is not actually responsible for consular cases—that is unacceptable. On the first day of Kara-Murza’s trial, I asked the consular Minister what he was doing and what his views were. He responded that he was not aware of the case. It is vital that we meaningfully get a grip of this.

In conclusion, communications can get better. The families in the Public Gallery are here because they experienced the unthinkable, and they deserve better. In the absence of Government action, it falls to Parliament to demand action and to hold the Government to account—we owe it to all those who are still arbitrarily detained. The Government’s first job is very simple: to keep their citizens safe at home and abroad, and to bring them home.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I wish to put on record my thanks to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for the work the Committee does and the recommendations it has made.

As Anoosheh Ashoori’s MP, I campaigned tirelessly for his release along with his family. When I gave written evidence to the Committee, I was reminded just how badly the FCDO handled Anoosheh’s case—and Nazanin’s case as well. It is unacceptable that the FCDO

does not have a consistent, comprehensive strategy in place. Does the hon. Lady therefore agree that the FCDO must urgently deal with detainees, whether they have parliamentary representation or not?

Alicia Kearns: I thank the hon. Lady for all the work that she did. As our report showed, it matters when MPs take up these cases, but it should not fall to us to take them up, and that is exactly the point she is making. We have a duty to know the families and to be reassuring, but it is difficult. When I was a Foreign Office official, I was given the duty of supporting the family of someone who was being held by a terrorist group, but we did not know whether they were alive or dead. It is difficult, and we cannot always share all the information, because we do not know whether it is 100% accurate, but we can do more than we have been doing. The harm this process causes, and the trauma it results in for these families, is something we should be working to overcome. That is why we made our recommendations.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton for her comprehensive report, and I echo the solidarity that she has expressed with the families, particularly those in the Public Gallery today. I share her disappointment at the rather defensive tone that the Government have taken in their response to these very practical and carefully considered recommendations.

Does the hon. Member have any reflections on the fact that a number of high-profile cases have involved dual nationals? Does the Committee have any sense that the Government thought they had a slightly lesser responsibility to those people or that dual nationality was a complicating factor? In fact, dual nationality is as valid as single nationality, and the Government have the same responsibilities to those people.

Alicia Kearns: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I want to apologise for having my back to everybody in the Public Gallery—it is parliamentary courtesy to address the Chair. The Committee did look at dual nationality very carefully. The problem is that some of the worst perpetrators of this heinous crime, and particularly Iran, do not recognise dual nationality.

For example, Morad Tahbaz is a British citizen. Yes, he does have Iranian citizenship, but he also has American citizenship. What do we see from the Iranians? They want to treat him as an American detainee. Why? So they can get what they see to be the most bang for their buck. Let us be clear: we need Morad to be released, because he is deeply unwell, and there were missed opportunities to bring him home. I place on record that the treatment, by certain Foreign Secretaries, of his family was shameful. It was one of the most shameful things I have heard, and I refer colleagues who are interested to the evidence that was given. We should never talk to a family in that way.

The reality is that it is difficult for us to tackle this issue and that, as soon as one person is released, these hostile states “fill the pool,” as some of them like to joke, with dual nationals, more than anyone else. We did

not find that the Government necessarily deprioritised dual nationals, apart from in one specific case, but in terms of the lack of multilateral effort on saying that we will refuse to accept this issue as an excuse, they could be tougher.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton, and I thank the Committee’s members for their support. In the almost six years that I have been challenging the Government on my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal’s arbitrary detention in India, I have been struck by the contrast between the professionalism and dedication of the consular prisoner teams and the seeming lack of strategy on the political side, especially when it comes to cases of arbitrary detention ruled on by the UN working group.

Paragraph 16 of the Committee’s report is perfectly clear that the Government’s approach

“is counterproductive and risks undermining an important tool, as well as the Government’s commitment to a Rules-Based International Order solution for ending this practice.”

I was therefore glad to read, in paragraph 17, the recommendation that

“when there is a UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention opinion that a detention of a UK citizen is illegal, the FCDO assumes that the case will not be judged in line with international standards and should respond accordingly.”

Can we do anything to bring the Government into line with what seems to be logical best practice?

Alicia Kearns: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his long-standing and absolute commitment to Jagtar Singh Johal and his family. It is an incredibly disturbing case: a man who was arrested while on his honeymoon to a country, and who to this day has still not been charged for supposedly leading some sort of—I do not know—counter-revolutionary effort. The reality is that there are no charges; he is arbitrarily detained, and that has been determined by the UN working group. It is utterly wrong that the British Government would not accept that international determination when we are the foremost country calling and relying on the multilateral system time after time to uphold the rule of law.

We must continue to put that pressure on. I ask the Government to think again about the decision not to accept that recommendation. There is no reason for it. As I touched on in my statement, the reality is that if we cannot get definitions right and we cannot at least accept multilateral determinations, any multilateral meetings with others will fail.

Finally, I would like to thank the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), who has now joined us, for playing a significant role in this important inquiry.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I will suspend the sitting until 1.50 pm.

1.47 pm

Sitting suspended.

Bishops in the House of Lords

1.50 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of bishops in the House of Lords.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. Some people, perhaps including members of my party, might wonder why a member of the SNP has secured a debate on the House of Lords, so I want to make it clear from the outset that my principal role here today is as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary humanist group, which comprises more than 150 Members of both Houses and has representatives from all the main political parties. I moved the motion in that capacity.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): As secretary of the same group, I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate, which is not only overdue, but timely: as he knows, yesterday in the Lords, there were amendments to the Government's legislation. I suspect he agrees with the principle of those amendments—he and I differ on that—and he probably agrees with me that the archbishop who tabled them is a very distinguished Member of that House, but does he share my sense of unease about somebody who has not been elected or appointed, and who is merely in the Lords in his capacity as a bishop, potentially changing the law of this country?

Tommy Sheppard: Absolutely, and that goes to the core of the argument I am about to make, but I start by thanking all the members of the all-party humanist group, many of whom wanted to participate in this debate but could not make it today. I say that so that the public watching know that the interest in this question in Parliament is much wider than they might think from the number of people able to make it here on a Thursday afternoon. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I place on the record my thanks to Humanists UK, which supports our group in Parliament, for the work that it has done, particularly with our patron, Sandi Toksvig, in trying to raise the debate more generally among the press and public.

There are only two countries in the world where clerics are automatically guaranteed a place in the legislature. One is the United Kingdom, and the other is the Islamic Republic of Iran. The question before us is whether we wish to be able to make that same comparison in future.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The hon. Member is broadly accurate, but I am sure he would want to be complete in what he says. They might be small jurisdictions, but the Tynwald, which is older than this Parliament, last month reinstated the cleric who sits in that Parliament. Also, the Dean of Jersey is a member of the States Assembly in Jersey. I say that for completeness. Within these islands, what happens here is not unique.

Tommy Sheppard: I am talking about national Parliaments and legislatures, so it is only the United Kingdom and Iran to which this applies. The question before us is about an arrangement made in pre-democratic, feudal times, under which the Church of England is, at the heart of our constitution, guaranteed automatic representation. Does that have public legitimacy in the

21st century, in a country that aspires to be open and democratic, and in which a clear majority of citizens do not identify with that Church? Is it appropriate that we should continue with that? I submit that it is not.

Aaron Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way again. I apologise for intervening, but I have to leave for a Bill Committee in a moment and I want to get these points on the record; I am grateful to him for letting me. Does he agree that there is a way in which religious people could be represented in the Lords, and indeed are already? We already put the Chief Rabbi and the Chief Imam into the Lords through appointments. If we are to continue to have an appointed Lords—opinions differ in this place on that—people in the Church of England could be appointed to the Lords in the same way. It just should not happen as of right.

Tommy Sheppard: Absolutely. The hon. Member again pre-empts what I will say. I shall come on to that, because I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that people of faith, or faith leaders, should not play a major role in our public life and public discourse and be representatives in Parliament. What we are concerned about here is the automatic right of one Church—one institution—to a privileged position and guaranteed representation at the heart of power.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate, and for his really good speech. The UK is an increasingly diverse place when it comes to religion and belief. I speak as a humanist—I declare that as an interest. That is my belief, but I champion the rights of all religions and beliefs. On the point about one particular branch of one particular belief being represented, does he agree that that is not really where we should be in a pluralistic society?

Tommy Sheppard: I do; again, the hon. Lady pre-empts what I will say. I am coming on to exactly that point. However, I wanted to say, just in case anyone thinks otherwise, that we are not talking about a ceremonial arrangement; there is nothing cosmetic or decorative about the situation of the bishops in the House of Lords. We are talking about real, effective, political power. The bishops vote on matters in the legislature, and there are plenty of occasions when their votes have been decisive. It does not really matter—in answer to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell)—whether I agree or disagree with the position that a bishop takes in any vote; the question is whether they should have an automatic right to that vote.

Generally, of course, the bishops' influence is what one might call socially conservative, particularly when it comes to controversial and passionate arguments about equalities, same-sex marriage, assisted dying and many other issues that have a moral dimension. That element of the legislature tends to create an in-built conservative majority, which places the legislature and Parliament at odds with the attitudes of the general public.

Also, of course, in the House of Lords, the bishops are effectively a group. They have their own chair, and they are treated as a political party, in terms of the information and consultation that they get on the framing of legislation. Some people probably do not know that they even have priority and privilege over other Members of the House of Lords. By convention and protocol, when a bishop stands up to speak, whoever is speaking

must shut up, sit down and give way, whereas in the House of Commons, a speaker has discretion to decide whether to take an intervention. That is not the protocol in the House of Lords.

Andrew Selous: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is right in saying that the bishops have that right, but if he observes debates in the Lords, he will find that the bishops are very generous and gracious in giving way to other speakers. It may be a right that they have, and he may be right that it is old-fashioned—I would perhaps agree with him on that—but in practice, I think he will find that the bishops are generous and gracious about having their arguments and points tested in debate.

Tommy Sheppard: But there are plenty of occasions when it has happened, much to the chagrin of Members of the House of Lords who contributed to the Humanist Society's report on the matter.

The final thing that I want to say about the way that the bishops operate is that the code of conduct in the House of Lords, and particularly its strictures on conflicts of interest, does not apply to the Lords Spiritual. In effect, it is accepted that they would not have a conflict of interest, or if they did, that it should be ignored. In effect, one Church—the Church of England—has 26 paid professional advocates, right at the heart of the constitutional arrangements of this country, who are there to protect and advance the interests of that institution. That gives the Church of England an unfair advantage in this democratic system.

In preparing for this debate, I looked at what happened in deep history, because the relationship between Church and state, and the history of bishops in the Lords, is very old. I read about a controversy in the time of Richard II, centuries before the country that I represent in this place was even part of governance arrangements. At that time, a majority of Members of the legislature were Church representatives. In fairness, no one would claim that was democratic, but a bunch of people took decisions, and the majority of them were representatives of the Church.

That changed with the dissolution of the monasteries, after which Church representatives became a minority in the upper Chamber, and in 1847 the number of bishops in the House of Lords was capped at 26. The situation has not been reviewed since. Some on the conservative side of the argument will say that the fact that the arrangement is so old is reason in itself to protect and not challenge it, but we are talking about our democratic constitution; it is not good enough to leave untouched and unreviewed an arrangement that is so obviously out of touch with our times.

The time is right for a review. We first need to identify the mores, attitudes and norms of the society in which we live and which our Parliament is meant to govern. Everyone will admit that they have changed remarkably, even in our lifetime. In the 1950s, one might have been able to describe England or Scotland as a Christian country, but that is no longer the case. In the last British social attitudes survey, 52% of the population identified themselves as non-religious, and a further 9% did not answer the question, so the number of people who identify as religious is getting towards a third of the population these days. Within that, only 12% of people say that they identify with the Church of England—and

the Church says that only 1% of the population are active in the Church, in the sense of attending services and being part of it in any normal sense. Clearly, there is a great disjunction between the type of country we are and whether the Church should continue to have this privileged and separate representation at the heart of our constitution.

I am not saying—I repeat this point—that it is wrong for people of faith to be involved in our public life and public discourse, and to be representatives in Parliament. I am saying, however, that it is clearly wrong that one Church and one institution in our country has guaranteed and automatic representation at the heart of our governing arrangements. After all, we do not apply that to any other section of society. We do not say that university vice-chancellors, representatives of the royal colleges of medicine or any other part of society should appoint Members to the House of Lords, and we certainly do not say that any other Church or religious group should, so why is this anomaly allowed to persist?

In this debate, we will necessarily engage with the wider context, on two fronts. First, we will invariably get into a debate about the general role of Church and state, and whether the time has come to disestablish the Church of England and have a proper separation of powers, so that we have secular arrangements for our governance. Some time ago, there were plenty of examples of established Churches—indeed, the Anglican Church was established in many other countries—but over time disestablishment has taken place, and I submit that it has been to the benefit of both Church and state. Demonstrably, the state has continued to be there, without being subject to partisan interests, and the Church has been freed from the responsibility, and has been better able to play the role it should in debates taking place among the population: the role of our social and moral conscience.

We can point to no example of the disestablishment of a Church being anything other than beneficial. No one would consider going backwards to re-establish a Church that has been disestablished. That said, there are plenty of examples of established Churches that do not have privileged or guaranteed representation in the legislature. Again, the UK is exceptional in that regard. We need a wider debate about the role of the Church of England in our diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, non-faith society, but that is not germane to the argument about representation in the House of Lords. We could remove the Church of England's representation in the House of Lords without disestablishing the Church of England.

The other argument that we get into is the general question of Lords reform. I took part in a radio discussion on this issue this morning, and one caller asked why we were even talking about bishops in the House of Lords, because we should have been talking about having an unelected second Chamber. To some extent, I agree, but I think the bishops' presence in the House of Lords is a good place to start, because in many ways it is a double affront to the notion of democracy. Not only are the bishops not elected by, or accountable to, the public; they are not even scrutinised and subject to the normal appointment mechanisms for the House of Lords. They are completely separate from that, so if we want to talk about the balance between elected and appointed representatives, and about the role of scrutiny and transparency, the bishops are the best place to start.

[Tommy Sheppard]

Lords reform has been talked about for so long—certainly for all the time I have been in Parliament, and for many decades. I think it was 113 years ago that the Labour party committed to the abolition of the House of Lords. I say that not to have a go; I simply point out that it has been an intractable debate for a very long period. It is useful to have this debate, and to see whether we can engage on the subject. An electoral contest in the United Kingdom is coming, and parties will have to frame propositions on this matter. I wait to be educated by the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), about His Majesty's Opposition's thinking with regard to the upper Chamber, but I note the report published by the Labour party at the end of last year, which talked about having a second Chamber. It did not say how the second Chamber would be elected or appointed, but it talked about a Chamber of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. I think the presumption is that representatives would be elected in some way. Even within that model, however, there is simply no role or logical place for the Lords Spiritual, so on those grounds, they would have to go.

Hon. Members will hear from the SNP's Front-Bench spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), about our party's thinking on this issue, but I should explain why I am engaged in this debate. Of course, my colleagues and I want Scotland to become a politically independent, self-governing country in these islands, and we want a much better, co-operative relationship between the national Governments of Britain. That is something we aspire to, and there is not really any conceivable place for the House of Lords in that arrangement. In many ways, there is a particularly Scottish aspect of this issue, because the bishops represent the Church of England; they do not even represent the Anglican community throughout these islands.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is making a very interesting speech. On a point of curiosity, if the worst were to happen and Scotland became independent, would there be an upper Chamber in its legislature? Is that in the SNP's plans?

Tommy Sheppard: That would be a matter for the people of Scotland. My party's proposal is that if we had consent to move forward and become an independent country, a modern, democratic constitution would be written. We would spell out the rights of each citizen and the process of government. That would be when to debate whether it was necessary to have a bicameral Parliament, or whether a single legislative Chamber would suffice. I note that part of the argument in this place is that we need an upper Chamber because the House of Commons makes so many mistakes. That seems an argument for reform of the House of Commons, rather than justification for an unelected Chamber.

There is a particular attitude in Scotland; people look at the House of Lords, and at the role of the Lords Spiritual within it, and see this very much as another country. They see this as part of the rationale for doing something different, and moving forward to become an independent country.

I will wind up in a moment because I want others to have a chance to contribute, but I want to say that we need to continue this debate. It is very much overdue in this place, and I know that the public are with us on that. I gave some figures about how many people identify as non-religious. When we ask people whether the Church of England should have automatic and guaranteed representation in Parliament, we find that the majorities against that arrangement are phenomenal: 68%, including a majority of Conservative voters, say that it cannot and should not continue.

This is a debate whose time has come. We should make time for it in the main Chamber as we go through to the end of the year, in a time slot that I hope—with all respect to the Backbench Business Committee—will allow more colleagues to participate and engage in the discussion. This is something that gives our democracy a bad name, and it does not do any favours for the Church of England.

I will finish by repeating this point: it is so important that people of faith are engaged in public life. I say that as a humanist and an atheist, but I respect everyone's right to practise their religion and to have their own belief system. I want to see a pluralist, tolerant society where everyone is respected, so, of course, I want people and faith leaders such as bishops to be involved in our public discourse. I agree with many of their statements and arguments and the way in which many of the bishops vote on many topics of the day. I am not saying in any sense that they should be excluded from our parliamentary system, but they should be there on the same basis as every other citizen. They should be subject to the same rules as everyone else. At the end of the day, surely that is what democracy means: everyone is treated fairly and everyone has the ability to hold others to account.

I commend this discussion to the House and I look forward to it continuing as the months go by. Perhaps we will actually see the framing of some policy on this matter, with will feed into the political debate at the election, and we may even see some change. Or perhaps Scotland will become an independent country first—I do not know.

2.12 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I had an email from one of my humanist constituents a few days ago asking me to speak in this debate. I told him that I would do so and that I would take an alternative view, but come with a listening ear, and I hope that will be the same for everyone who speaks.

I get the passion that the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) has for this issue. However, having had the privilege of being a Member of this House for 22 years, I can say that it is not regularly at the top of my constituents' lists of demands. The good people of South West Bedfordshire are not short of things they want me to get done in this place, but this issue probably does not make the top 50 or even the top 100. I also gently observe that in a House with 650 Members of Parliament, there are only six MPs here this afternoon who do not have to be because of their Front Bench or Parliamentary Private Secretary responsibilities. I know that there are other important debates in the Chamber, and that we may even be on a one-line Whip now and other considerations may call, but it is worth putting that on the record.

I, too, will start with some history—it is important that we remember our history, because if we do not remember where we have come from, we are in danger of repeating the failures of the past. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East is right. In 1301, in addition to the two archbishops and 18 bishops, there were 80 abbots and priors entitled to sit in the House of Lords, but the temporal peers rarely exceeded 50. The hon. Member, who introduced the debate very well, would indeed have a point if anything like those numbers and proportions were the case today. However, bishops today make up just 3% of the House of Lords. I think that it is the second biggest legislature in the world, after that of the People's Republic of China, and that it tops 850. Of those 26 bishops, it is usual for just one or two to vote. I am told that a large number would be four or five, and six would be right at the top of the scale. I am unsure of how many votes the bishops have swung because they tend to come down on a rota system. They have a pastoral and a spiritual role, and they say Prayers like our Chaplain does in the House of Commons.

I dispute the figures that the hon. Member for Edinburgh East quoted. My reading of the 2021 census is that a majority of people in England and Wales declared a faith. I counter the notion that is put about sometimes that faith is dying; I think that is a myth, and it is unhelpful for the positive development of a modern society. It leads to a disconnect between people of faith and others, and it can lead to problems in the delivery of services. In fact, it is nearer to the truth to say that, in many parts of our country, faith is not just alive, but thriving. That is particularly true in London, where 62% of people identify as religious compared with 53%, which is still a majority, outside London.

Tommy Sheppard: The census produces different data from the social attitudes survey, but does the hon. Gentleman not accept that there is much concern about how the faith questions on the census are asked? It asks about affiliation, rather than belief. There are many people who answer “C of E” or whatever to that question because that is what they were born into. It is not what they believe and who they are now.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is right in that how a question is asked can determine the answer, but it was a free choice and plenty of people put down, “No faith”. In the last census, a majority of people in England and Wales declared a religious faith, and it is important to put that on the record.

The Church of England, as the established Church, takes its responsibility to uphold religious freedom for all extremely seriously. No one put this better than the late Queen. At Lambeth Palace in February 2012, she said:

“The concept of our established Church is occasionally misunderstood and, I believe, commonly under-appreciated. Its role is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions. Instead, the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country.

It certainly provides an identity and spiritual dimension for its own many adherents. But also, gently and assuredly, the Church of England has created an environment for other faith communities and indeed people of no faith to live freely. Woven into the fabric of this country, the Church has helped to build a better society—more and more in active co-operation for the common good with those of other faiths.”

Those were wise words from Her late Majesty the Queen, and we would do very well to heed them 11 years after they were spoken.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner for the Church of England for giving way. The established Church of Scotland, which is really a national Church, not an established Church, takes its role of creating a better society very seriously—we can look at the role of the Committee on Church and Nation in the development of the Scottish Parliament—but it does not sit in an unelected Chamber to create a better society.

Andrew Selous: I accept that there are different arrangements in different nations around the world, but if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me as I develop my argument, he will understand why I am making it.

No other major denomination or faith argues for the removal of bishops from the House of Lords. In 2012, other faiths argued for their retention in evidence to the Joint Committee on the Draft House of Lords Reform Bill, which scrutinised the coalition Government's Lords reform plans. Indeed, I have spoken to Muslims, for example, who would much rather live under a benign and welcoming established Christian Church of England. What they fear more is a sort of dominant secularism, which they think would cause problems for them as Muslims and for people of all faiths.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Selous: I will give way once more to the hon. Gentleman, and then I will make a little progress.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman seems to be touching on very dodgy ground. What is he trying to allude to here—if there is a Government led by a Muslim in this country—because there happens to be one in Scotland? And in London.

Andrew Selous: I did not deny that was the case. I am just pointing back to what actually happened when evidence was being taken by the relevant Bill Committee under the coalition Government for Lords reform. Other faiths argued for the retention of bishops in the Lords, and that is a matter of fact and is on the record.

I suspect that the intention of some Members present would not be to stop with the bishops. I think that some here would like to eradicate the whole footprint of the Church of England across their country. They are entitled to that view—I do not have a problem with that—but it is not a view that I agree with and share, and we argue these things out in this place.

Another important point is that the bishops—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman pursues his next point, I am slightly alarmed by the number of pieces of paper he has in front of him. I aim to get to the Front Benchers by 2.40 pm. The hon. Gentleman has had almost 10 minutes, and there are three other people who want to speak, and they will already have to have substantially less time than that. In the interests of fairness, it would be welcome if the hon. Gentleman perhaps curtailed what he had intended to please us with.

Andrew Selous: I will do that, Mr Davies—my apologies. You did not give any guidance on time, and I was not sure whether everyone here had stood up to speak. I accept what you say, and I shall certainly speed up.

We have a big footprint. We have a lot of social action from our churches. A million children are in Church of England primary schools, and the Church of England is the biggest provider of academies. Some 27% of charities are faith-based, and the number of faith-based charities has increased in this country, from one in four to one in five. Those voices need champions here in Parliament. There are wider benefits in terms of the life chances of children in faith schools. There are lower rates of attempted suicide and better health outcomes. That is all in the Bloom review, which was published earlier this year.

You will be pleased to hear me say that I am moving to my conclusion, Mr Davies. I want to make a broader point about values and culture in our public discourse. We have an angry and divided public square, social media lynch mobs, and so on. The world view that we pick up from the Church, however imperfectly demonstrated by the bishops, is one of love, forgiveness and grace, and we have never needed that more in our public life than we do at the moment. We need humility and hopefulness, and that is part of what the bishops point to. That is very necessary and extremely important in a troubled and hurting world. If it's not broke, don't change it.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I am grateful to Mr Selous. Three Members are standing, and I want to get to the Front Benchers by no later than 2.40 pm, so we are talking about five or six minutes maximum for each remaining speaker. I call Neil Coyle.

2.23 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Davies, for calling me in this debate. To make it clear, I speak in a personal capacity as someone who would welcome the formal extension of invitations to sit in the House of Lords to representatives of other faiths: imams, rabbis and representatives of other Christian denominations. I serve a community with two cathedrals and was proud to attend the 175th anniversary of St George's Cathedral, which is a Catholic cathedral, just this week.

I support reform of the House of Lords, but just targeting bishops for removal would leave the House full of Tory donors and political patronage, and that is not a House I would be happy to see. This debate puts form before function. Frankly, the composition of the upper House is less of an issue than its role. I would prefer an upper Chamber with regional representation, elected council leaders and directly elected Mayors, whether or not I agree with their politics.

I am mindful that a bishop at least represents a diocese, which gives them—more than others they sit with—a constituency, of sorts, to reflect in the House of Lords. I am also mindful that bishops are seen as the spring chickens—the upstarts and whippersnappers—of the House of Lords, because they are forced to retire at 70, which is younger than some of their peers, who, of course, are also peers. The bishops' contributions come from their expertise and experience, are based on years of service, and are underpinned by values that are

integral to what they bring to our upper Chamber. The Bishop of Durham yesterday described the Government's Rwanda plans as “horrific” and “immoral”, and I share that sentiment. Although there are so few bishops in the Lords, they have been crucial to narrow recent wins. Their votes have been decisive—I thank them for their service—including on the Government's plan to sack nurses for daring to strike in favour of their employment rights and pay, which their union voted for. Lords should be commended for serving until 4 am, rather than being told that their contribution is unwelcome.

I also believe that Parliament should be on top of issues facing our constituents. I am sure that, in Edinburgh, they talk of nothing other than Church of England bishops sitting in the House of Lords, but I have had three requests to be here today. I represent an extremely diverse, vibrant central London community, which includes at least five mosques, and this is a non-issue for the vast majority of the people I serve. Week in, week out, I deal with issues to do with housing, the cost of living and Home Office failures. I am proud to work with peers and bishops on my constituents' top concerns, which the bishops see reflected in their congregations. They share those values, and I respect that.

I speak in unity with the other representatives of Southwark: my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and Bishop Christopher of Southwark, who sits in the House of Lords. I am proud to share a platform with them in representing and serving Southwark.

I welcome Bishop Christopher of Southwark's work here in Westminster and in Southwark, where the cathedral was integral to the rebuild after the horrific terror attack at London Bridge and Borough Market. The work of the cathedral, Bishop Christopher and Andrew Nunn, the dean, who is now retired, was fundamental in ensuring that we rebuilt quickly. The love and strength with which they served was commendable, and I am glad to have seen it and been part of it.

The Bishop of Southwark has recently spoken about the 1 million people waiting for council homes. He has supported the Bishop of St Albans' plan to prevent leaseholders from paying fees to remove dangerous cladding, and the Archbishop of Canterbury's call for a 10-year plan in partnership with other countries to tackle the refugee crisis and human trafficking. The Bishop of Southwark has spoken about children detained under Home Office plans that he called “most alarming” and “unedifying”, the Home Office's failure to tackle sexual exploitation and modern slavery, and other issues. It is hard to disagree with those contributions; I welcome them.

One backer of this debate said that bishops have been intervening pointedly in politics. I would be disappointed if the Church were not standing up on these issues and did not take a view on the Government's devaluing of human life. I would be disappointed if it did not request that, rather than crossing the road, we should be the good Samaritan and intervene to help others where we can.

It is disappointing that this debate is focused on one group in the House of Lords, based on their faith, rather than their role. We can compare them with some of the other contributors in the other Chamber, including Lord Lebedev, whom the intelligence services said should

not be there; Lord Archer, who has never spoken and never bothered to turn up; Lord Bamford, who has made five contributions in a decade—one contribution for each £1 million contribution he has made to the Conservative party—and the Earl of Rosslyn, who has spoken once since—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that this is not an opportunity to make personal attacks on individual Members of the House of Lords. I would be grateful if he refrained from doing that. In the House of Commons, we do not pick out particular individuals. We must stick to the subject of the debate.

Neil Coyle: Certainly, Mr Davies. I will move on. The point I was making is that there are others I feel should be a more legitimate target for removal from the House of Lords. The bishops should not be targeted purely because of the denomination they represent, their understanding of British values, how they demonstrate that through their faith, the communities they serve and their experience working in churches and dioceses.

I stood for election to help to tackle the real problems in my community and those that the country faces, not to bash bishops—Members can do that in their own time—or get consumed in an academic political debate that makes no meaningful difference to the people I serve. I would sooner hear more from the Bishop of Southwark and the rest of the Lords Spiritual from the Church of England here and elsewhere, rather than the Prime Minister's shameless hypocrisy yesterday in quoting from Matthew, chapter 25, at the service for the NHS's 75th anniversary.

2.29 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as churchwarden for my home parish in my constituency of West Dorset. I have had more constituents getting in touch with me about the matter than my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) may have. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) on securing this debate.

As I have told my constituents, I do not necessarily agree with them in principle, but it is important to have an objective, clear and frank debate about why there are constituents and even members of the Church who feel increasingly strongly about the issue. Although I may disagree in principle with the hon. Member for Edinburgh East, we should understand why increasing numbers of people feel strongly about the role of the bishops in the House of Lords.

The Church of England has an incredibly important role to play throughout the land in unifying people with different views. It has a critical role to play in bringing people together and finding ways to have more in common than that which divides us. We need to reflect on that when we start to hear very clear political views from bishops in the House of Lords.

I did not intervene on the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), but I suspect one reason that I disagree in principle is that I disagree wholly with what he says about why bishops should be in the House of Lords. It is not right that bishops, who

have an important role to play in unifying their communities and who have the cure of souls, regardless of political view, are in effect being made to feel alienated from their own parishes and their own church communities.

I am delighted to have the Bishop of St Albans here in the Gallery. I was delighted to be in his congregation at the St Alban's day festival not 10 days ago. It was very clear from the sermon at the lectern in that service that a very pro-immigration message emanates from his cathedral. That is his decision, but I am afraid we have to recognise that not everybody agrees with that position. We are increasingly seeing bishops in the Church of England becoming politicians who wear mitres. That is a decision for the Church of England and for individual bishops, but I think it is a damaging thing for the Church of England to do.

I have been a member of the Church of England for 30 years; if we were counting from baptism, it would be 41. I remember vividly that in my younger years I thought, "Why is the Church not being stronger on the issues that I feel strongly about?" I made representations to my priest at the time. It was probably part of the reason why, at an earlier point in my life, I had to discern whether I had a calling to the priesthood.

Neil Coyle rose—

Chris Loder: I will give way in a moment.

Many members of the Church of England, and not just residents of my constituency, have been in touch with me about this debate. That is not because they agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh East, who thinks that bishops should be taken out of the House of Lords, but because a good number of them wholly disagree with what some bishops have to say—I recognise that the Archbishop of Canterbury was in Portland only a few weeks ago—and believe that they have spent their life supporting a Church from which they now feel wholly alienated, based on what the bishops have been saying. I am sorry to say that that includes a good number from the diocese of Truro. Everyone ought to note that the bishop, who is being translated to Winchester and will therefore have a seat in this place by default, has had many issues within his own diocese, not least the fact that the future of a good number of parishes is in question. It is important to consider whether bishops should focus on political matters of the day or on the cure of souls and taking care of their own diocese.

Neil Coyle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Loder: I am sorry; I wanted to give way to the hon. Member, but I think you are prompting me to finish, Mr Davies. I will happily speak to the hon. Member afterwards.

2.35 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you, Mr Davies, and solidarity to the Bishop of Salisbury. I might not think he should be sitting in the House of Lords, but the Christian message of love and charity should be heard loud and clear from pulpits across the length and breadth of these islands.

I am a doubting Thomas, as I said in the main Chamber the other week. In some ways I agree with the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) when it comes to certain Members of the

[Martin Docherty-Hughes]

House of Lords. Some of us tried to raise the matter at Prime Minister's questions last Wednesday, but I am afraid the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland failed to answer the question of whether he agrees with MI5 or with the former Prime Minister about that appointment.

I am going to speak as a Scottish constituency MP. There are 59 Members from Scotland. I have been looking at evidence in the House of Commons Library about the way in which bishops of the established Church of England have participated since 2013 in legislation that has not only affected England and Wales. I am mindful that the Anglican Church is disestablished in Wales and that the Kirk is the national/established Church in Scotland; there is the Episcopal Church, but it is not the national Church.

The bishops of the Church of England participated in 615 Divisions between July 2013 and July 2023, on 187 pieces of business. Parliamentary research has identified 22 pieces of business on Scotland, based on the subject index—basically, those that cover all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. During those 22 pieces of business, 49 Divisions took place. Twenty-three bishops participated in 31 of those Divisions, casting 91 votes on 11 different pieces of business.

One of those Divisions was on the Scotland Act 2016, which was the then Government's response to the referendum on Scottish independence, on which the bishops of the Church of England had more of a say than the 59 Members representing Scottish constituencies, no matter what party they belonged to. This is a matter of the constitution. The Second Church Estates Commissioner, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), will perhaps correct me if I am wrong, but in 1919 the convocations of Canterbury and York agreed addresses to the King that sought greater opportunities for the Church of England to discuss its own affairs and to review the legislative role of Parliament. Up until 1919, it was Parliament that dictated the governance of the Church of England, which seems absolutely ridiculous.

The point I am making is that if it is acceptable for the Church of England to review its own processes and mostly remove itself from the parliamentary process, why is it participating in the governance of the other nations of the United Kingdom? Why is it participating on issues that relate to Scotland and Northern Ireland? I have heard the excuse that Churches in those areas have asked it to participate, but there is no Episcopal national Church in Scotland; it is the Kirk.

I come back to the point about the role of religion in politics. I think it is central, because if it were not for the Church and nation committee of the Kirk, the Parliament of Scotland would most likely not exist. It was the voice of the Scottish nation itself prior to devolution, and I am extremely grateful to the Kirk for doing that work. We also need to go back to issues relating to Ireland, because the Anglican Church there covers the entire island of Ireland. If I were a Unionist in the north of Ireland, I would be asking myself, "What has the Church of Ireland got to do with the governance of Presbyterian issues specific to Northern Ireland?" I say that as a doubting Thomas Catholic.

There is also the question of replacing the bishops in the Church of England or adding to the religious ethos of the upper Chamber. I need to be very clear that I do not believe in an unelected, unaccountable upper Chamber; during our time in the Union there needs to be total, sweeping reform and a new premise on which people are elected or appointed to that upper Chamber.

The idea is also sometimes raised—it has been raised here before—that we should ask other religious leaders, such as the Chief Rabbi or imams, to go into the upper House. I have even heard cardinal archbishops of the Roman Catholic Church suggested. That will not happen, because Roman Catholic clerics are prohibited by canon law from taking up elected office: if they do, they are removed from holy orders.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) on reminding us that the constitution and the way in which governance happens is important. It comes down to all the other issues that the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark was talking about. I commend my hon. Friend and say to him that people like me will stand with him and continue to argue, with no personal animosity against the bishops of the Church of England, for the end of the House of Lords itself and for an elected upper Chamber to replace it.

2.40 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) on securing the debate. My first email from a constituent asking me to participate in the debate was in February, so I congratulate Humanists UK on the effectiveness of its campaigning machinery and the passion of its members. I echo the thanks to the all-party group, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate.

My hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh East and for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) have a record of making interventions on the subject of the Lords Spiritual and Lords reform, and they have wide agreement among our SNP colleagues. Our position is clear: the House of Lords should be abolished. There is no place in a modern democracy for an unelected legislature, let alone one that grants membership to religious clerics as of right.

In 2005, I was proud to move the resolution at SNP conference that most recently confirmed our party's long-held position that no SNP member would take a seat in the unelected House. It is important to be clear, as we were in the debate that I led from the Back Benches in January about reform of the Lords, that we hold the individuals concerned in the highest regard; nothing we say is meant with any personal disrespect or questioning of their sense of duty and commitment to the roles that they have accepted.

We can also appreciate the role of faith leaders more widely across society. In Westminster Hall we often have debates about the importance of freedom of religion and belief around the world, and we hear of many places where these rights are not respected, so we should be proud to live in a modern, pluralistic society where people can practise their faith and speak openly about their beliefs in the public square.

Faith communities continue to make up a significant proportion of our society, and it is right and proper that the leaders of those communities are accorded respect and, where appropriate, a voice in our national discourse. We need only look at the service in St Giles' cathedral yesterday, where leaders from the Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and humanist communities were invited to greet the monarch after he was presented with the Honours of Scotland. Our views on a constitutional monarchy notwithstanding, that gives an indication of the importance of faith and belief communities to our wider civic society. But providing that kind of representative role, having a platform in the media or being a statutory consultee on certain aspects of public or planning policy is very different from having an active role in a legislative Chamber of Parliament.

The unelected Chamber is already anomalous. The presence of bishops as *ex officio* members is more or less unique in western democracies; it is even more peculiar when we consider the special privileges accorded to the bishops in the House, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire outlined. All that comes on top of the antiquated and essentially undemocratic role, and frankly existence, of the House of Lords itself. These points have been well made by my hon. Friends and do not need much more rehearsing.

Ironically, there are more people in the Lords than in the Commons who want the upper Chamber abolished or reformed, because so many Members of the Commons, particularly on the Government and official Opposition Benches, want to be appointed to the Lords at some point. That is why I concluded in my debate back in January—as the Lord Speaker concluded in his thoughtful intervention for the Hansard Society, and even Gordon Brown conceded in his latest weighty tome, which I think is already gathering dust on the shelves of the Leader of the Opposition—that the biggest barrier to reform of the Lords is that no meaningful reform of the Lords can be carried out without also reforming the Commons. And any meaningful reform of the Commons would mean taking power away from the Government. And no UK Government, of whatever colour, will readily give up that power.

Despite all the grand talk about parliamentary sovereignty, the House of Commons is essentially a plaything for the Government of the day. The Government set the agenda, control the time, and control the standing orders and rulebook, no matter what myths and conventions say otherwise. An elected Lords would challenge the primacy of the Commons. A cap on the size of the Lords would limit the powers of patronage held by the Prime Minister. The removal of the bishops would call into question the relationship between Church and state, meaning the relationship between the Church and Crown.

The Crown in Parliament and the royal prerogative are the Government's free hand to wield Executive authority. No matter what nice words the Government use to dress up how much they value the House of Lords and appreciate the work of the bishops, the reality is that any tinkering at the edges or pulling on the thread of the UK's constitutional tapestry risks unravelling the whole thing—and no UK Government would want to do that.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Patrick Grady: I do not have time.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East again on securing the debate. Musing about reform of the House of Lords has been an entertaining parlour game in UK politics for more than 100 years, since the Labour party first promised and failed to deliver meaningful reform. I fear that the forces of antidisestablishmentarianism will continue to prevail. My hon. Friend and I both know that meaningful reform is not going to happen. The meaningful reform that will truly let democracy flourish in Scotland will come when the people of Scotland choose to leave the broken Westminster system and become an independent country.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I want to get in before the hon. Gentleman finishes, because he may have a bit more time than he thought: he has up to 10 minutes. I did not want him to cut him off if he wanted to give way but was mistakenly thinking he did not have enough time.

Patrick Grady: Apologies, Mr Davies. I was pretty much finishing, but I will hear from my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: My hon. Friend was talking about the issue of establishment and the role of Church and state. The Cecil Committee in 1935 was very clear “that a complete spiritual freedom of the Church is not incompatible with Establishment.”

Does my hon. Friend agree with the Cecil Committee?

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend is right. The points about the establishment of the Church of England have been well made. The point that I am trying to make is that we cannot unpick. This is the nature of the UK constitution, such as it is. Everything is so tightly interwoven that if we start picking at one part, the whole thing will fall apart. That is not in the interests of the Government, because the point of the UK constitution is to give the Government as much unlimited and unchallenged power as possible while retaining the pretence of democracy. The alternative to that, for the people of Scotland, is for us to vote to become independent.

2.46 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies, and to contribute to this debate on behalf of the Opposition. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) on securing the debate and on the vigour with which he pressed his case. I agree with what he said at the outset: there is a high degree of interest in the issue. Thursdays are a tricky day to get colleagues to participate in this place, but in general there is a high degree of interest in this, in the wider issue relating to the House of Lords, and in the even wider issue relating to our constitution. That speaks to his point about having a constitution that has evolved slowly. There is a beauty in this place and its conventions and norms, but when that is tried—and, boy, has it been tried over the past decade—it sometimes starts to be flimsy and a bit weak. It is right that we discuss these issues, and the hon. Member made a good start.

There has been a range of interesting contributions from all sides. I agree with the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) that faith remains a

[*Alex Norris*]

hugely significant part of British life. Last month, my community was really tested when the awful Nottingham attacks happened and, boy, did we lean on our faith community. The right reverend Bishop Paul Williams was a huge support for our community and for its Members of Parliament. We should recognise the anchors and fixed points in the lives we lead, but it is reasonable and—I would argue—necessary to discuss the place of that in a democracy, and particularly in a legislature.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), with characteristic impudence, made a point that I will return to on a number of occasions. I believe the role of the second Chamber is much more important than the constitution of its membership.

I cannot quite agree with what the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) said. It is right we have the debate about whether the Lords Spiritual should be in the House. However, the moment we choose to have people in a political legislature, in which every question can be put to a Division if we so wish, they will take views. Asking people to be in a political environment but not be political worked for the Law Lords before we moved to a Supreme Court, because they had to not prejudge case law, but I do not think that that reads across here. We should expect people to take views. If we did not wish them to, that would be an argument for not having them here at all.

That links to what the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) said. I understand the frustration. He raised a number of debates and even Divisions that might have gone another way without the bishops, just as they might have without any 26 Members. Again, however, I would argue that that is a debate about constitution. If we put those people in that place, they should choose their moments to speak and vote as they wish, and should exercise their judgment in that. I suspect that that is what happened in those cases.

To make a couple of points of my own, as we have heard, there are 26 bishops of the Church of England in the other place, sitting as Lords Spiritual, which is about 3% of the membership of the other place. They have a wide role—a wider role, I would argue, than I do as an individual. They provide spiritual and pastoral support to Members, including reading Prayers at the start of each sitting day, and like other Members they offer their perspectives on the various matters before Parliament, asking questions, speaking in debates, serving on Committees and scrutinising legislation.

There have been times in the debate when there has perhaps been a suggestion that the bishops are an homogeneous group. However, they represent a diversity of opinion within the church and a range of political views, and they have the independence to bring different perspectives to the work they do, informed by their faith and their local, national and international connections. Again, whether or not we choose to have them as part of our legislature in the future, we should recognise the contribution the bishops make to Parliament and thank them for their service. As I say, for us in Nottingham, that has been particularly important in recent weeks.

The other place does a hugely important job. I cannot agree with the point from the hon. Member for Edinburgh East that, in some way, the case for a second Chamber is

that we make so many mistakes in this Chamber and, therefore, that the actual issue is us being better. I would say, and I would hope—well, I believe this extends to everybody: I am a human being and I make mistakes all the time. In fact, I have just misspoken in this contribution, and I will make other such mistakes throughout the day. Who knows what they will be?

It is right that we have checks and balances in our democracy that will either curb the worst instincts of politicians or give us the chance to think again. That is a very important thing, and that model is, of course, popular around the world. I think the other place provides exceptionally important scrutiny and balance to the work that we do and enriches the quality of debate.

I also believe that it is possible to strongly hold that view, as I do, but also to recognise the case for reform and to understand that the other place has ballooned in size, as mentioned by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire—Bedfordshire—another mistake from me there, Mr Davies. It has 777 Members, and I would argue that it is not sustainable at that size. Having a larger unelected Chamber than elected Chamber—a larger upper House than lower House—is, I believe, unique among bicameral Parliaments.

The next Government, whoever and whenever that might be, will have to grasp this issue. It is about the second Chamber, but it is also about maintaining, developing and sustaining public confidence in our democracy in general, and that is part of my quibble with this debate.

Alex Burghart: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me—I may be pre-empting what he is about to say—but what is the Labour party's position on bishops in the House of Lords?

Alex Norris: Well, the hon. Gentleman has not yet given me the chance to finish. I tempted him into a flourishing drive, and my slip cordon is, I suspect, better than the one the England team is operating today.

My major quibble with this debate is that we should not be pulling out a single element—in this case, a cohort of 3%—and making a single analysis of its merits or otherwise. It must be a fuller debate about the entire Chamber. However, that in itself is a smaller part of a wider conversation about our entire democracy. What are we seeking to do at what level? That is, at the national, regional, local, and parish and town council level. That cannot just be a debate among politicians; we have to let the public in.

I know that the Minister is well briefed enough to know where the Labour party stands on this matter at the moment: we have argued for a smaller second Chamber, and we have argued that we should use that as an opportunity to better recognise and involve all our nations and regions in our democracy. However, we are on a journey to the next general election; we have an important democratic staging post coming among our political parties. The Minister will see the full platform when he is ready for the general election, and I say to him gently that it can be any day he wants.

Alex Burghart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Norris: By all means—keep going.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman is very generous to give way again. It is interesting to hear him talk about a big debate on the future of the constitution and about the involvement of everyone. If his party was to present plans for a reformed upper Chamber, would it be prepared to put those to a referendum of the people of this country?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to read the future. I am afraid that I will disappoint him. We have not finished our process of policymaking. The Government are hiding from the public—it seems like they intend to do that for a long time, and we understand why—but if the hon. Gentleman wishes for a quicker answer, he can give the public what they want, which is their chance to have their say on his Government.

Another issue that is hugely important for what we can do now and today—I hope to hear a little from the Minister on it—is that we know that our communities want greater power and control over their lives. A very important and significant degree of consensus has emerged across the political parties, and across the Chambers, over greater regional devolution. At the moment, we have an asymmetric settlement whereby some are in and some are out, and I hope to hear from the Minister his desire to improve and to move at a quicker pace on that. I depart from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), the Front Bencher for the Scottish nationalists, in that it is not my goal to hoard power in this place so that I might one day get a chance to sit where the Minister does and get all those nice levers to pull. That is not my desire in politics at all. I am here for devolution. I am here because I want to put the tools and resources into my community so that local leaders can shape our economy, shape our place and make it somewhere where everybody has access to the best opportunities.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way on the issue of decision making. The 23 Anglican bishops who sit in the upper House have no moral or theological authority in Scotland, so why are they participating in laws that impact Scotland and also Northern Ireland?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman reiterates the point that he made earlier, with great gusto. It will be heard, and it has contributed to the debate. I think that that is an important question that needs to be resolved, but the point I am making is that we have to resolve this in the round. I do not think that a debate such as the one we are having today, which takes a granular look at the issue, serves the bigger picture.

I will conclude on that point. We have a constitutional settlement that has evolved over centuries, as we have heard, and with that come things that, if we were sitting down afresh, we would not design in the same way. It behoves all of us, as custodians of this place, to renew and refresh these things, but doing that in the round and doing it with the public, rather than to the public, have to be the strongest principles.

2.56 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) both on initiating the debate

and on the manner in which he spoke, which was non-partisan and direct to his point. Despite what I will say in the debate, I have the greatest respect for the humanists in the United Kingdom. I respect their values and the work they do. I know that there are members of the hon. Gentleman's APPG on both sides of the House, because this is an issue that cuts across party lines, as we have seen this afternoon.

The hon. Gentleman was right in saying that we ought to be having these constitutional debates. We ought to have them in every generation. We have had them in many generations, certainly over the past 400 years. In Cromwell's day, the bishops were removed from the House of Lords, to be brought back under the Restoration 20 years later. In the 1840s, there was a groundswell of movement to disestablish the Church of England; that then faded away. Gladstone started off as an ardent supporter of the established Church, only to change his position 20 years later, based on what he had seen in Ireland. In around 1929, the Church of England itself toyed with the idea of disestablishment, in response to the Houses of Parliament having voted down its Book of Common Prayer, which Parliament deemed to be too Catholic in its tastes. Therefore, this is a debate that we have had over and over again, and it is right that we should return to it, because nothing in the British constitutional system is automatically eternal. The case has to be made again and again for the way in which we do things. And, over time, things have changed.

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

The hon. Gentleman referred to the pre-democratic feudal past, from which the Church emerged. Indeed it did. The Church in his country, his nation—Scotland—and in mine is older than the kingdom of Scotland; it is older than the kingdom of England. There were priests and churches before there was a king of all Scotland or a king of all England. I urge him not to be totally down on the pre-democratic feudal past. It was that past that also gave us Parliaments, law, the jury system, currency, local government and many other things. Not everything that emerges from that time is inherently bad—I used to be a teacher of medieval history.

The question that we are addressing is, how strong is the case for change? I was particularly drawn to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) about priorities. I will disappoint the hon. Member for Edinburgh East when I say that I have not come to Westminster Hall to announce that it is Government policy to disestablish the Church of England. The hon. Member will recognise that, although some people feel very strongly about this subject, their numbers are quite small, the challenges the country faces are very great and the time before the next general election is increasingly short. So this issue is not something the Government will be engaging in—certainly not in this Parliament.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East rather cheekily raised the parallel with Iran. I say “cheekily” because, although I would share his concerns if the Archbishop of Canterbury controlled the BBC, the courts, the military and the selection of MPs, that is not the case in the United Kingdom.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I will ask the same question that I asked the spokesperson for the official Opposition. The 23 bishops of the Anglican Church sitting in the

[Martin Docherty-Hughes]

upper House have no moral or theological authority in Scotland, Northern Ireland or, indeed, Wales. Does the Minister think they should participate in legislation that impacts those three nations of the Union?

Alex Burghart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the point, which he has made several times in the debate. The truth is that we remain the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It remains the case that we have, on certain issues, a Westminster Parliament, which has an upper and a lower House. Members of the upper House are entitled to vote, just as, I might add, Members of the SNP are entitled to vote on certain issues that affect only England, and I have observed them so doing on a number of occasions. I know that the hon. Gentleman wishes not to recognise the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. However, the people of his country chose otherwise in a once-in-a-generation referendum.

While we are on the subject, I have heard the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) say a couple of times that the SNP will have nothing to do with the unelected House of Lords. That is the SNP's prerogative, and the SNP is entitled to take that position, but I do think there is something rather sad about it, because the people of Scotland chose to stay in the United Kingdom, and the House of Lords remains part of the constitution of this kingdom. The SNP has deliberately chosen not to represent its views in the upper House, and that is unfortunate; it is a narrow view that is depriving SNP voters in Scotland of a say in the upper Chamber.

Neil Coyle: Does the Minister's sadness on that issue extend to those who seek to gag Church leaders from speaking about immigration? I am unaware of a nativity story that includes an innkeeper telling Mary and Joseph to take their donkey to Rwanda.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman specialises in jokes of poor taste. The Government certainly do not seek to gag bishops in any way. I take the view that I think he takes, which is that Members of the House of Lords should be free to talk about any issue that comes before them—even when I disagree with them. Obviously, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) takes a different view on that. I think it is important that people who sit in the Lords can speak their minds on any issue that comes before that House.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East raised points about how there was special pleading for the bishops in the Lords in one or two areas on privileges. As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire pointed out, while there is a custom and a convention, these are not rules. Indeed, the customs and conventions are often more honoured in the breach than the observance.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East mentioned party blocs. Again, what he said is not quite the case. Bishops are not consulted as a party bloc on new legislation before it is tabled, they are not recognised by officials as a party grouping and nor do they get a separate meeting with the Bill makers. That argument does not quite work.

On the code of conduct, although it is true that there is a slightly different code of conduct for bishops, that is also the case for Ministers of the Crown and Members who are employees of non-departmental public bodies. I do not quite follow the hon. Gentleman's arguments there.

The hon. Gentleman talked, quite rightly, about how the social mores of society have changed, and they have. The position of the bishops has also changed over time. The arguments he will hear bishops advocate today are very different from those he would have heard 50 or 100 years ago. Do bishops today reflect society? I think the hon. Gentleman said 14% of people in the United Kingdom are Anglicans. Only 3% of the Members of the House of Lords are Anglican bishops. If one wanted to go down that route—I am not encouraging anyone to do so—one would say that the Anglicans were under-represented.

I know that the point the hon. Gentleman was actually making was a serious one about the ex officio status of Members of the House of Lords. Going forward, that is fertile ground for discussion, and I thought we were in the foothills of that serious discussion. However, the hon. Member for Glasgow North chose to make this a bigger debate about the House of Lords in totality, and he and I have had that debate a couple of times.

I was trying to tease out SNP Members' position on an upper Chamber, should they get independence. I think I got three different answers. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East said that that will be decided as and when; the hon. Member for Glasgow North said we should abolish the upper House; and the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire said he would like to see an elected upper Chamber—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Here.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire says from a sedentary position that he would like to see an elected upper Chamber here. Let us address that point. From the Conservative party's perspective, the problem with an elected upper Chamber is that all the experience that people bring to the House of Lords—people who do not wish to be part of a political group and who have perhaps come to a stage in their career where they do not want to stand for election—would be lost. That would be a terrible shame, very much to the detriment of democracy in this country. A challenging and revising Chamber needs to be a Chamber of all the talents. The best way to get that is by having the system we currently have and making sure that people who would ordinarily not find their way into an elected House can have a stake and a place in our democracy.

Mr Sharma, I think the hon. Member for Edinburgh East would like to say a few words to sum up, so I will sit down.

3.18 pm

Tommy Sheppard: I am glad that this debate has at least brought to the fore in the Chamber those who wish to advocate on behalf of the Church of England, and they are right to do that. They can console themselves, perhaps, that I am not advocating a Cromwellian approach to this problem at least.

There is not sufficient time to deal with everything that has been said, but I want to stress that no one is suggesting that there is not a role for people of faith in our public life and in our Parliament. No one is suggesting that Anglicans should not be represented in the House of Lords or that bishops should not be in the House of Lords. In fact, 60% of the non-spiritual peers in the House of Lords identify as Christian, so it is hard to make an argument that that particular Church is under-represented in the upper Chamber. What we are talking about is whether this anachronistic situation of additional, guaranteed representation should exist for one Church and one institution alone, above all others.

I said earlier that I do not have a religious faith, but I want to give the last word in this discussion to someone who does: my friend and colleague Simon Barrow, the director of the Christian think-tank Ekklesia. He says—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of bishops in the House of Lords.

NATO Summit: Vilnius

3.10 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and NATO Summit 2023 in Vilnius.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I am very grateful for this debate, because it is important that the hard work that goes on across parties gets an airing in the House. To those watching our proceedings, I want to make the point that the NATO Parliamentary Assembly is a genuine, cross-party Assembly where party politics never comes into the discussion. People seek pragmatism. As leader of the United Kingdom delegation, I have the support of the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who is the deputy leader. That will one day switch, because the Government have the leadership and the Opposition have the deputy leadership, but everybody works very closely together. I also say to those watching that it is a highly experienced delegation; it includes many former Defence Ministers, Ministers of State at the Foreign Office, Secretaries of State and, indeed, hon. and gallant Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney). There is a wide spread and a lot of experience.

I should start by saying what the NATO Parliamentary Assembly is. It was established in 1955 to bring about political accountability. Above all, we are the political body of the allies. We have political discussions about how NATO should move forward, just as we have discussions about defence—most people would envisage NATO as a defence body. Overall, we contribute to several key areas of NATO policy. For instance, the Parliamentary Assembly made a large contribution to the NATO 2030 strategy, which was adopted in Madrid last year.

I chair the Defence and Security Committee, in which allied nations discuss particular defence areas. There is also the Political Committee, the Science and Technology Committee, and the Economics and Security Committee—all important Committees that look at different issues, go to various countries and deal with partner nations as well as allies. They help to form the global image of which NATO needs to be aware. From there, we can feed into and build to summits, such as that one that will take place next week.

As I said, the Parliamentary Assembly is a political body. The importance of soft power cannot be overestimated. The public will often see the high-level dealings of parliamentarians, leaders of countries and Ministers, and that is what gets reported. The leaders have civil servants with them, and everything is pre-arranged. The Assembly has, by its very nature, the advantage that we are all Back Benchers. Those Back Benchers come from all 31 allies and partner nations. That often allows us to build relationships and get into discussions about things that it may be more difficult to discuss at a higher level. For example, I have been in conversations, as have other members, about Sweden's and Finland's accession and Türkiye's concerns. We were able to discuss with our colleagues from Türkiye where the concerns lay.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does the right hon. Member agree that it was very important, post cold war, that the Assembly was able to bring in

[Mr Kevan Jones]

associate members from former eastern European countries, and build a political consensus in those countries to be part of the future accession to NATO?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He illustrates the political nature of the Assembly, which helped guide those newly formed democracies, as they were starting to flourish and develop in the early days, to ensure that they did not fall off the path to freedom, democracy, free speech and the other things that we recognise as key planks of NATO membership.

We are able to have conversations in the background with colleagues from other ally nations, can feed those back to our Governments, cross-party, and help move discussions forward. It should be recognised that the Swedes made enormous strides in addressing Türkiye's concerns. The soft power at play in the background at committees should not be underestimated.

I am sure that most Assembly colleagues would agree that the transatlantic relationship remains strong; there is strong support for NATO on Capitol Hill, but our Capitol Hill colleagues tell us that they have to constantly inform and make representations to new colleagues about the importance of NATO and what it does. It would therefore be wrong to say to America deals with that in a bubble. It is important that we show the importance of the relationship between north America and the Canadians, who I will speak more widely about later. This is truly still a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. The strength of the partnership has served us well for 75 years, and that cannot be overestimated.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. My right hon. Friend is making an extremely important point. Does he recognise that a live example is the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States, through which the Administration is pursuing an "America first" agenda? The challenges of that for allied nations can be pointed out to members of Congress and Senate in the United States, so that they better understand why a partnership on supply chains and investment programmes matters. They can then challenge the Administration, so that a better position can be developed, and so that when the Government seek to make trade deals, they do not undermine those efforts.

Alec Shelbrooke: At the transatlantic forum, which many of us with leadership positions take part in—it takes place in December, at Washington's National Defence University—American politicians saw for the first time, at first hand, the anger that had built across many European nations about the knock-on effects that the policy might have, not least the gaps that it could lead to in defence procurement and the development of technology. All Governments will often pursue an economic policy that fits with their national agenda, and not necessarily see the impacts elsewhere. The forum is another good example of soft power, because conversations can take place and can be fed back.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The underlying reality is that the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States is recognition that they, and the rest of the west, had allowed their industrial capacity to be hollowed out and

basically subverted, particularly by China, and they are rebuilding their industry. There might be discussions to be had, but should we not also recognise that industry is vital, not only for our economy but for our security? It is time for us to catch up.

Alec Shelbrooke: I agree with much of what the right hon. Gentleman said. That is a very good example of the fact that the Assembly is not afraid of being critical of Government policy. It is not afraid to be critical of Governments of any colour. The committees have been in the building for a long time.

I was about to come to the reports produced. A report produced by Defence and Security Committee is about ensuring an industrial base for the manufacture of defence equipment and munitions. I do not think it is a state secret any more, particularly as it got leaked on the internet by somebody in America, that there is real concern about the ability to rearm. The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) touched on the fact that industry has not created a constant supply line. My committee recognised that we must have that constant supply line, and industry must have the confidence to invest; I suspect that the Economics and Security Committee recognised the same. That is a good example of the work that has been done, and fed to leaders in advance of discussions that they must have at the Vilnius summit.

As we are all aware, we are involved in a war. It is not a war with NATO, but allies are supporting Ukraine, and doing everything we can to let it stand up for freedom and democracy, and to let the Ukrainian people choose how they live their life and who runs them. It is an important fight; it is the fight of democracy against autocracy and dictatorship. It has, however, posed real challenges. The Assembly is not afraid to highlight those challenges and ensure they are fed into discussions.

Reports become the body of the work of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. One issue reported on was the rapid evolution of Baltic security after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It has led to another very important political point. Everybody recognises article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty, which says that an attack on one is an attack on all, but it has become apparent to many—that this is being discussed in our Committees—that article 5 is not an emergency call. It is not a 999 call, or a 911 call, for those in America. It is about re-enforcement—the rapid reaction force, which takes three weeks to get there.

Article 3 says that a country must be able to defend itself first. That is why countries have moved forward with a forward defence presence; for example, there is the joint expeditionary force in the Baltic sea, and the 300,000 troops being lined up along the border, so that the tripwire is not tripped. That is a fundamental difference, because until the invasion of Crimea, NATO had shifted its perspective; it went from being a cold war defence organisation to being a political organisation. It was doing exceptionally important work, as the right hon. Member for North Durham pointed out, as countries from eastern Europe joined the path of democracy. After the invasion of Crimea, there was a switch to both roles being important. It is a tribute to NATO and its leadership that it was able to adapt to the change in geopolitical circumstances so quickly.

It is not just Members of the House of Commons who are members of the Assembly; five Members from the other place also make a great deal of effort.

Lord Lancaster from the other place, who is on my Committee, had his report, “Troubled waters—how Russia’s war in Ukraine changes Black sea security”, published. Security in the Black sea region has changed immensely.

I will take this opportunity to thank our allies in Türkiye for their incredible work; sometimes they do not get the credit they deserve. They are looked at in different ways. They enforced the Montreux treaty, which has stopped huge amounts of Russian maritime capital equipment making its way into the Black sea and creating an issue. They negotiated the export of grain; they are constantly patrolling the Black sea to defuse sea mines that have become dislodged; and they are very much protecting that area. Indeed, there are a lot of NATO allies around the Black sea, and they are in a tough region, as we can see from looking at their geographical neighbours. It shows the strength of the NATO alliance that we have countries from so many different parts of the world carrying out very specific roles.

I turn to the work of the Defence and Security Committee. When I took on the chairmanship, I wanted to look at maritime security. The High North is coming ever more to the fore. We recently conducted a visit to Canada, which was very much based around its naval training, because Canada is surrounded by three oceans yet has not invested in its maritime capability in the way that we would. Its Halifax-class frigates are slightly different from ours, and are being refurbished at 30 years old; that is the same age as our Type 23s, which we are retiring, yet they are being refurbished to take another 20 years at sea. There are interesting comparisons to be drawn in the alliance when it comes to procurement. We might consider what we are doing with the Royal Navy, and the modernisation and the technology that can be brought forward in the realm of the NATO maritime alliance.

Russia may not be able to control the oceans in the way that the Americans can, but it is exceptionally good in the arena that it operates in. That arena is increasingly becoming the High North, for them and for the Chinese, who are mapping the area, working out where they can push up and where they can exploit, and where the mineral resources lie. They are also investing heavily.

The Assembly has been able to identify and bring more to the fore the problems the Canadians face, not least permafrost. Permafrost is retreating in the High North, which is destroying military infrastructure, such as runways that have been relied on up to this time. NORAD—the North American Aerospace Defence Command—needs updating, and there are fuel supply depots that are not being used. We talk about the UK’s procurement struggles; we need to recognise that many allies have similar struggles. That again shows the strength of the alliance: we can come together to face what will become an ever-greater threat.

Russia has recognised that it needs to shift the ball, and there is an interesting conversation about the capability of its intercontinental ballistic nuclear missiles and whether it would use them. We have the policy of counterbalance, but it now has developed the Poseidon torpedo, which could by all accounts make its way underwater for six days to the coast of North America, explode a mile offshore with a nuclear warhead and create a tsunami. That changes the counterbalance, which is why, again, this alliance is so important. It is also why it is so

important that the UK renews Trident and the Dreadnought fleet, to make sure that counterbalance exists. That way, even if we do not know where the silos are, we know that there would be a response, and that would reduce the threat. If the Russians want to go down that road, let them, but they still have not got a free pass to do that, because we have the counterbalance.

More positively, NATO works on interoperability, and F-35s from the UK have been landing on Italian carriers. Such steps send out important messages to our foes—to the Russians, and to the Chinese in many ways—that NATO is not just a gathering of 31 countries with their own military equipment; it is building its interoperability. The interoperability offered by the F-35 marks a fundamental change in air support in the alliance.

I will conclude, to allow colleagues to contribute. As we approach the 75th anniversary of NATO, and talk here before the Vilnius summit, I think everyone in this Room would agree that NATO is more important than at any time. Only through these alliances and partnerships will we bring about the counterbalance needed to ensure that we can carry on living in freedom and democracy, which the people of Ukraine are fighting for with their life as we speak.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. I will call the Front Benchers at 3.58 pm. There is no time limit at the moment, but Members should keep that in mind. I call Kevan Jones.

3.30 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Sharma; what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing the debate. May I also say a big thank you to the Members of both Houses who serve on the UK NATO Parliamentary Assembly delegation? As the right hon. Gentleman said, I am the deputy leader of the delegation, and next year NATO will be 75 years of age. It was set up in the dark days after the second world war, with the inspiring leadership in the UK of individuals such as Ernie Bevin coming together to ensure that the horrors that faced us for two generations would never again be visited on Europe. Its fundamental aim was to protect the new rules-based order, democracy and the way of life that we have often come to take for granted.

In 1954, Dwight Eisenhower said:

“We do not keep security establishments merely to defend property or territory or rights abroad or at sea. We keep the security forces to defend a way of life.”

That is as relevant today as it was in 1954. The unprovoked Russian attack on the sovereign nation of Ukraine has brought that to stark attention. Some of the threats that we face are the same, with war sadly returning to the European mainland, but there are also new challenges that were not there 75 years ago, such as cyber, disinformation and new technological developments, which we need to keep ahead of to protect the way of life and democracy that the NATO nations strive to defend. Some people say that NATO is an aggressive alliance. It is not; it is a defensive alliance to protect the values that I have just outlined.

[Mr Kevan Jones]

I have been a member of the Assembly since 2017. I am currently also a vice-president, and until recently chaired its Science and Technology Committee. I will attend the summit in Vilnius next week on behalf of the NATO Assembly in my position as one of its vice-presidents. What does NATO face today? Clearly, there is the current threat from Russia in Ukraine, and the defence of the democratic values that I outlined. We need to reiterate our support for Ukraine next week in terms of ensuring success in defeating the unwarranted invasion of a sovereign European nation, and we must focus, as the right hon. Gentleman said, on refreshing our own defence settlements, including the accession of new nations, and ensuring that we not only get security guarantees for Ukraine but have a pathway to it becoming part of NATO.

Next week will be difficult, as it always is, in terms of not only ensuring that we reiterate the arguments for why NATO is important, but, importantly, ensuring that its defence and deterrence capabilities are renewed, to deter those who wish to do us harm. I am very disappointed that we have not had the Command Paper from the UK Government prior to the NATO summit. It seems strange that we will make various commitments next week in Vilnius but will then have a Command Paper that, I am told, will be out towards the end of the month.

There are two aspects next week in Vilnius that the NATO Parliamentary Assembly agreed at its spring session in Luxembourg. The first is a united resolution to continue to support the people and Government of Ukraine, and to make sure that we have more integration between NATO, the EU and NATO partner nations on providing the political, military intelligence, financial, training and humanitarian support for Ukraine to prevail and restore the territorial integrity it needs. It is also about how we up the ante and make sure that the military equipment the Ukrainians require is speedily delivered to them.

The other resolution that we passed and sent to the conference was about the Wagner Group—which has been in the headlines in the past few weeks—highlighting that that is a terrorist and criminal organisation. We also need to look at how we can get more integration, and not just in Europe, because the threats are now wider. How do we respond to China, for example?

Alec Shelbrooke: I notice that we have a Foreign Office Minister with us today. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the recalcitrance of the Foreign Office about proscribing the Wagner Group is disappointing?

Mr Jones: I do. The right hon. Gentleman and I went to the Foreign Office last year, and we know well the lack of interest there in the NATO PA, which is a marked contrast with every other nation represented there.

Another important resolution we have next week follows a commitment by Congressman Gerry Connolly when he was President of the NATO PA. It is about reinforcing the idea that NATO is there to protect democracy and the rules-based order. His suggestion, which was adopted last year, was that we should have a unit within NATO to make sure not only that we talk about democratic values and the rules-based order, but

that we can promote them throughout our nations, similar to the way we did that during the cold war. That will be important.

For people who do not understand the Parliamentary Assembly, we have a direct say about what NATO does. I chaired the Science and Technology Committee for four years, and we have a very good relationship with the NATO chief scientist, Dr Bryan Wells, who has taken on board some issues and the reports we did on hypersonics and new technologies, and on ensuring that we can get some of the new technologies distributed across NATO. The Parliamentary Assembly is a valuable forum, because it makes the case for NATO, as well as bringing together parliamentarians from across NATO. As I said, post the cold war, when the Berlin wall came down, the PA was vital for building important relationships between parliamentarians from the former eastern European bloc, so that they could work on their accession strategy for NATO membership, and this was about underpinning the importance of democracy.

I look forward to taking part in the NATO summit in Vilnius next week and being, as we all are on the Parliamentary Assembly, the political and democratic voice of NATO. I think we need to argue more and more for why NATO is important, because it went into abeyance after the cold war. It has now been brought into sharp focus because of what has happened in Ukraine and it is in the public's consciousness. NATO is not just a military alliance; it is underpinned by democracy. Having parliamentarians as part of that process is an important way of showing that it is a democratic organisation that not only has, at times, difficult discussions but promotes the rules-based order and democracy, against the alternatives of those who would not only do us harm but destroy the system that we have grown to love over the last 70 years.

3.40 pm

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my Yorkshire colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke)—the leader of the UK delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—on securing this important debate. As a Royal Air Force veteran, I am particularly proud to serve on the UK delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and I am delighted to take part in this debate.

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly has a critical role in building multilateral relations across Europe and the entirety of our alliance, and it is fitting that we recognise that. The Assembly is an essential link between NATO and the Parliaments of NATO member states. The Assembly has remarkable success in achieving its core principles: fostering dialogue among parliamentarians on major security issues; facilitating parliamentary awareness of key alliance policies; providing NATO and its member Governments with an indication of collective parliamentary opinion; providing greater transparency of NATO policies, as well as collective accountability; and strengthening our transatlantic relationship.

NATO is not just the bedrock of British security but the guarantor of peace for almost all of Europe. Following the cold war, many questioned whether NATO still had a role to play in the modern world, but with British tanks in Estonia, American HIMARS donated to Ukraine

and the recent accession of Finland, with Sweden soon to follow, we can clearly see just how relevant NATO remains today.

I am incredibly proud of the UK's track record on our place in NATO. We consistently meet the 2% defence spending target and have the most advanced aircraft carriers at sea today, forming a vital part of NATO's blue-water capacity. Our soldiers are proud to take part in the rapid response force, the joint expeditionary force, which is ready to deploy anywhere, at any time, to defend our alliance.

More widely, NATO and the Parliamentary Assembly have been resolute in our protection of British values at home and abroad. There have been repeated commitments to a NATO centre for democratic resilience over the years. I look forward to its implementation, so that democracy is defended not just militarily but socially from the disinformation campaigns of countries such as Russia, Iran and China, which seek to paint NATO as an aggressor rather than what it really is: a community of like-minded free nations that want to be defended against aggression.

It is clear that our digital and democratic resilience will be critical to our security in the years to come. Through fantastic bodies such as the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, we can work together to fight autocratic encroachment into our institutions. The upcoming summit in Lithuania is a chance for us to discuss what our vision is, not just for NATO, but for Ukraine in NATO. I believe fundamentally that we have to continue to help and support Ukraine as much as humanly possible in its heroic fight against the unwarranted and illegal Russian invasion. While being aware of the importance of not escalating things further, we have to send the clear message to anyone who would seek to start a war in Europe: "You will pay dearly, and you will not succeed."

I am certain that in Vilnius, the British representative, accompanied by our Prime Minister, will make the case for deepening our bilateral and multilateral relations across the alliance, and keeping up the pressure among our allies to continue our support for Ukraine. Our message at this conference to our allies and Ukraine should be really clear: give them the tools and they will finish the job.

3.45 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. As we are dealing with defence matters, it is worth noting that your predecessor was the last serving member of the British Army to have served in this House.

I congratulate the leader of our delegation, the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), on securing this debate. It has highlighted once again that, whereas in the popular mindset NATO is seen as a military alliance, it is fundamentally very much a political alliance, and was right at the beginning. It was created in response to political events.

When one reads Ernie Bevin's justification for NATO, it is interesting to see that he stresses the extent to which they tried to secure political agreement with the Soviets for the management of Europe after the second world war, not just in Germany, Berlin or Austria, but across Europe. They were perpetually frustrated and eventually understood, particularly after all the political and military coups that took place across eastern Europe, that they

needed collective security against the threat, and that they needed not only a military, but a political organisation. It is right that the Foreign Office leads the debate, because it leads in NATO. That, again, demonstrates the fundamentally political nature of the alliance. It is, of course, backed up by hard power and our nuclear deterrent, but it is underpinned by industrial and societal issues.

I have always taken an interest in manufacturing and defence industry matters—probably because of my previous incarnation as a national officer in a major industrial union—and, interestingly, that is now very much a mainstream debate inside the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and in the various capitals of NATO countries. There is a real role for Parliaments to get engaged, as hon. Members have mentioned. Countries will be looking at rebuilding their own industrial capacity but, even within the United States, there is recognition that no one country can do that alone.

Diversity of supply from secure and trusted suppliers is enormously important. That is true about fundamental materials—even this week, countries were finding China cutting off various materials to chip makers—but it runs right the way through. Sometimes, among the less well informed, the debate has focused on the high end, such as computer chips, but basic, fundamental industrial capacity in the form of foundries and drop forging is enormously important in maintaining capacity. The struggle in Ukraine has highlighted that importance.

There is a lot of catching up to do. Our Government are doing some of it but, to my mind, they are still being so slow. There is no point in criticising Joe Biden and the Administration in Washington for rebuilding their industrial capacity. We should work with them, and we should also work across Europe. There is a regrettable tendency within the EU bureaucracy to try to make this an exclusive EU function, more as a political operation than a defence and industrial one. It is hugely important that the UK, the EU, and the United States and Canada look at how we can best co-operate to ensure that we can supply our troops not only in normal times, but in times of crisis and emergency.

Alec Shelbrooke: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this mindset has to be present across all Departments and all Governments at the top? There is a reason why we need warehouses full of billions of pounds' worth of equipment, and it is not just, "Let's get that off the accounting books." What has been shown is just how vital it is.

John Spellar: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is also about industrial capacity to replace that equipment. There are some real debates to be had about the associated costs and capacity, but that is much better done with proper understanding of specialisations. That should also involve our friends in Australia through the AUKUS agreement, which will be important for the UK and the role we can play with our European colleagues.

There is also the battle for hearts and minds inside Europe, which goes right the way back to the founding of NATO. Sometimes there is a misplaced focus on technology. People talk about being able to use Facebook and various parts of social media. Those skills are important, but, as Rupert Murdoch said about the entertainment industry, in the end, content is king. That is the important thing. That is where we very much need

[John Spellar]

to sharpen our act, or rather recreate the capacities that we used to have. After all, in the second world war we had the Political Warfare Executive, which was probably one of the most outstanding information and disinformation operations. We seem to have moved backwards from that.

We are up against an opponent for whom politics is everything. In both Russia and China, Lenin still rules OK. Politics absolutely dominates the scene. That is where the NATO PA comes in, because we are able to bring the democratic arguments. Congressman Gerry Connolly's work on putting the defence and advancement of democracy right at the heart of NATO was rightly referenced, but we also have to develop those capacities.

Both the EU and NATO have done some work on disinformation, but we have to up our game. We have to rediscover that. We have to create the mechanisms in Government that can co-operate with other countries in NATO, and with representatives in the NATO PA, in order to take the fight to authoritarians or their fellow travellers across the world, not to prevent the battle of machines but to win the battle of the hearts and minds. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly has a crucial role to play in that.

3.53 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. I thank the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for bringing forward this debate ahead of next week's summit.

As someone who spent a brief time on the NATO PA and longer on the Defence Committee, I am no stranger to these debates. The issues of the High North and the north Atlantic were a constant litany from me when I was on the Committee, which I am sure the right hon. Members for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Warley (John Spellar) were too aware of. One issue that I constantly raised was the north Atlantic command. It sadly did not come to the UK; it went to Norfolk in the United States, but it was welcome to see that gap being filled after some substantial time.

As ever in such debates, there is an unusual amount of agreement from all sides. I hope to continue in that spirit. Any illusion we had of living on a peaceful continent has been shattered. The conference itself is an ideal moment for us to reiterate the commitment to ensuring that Ukraine specifically has whatever economic and military aid it needs, not only to repel the Russian invasion but to restore its pre-2014 boundaries. We know that one calculation that President Putin made when proceeding with his disastrous strategy was that Europe and the western allies were too divided to really care about Ukraine and its people. I am glad to say that he not only has been proven spectacularly wrong in that regard, but he has spurred such a precipitous move away from economic dependence on Russia that with each passing day he loses the ability to divide our societies in the way he once did. Just as it will be no surprise to all those here today who have heard me opine on Ukraine over the years, so it should be no surprise to those watching the debate from the Russian embassy that although there may be innumerable subjects on which this House does not unanimously agree, this is certainly not one of them.

One thing that we will be hoping to see at the summit—I hope that Members agree—is a move towards some sort of NATO membership action plan for Ukraine. Obviously, the same caveats apply as we might see elsewhere, but a direction of travel, I think, must be established. When talking about these scenarios, it is always, of course, article 5 that is given the most attention. I think that the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell mentioned it in his opening speech, but in Ukraine's case we can clearly hope to proceed with aid and mutual assurance along the lines of articles 2 and 3. Article 2 refers to

“the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being.”

Article 3 states that

“the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.”

We are moving well along the track of article 3 without necessarily acknowledging it, but we will not achieve anything if we do not ensure that Ukrainian civil society and the country's institutions receive just as much attention as the deliveries of Storm Shadow missiles. I hope, therefore, that last month's conference here in this city will become an annual event even after Crimea is liberated from the clutches of Vladimir Putin.

Part of the strengthening of free institutions among our NATO allies is of course the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I am glad that it is getting the recognition that it deserves in the debate today. Multilateral institutions like NATO can often be disparaged; I think that the right hon. Member for Warley alluded to that. They can be disparaged as “parasitic or pointless”, to quote Anne Applebaum's excellent profile of the Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, in the latest edition of *The Atlantic* magazine. What the Parliamentary Assembly does is bring the democracies that constitute the alliance, however messy and imperfect they may be, to the leading edge of what makes NATO important and of its strength. I think that, far from its democratic nature being a drag, events such as the invasion have demonstrated how, although autocracies may notionally be able to move quicker, NATO is, to quote Applebaum's article again, one of the

“force multipliers that function better than the autocracies run by strongmen.”

This is because when NATO and similar multilateral institutions make a decision, they tend to stick to it. The other democratic aspect of NATO that we often overlook is the fact that it is a consensus organisation: Iceland and the recent member, Montenegro, have as much say on the North Atlantic Council as the United States or, indeed, the UK.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I note that the hon. Gentleman said that he was previously a member of the Parliamentary Assembly. I am one of the newest members, but I want to pick up on what he is saying about the leadership. The UK leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) is absolutely outstanding. We also have other members who are very experienced and people who have been Members of both Houses, such

as Lord Campbell and Lord Anderson of Swansea. That makes for the extremely important soft power role that we have, and I think that the consensus is very much down to the leadership of all those members.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I certainly agree with the right hon. Member. I will not disagree—especially about the right hon. Member for North Durham, because he is sitting behind me.

Valerie Vaz: There is also Lord Hamilton. I have just been corrected by my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar).

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I will not disagree with that either. I may not be a fan of the way in which the other House is appointed, but I know that Members there certainly have a role in the parliamentary process.

As I was saying, Iceland and Montenegro have as much say in the North Atlantic Council as the United States or the UK—this is where I might disagree with some Members, because whenever I hear committed Brexiteers waxing lyrical about NATO membership, I am always tempted to ask if they would not prefer to have the qualified majority voting of the EU. The consensus approach makes the choice of a Secretary-General so fraught and unpredictable, which is why someone who has proven to be such a reliable leader of the alliance will continue to be the best choice going forward.

I am of course biased in favour of a social democratic politician from an unequivocally non-nuclear northern European state who can lead NATO with such understated authority. That is precisely the sort of multilateralism that my party and I like to see. We are not alone, however. The Secretary-General is expected to be confirmed in post for at least another year.

I will take a brief moment to break from the consensus, in particular on the recent speculation about the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. and gallant Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), being put forward for the Secretary-General role—I have ensured that he knows I am naming him, albeit in a good fashion. Being someone who has come up against him and his predecessors at first hand, I can certainly say that the Secretary of State stands head and shoulders above them as a man who has not shrunk from the myriad challenges in his Department. Although I may not have always agreed with him, he has played mainly with a straight bat when dealing with Parliament and with No. 10, who I am sure do not consider him to be one of the nodding dogs that they prefer to fill the Cabinet with.

As we were reminded just last week, the Secretary of State is the most popular Cabinet Minister among the Tory rank and file, a man who had to fend off nominations to be Prime Minister. Anyone behind a campaign that had between zero and heehaw's chance in succeeding deserves a court martial at the very least. That is not because the Secretary of State is unsuitable—not at all—but because this is a critical moment for the issue of NATO and the EU, and there is no chance that a UK candidate could hope to succeed at this time. That is important to the overall debate about the role of the Assembly.

I read the *Telegraph's* so-called exclusive this week that the White House would prefer to have the President of the European Commission succeed Secretary-General Stoltenberg, but it was hardly the shock that some people think, especially given the current US presidential Administration. I therefore make one slightly discordant plea not to put us through this every year: states that cannot—some would say—unequivocally support the twin pillars of European-Atlantic security will never find consensus behind them.

Before I get accused of being simply a petty Scottish nationalist, I have to say that that is a fact that not only the UK, but France and Germany may have to get used to as well. In various ways, each of the largest European states has demonstrated that in different ways, but they cannot rely on the weight of the past, especially with both the EU and NATO having expanded so much. In this debate, we have inevitably focused on UK contributions to Ukraine, but often it has been the countries of central and eastern Europe that have done the heaviest lifting, not least Estonia, which has spent the largest amount of per capita GDP on bilateral aid. Let me declare a non-pecuniary interest as the co-chair of the all-party group on Estonia.

We in the Scottish National party believe—as do the Government of Ukraine—that the two pillars of European security are NATO and, for us at least, the EU. I am afraid that I am the only person who is able to be so unequivocal in my summing-up speech, although having to state that is pretty incredible. Let us wish, too, for tangible progress on the future of Ukrainian membership, along with a reiteration of the fact that our support for Ukraine will last longer than the Russian invasion with its heavy losses can—the Russians will continue to experience those until they leave Ukraine.

4.4 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Sharma.

I thank the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing the debate and all Members for their valuable contributions, in particular members and former members of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I also thank the right hon. Member for his role in leading the UK's delegation to the Assembly and all who play a role in our discussions in this place on the crucial importance of NATO.

The alliance is incredibly important to me and my family. My father and many members of my family have served in NATO operations around the world and in Europe in many different decades. The alliance of course was founded out of the horrors of the second world war. Having had a grandfather come from the United States to fight the Nazis, with my other grandfather fighting in Arnhem, it is a deep and personal commitment for me.

This is obviously a consequential moment for NATO as we approach the 75th anniversary. It is welcome to see colleagues engaging with the political aspects and intentions of the alliance so constructively and thoughtfully. I want to begin by making it clear that Labour's commitment to NATO is unshakable, as is our resolute commitment to the nuclear deterrent, which is of course a critical part of our contribution to the alliance. I have had the honour of seeing NATO training and operations

[Stephen Doughty]

in person around the world. I visited NATO HQ last year. I saw NATO operations in Kosovo and was recently in Canada where we discussed many aspects and reflected on the points that the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell brought up today, including his points around the Arctic.

Labour is a party of NATO. Labour's values of democracy, freedom and peace are embedded in NATO's founding treaty. One of Labour's proudest achievements is its role as the UK Government at the time in founding the alliance and as a signatory to the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. We have seen NATO go forward as the foundation and bedrock of our security and national interest, central to global efforts to achieve security and peace, and in the current context opposing the warped imperial ambitions of Putin's Russia and its barbarous war in Ukraine. All of us as parliamentarians have a role to play in ensuring a united voice from this House on NATO, and that has been evident by the comments today.

As we have heard, the Assembly is critical to furthering transatlantic relations, to assisting the development of parliamentary democracy in the Euratlantic region, and to ensuring that we seek co-operation and engagement, including outside the NATO members and including areas such as the Caucasus and around the Mediterranean as well. There is a debate in the main Chamber at the moment on the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, whose annual general meeting I attended yesterday.

All of these bodies, whether it is the CPA, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly or the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and many others, are crucial in strengthening the person-to-person ties of parliamentarians and ensuring that the values that we all share—democracy, the rule of law, conflict and atrocity prevention, the protection of human rights and the protection of our defence and security—remain at the heart of all that we do.

At a time of democratic backsliding across our own continent, the tides of authoritarianism that have been referred to by many Members today are reverberating through our direct neighbourhoods and indeed globally. With real direct threats to Britain's national security and that of our allies posing a real and lasting risk, relations between parliamentarians are critical to ensure that we exchange the best ideas, best practice and understanding of the threats that we face. As I have made repeatedly clear when I have met NATO allies and counterparts in different countries across the alliance, our NATO allies' borders are our borders. The commitment to the article 5 principle and the other principles of the founding treaty are absolutely unshakable and we need to understand that going forward.

The Assembly has also played a crucial role in the operation of NATO and informing the activities of the alliance going forward. For example, in relation to the summit next week, I know that the recommendations that the Assembly has come up with are both considered and thoughtful, whether boosting awareness of the systemic challenges posed by China or increasing and expediting allied support for Ukraine, and of course the very live discussions around efforts to ensure moves towards Ukrainian membership of NATO. We in the Opposition support a pathway for Ukraine to achieve that. I want to reiterate thanks to colleagues on the

delegation and all those who take part in the Assembly for supplementing the operation of the alliance more broadly.

On next week's summit in Vilnius, I have already said that on the critical issue of Ukraine, we believe that Britain should play a leading role in securing Ukraine a path to join NATO. Ukraine will rightly define many of the discussions at this year's summit. It is welcome to see that Defence Ministers have already agreed to plans that will establish a high readiness force of 300,000 troops. The multi-year package of support for Ukraine will be offered, and there will be a new rotational model for air and missile defence. Will the Minister say a little about the number of UK troops that will be included in such a high readiness force and what part we will play in that overall multi-year package?

Of course, Vilnius will be the first summit at which Finland will be present as a full member of the alliance, and we have strongly welcomed that move since the application was made. Putin falsely thought that he could fracture NATO; instead, he brought us together. The new applications have been very welcome. As the Minister knows, questions remain over the timing of Sweden's joining the alliance. We thoroughly support its membership, and I spoke with some Swedish colleagues in recent weeks about their hopes for Sweden to join the alliance as a full member. Where have discussions got to with our strong allies in Türkiye and in places such as Hungary, which have expressed objections? Is he optimistic about a pathway for Sweden to join the alliance? We must ensure that the UK strongly supports its application.

Let me say something about the crucial role that our armed forces play in relation to NATO operations, in terms of both training and operations on the ground. We need to ensure that our armed forces are ready and able to play the full role that they have often played in the past. The Opposition have fully supported the steps that the Government have taken regarding Ukraine and regarding many other aspects of enhancing NATO security at this time of disruption and threat on our own continent, but I share the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones): we have been calling for defence plans to be rebooted since March 2022, and the Government promised that there would be a defence Command Paper in June, but no such plans have been released. That means that the Prime Minister will attend Vilnius without a clear agenda and strategy for how to go forward post the developments of the last year. That surely falls short of what our allies and partners expect. I hope that the Minister can say something about that.

I also echo the comments of the shadow Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who has made it clear that, despite the rising threat to our national security and that of our allies, our armed forces are working with fewer troops and without the equipment that they need to properly fulfil our NATO obligations. Since 2010, the Government have cut the size of the Army by 25,000 full-time troops to 76,000, and despite the proliferation of threats, Ministers will cut it further, to 73,000 troops, by 2025. That is the smallest British Army since the Napoleonic wars. I draw attention to my past declarations in that regard.

Will the Minister relay to the Secretary of State for Defence that there is an incontrovertible nexus between the strength of our conventional armed forces and our

ability to contribute fully to NATO obligations, on which there is a great deal of unity in this room? We have to ensure that we are putting the troops and equipment in place to do that. There have been delays and mismanagement in a number of vital defence contracts. We have heard about Ajax again in recent weeks, and there are also the E-7 Wedgetail surveillance planes and a number of other issues. The Opposition are clear that Ministers must adopt Labour's plan for a NATO test of major defence programmes, establish a stockpiling strategy to replenish reserves and sustain support for Ukraine.

In conclusion, I again express my sincere thanks to the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell for his comments and for securing the debate, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members present for their comments. Although there is a growing threat from other global powers and challenges in other parts of the world, the biggest and most immediate threats facing the United Kingdom remain in the NATO sphere of operations in Europe and the north Atlantic, including in places such as the Arctic. We must ensure that we are not only a leading contributor to NATO in terms of personnel and defence matériel, but a key leader in the alliance diplomatically and politically, as has been emphasised many times today. The role of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which includes Members of this place, will remain critical to that.

4.13 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. You and I more usually come across each other in the International Development Committee, of which you are one of the most experienced members; it is very nice not to be under your forensic interrogation today but to have you as the Chair of this debate.

I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing this debate and for leading the UK delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Luxembourg in May. As I think he and others pointed out, we approach the 75th anniversary of NATO at a time when we are also commemorating the 75th anniversary of the NHS. Both organisations protect and look after us, and both are hugely respected and valued.

The assembly plays a vital role in strengthening the transatlantic alliance and the values that underpin it; it is also a crucial link with the democracies that comprise it. At the outset of this debate, I express on behalf of the Government, and indeed the House, our gratitude and admiration for the hard work, vigour, intellect, skill and experience that those Members who serve on the assembly so self-evidently bring to their work.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Europe wanted to take part in this debate, but he is currently travelling on ministerial duties, so he has kindly delegated responsibility upwards to me. It is therefore my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. I am grateful for the contributions of all hon. Members, and I will try to respond throughout my speech to the points that have been made.

At this early point, however, perhaps I could just acknowledge the brilliant speeches that have been made. After my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell, we had the right hon. Member for North

Durham (Mr Jones), who explained why NATO is such an important organisation. He underlined the importance of parliamentarians being involved with NATO. He asked about the proscribing of the Wagner Group—a point that my right hon. Friend also made. I should perhaps explain that the Wagner Group is directly connected to the Russian state, and we have designated both the Wagner Group and its leader under our sanctions regime. I assure the right hon. Member for North Durham and other hon. Members that we keep the list of proscribed organisations under review. The right hon. Gentleman will, I know, accept that it is not Government policy to comment on whether a group is under consideration for sanctions, but he and other right hon. and hon. Members may rest assured that his points have been carefully noted today.

The right hon. Gentleman also raised the question of the Defence Command Paper refresh, and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who leads for the Opposition on these matters, similarly raised the issue. Without getting into the details, which are probably not for me to talk about today, I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that it will be published before the summer recess, and I very much hope that he will approve of what it says.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) also underlined the importance of NATO and expressed the enormous regard in which we hold for our armed forces for their great skill. He mentioned the work in Estonia, where my old regiment—the 1st Royal Tank Regiment, which is now the only royal tank regiment—has served with such great distinction. He was also eloquent in his condemnation of Russia.

The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), who is my near parliamentary neighbour, spoke a lot of sense today, as he nearly always does. I will ensure that the kind comments of the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) about the Defence Secretary are brought to his attention.

Valerie Vaz: The Minister has been an excellent exponent of soft power during his ministerial career. Does he agree that it is good news that the Secretary-General of NATO has had his mandate extended for a further year?

Mr Mitchell: In all these situations, we always want a seamless and effective arrangement for any transfers of chairmanships, and I obviously understand the point the right hon. Lady makes.

Turning to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, who speaks for the Opposition, I want to acknowledge, at this critical moment, the rock-solid unity of view that he expressed on behalf of the Opposition. It is important, particularly now, that our absolute identity of interest in the current situation in Ukraine is so clearly expressed, and he did that with great eloquence.

There were a number of comments about what the Defence Secretary might say about the armed forces as they stand today, and I did take the trouble to find out what he would say in these circumstances. His past response was:

“The Government have injected more than £29 billion of additional funding into defence since 2020, investing in Army modernisation, major platforms such as Type 26, Type 31, Challenger 3 and F-35, and restocking of ammunition”—[*Official Report*, 26 June 2023; Vol. 735, c. 4.]

[Mr Mitchell]

to ensure that we have some of the finest armed forces in the world. I would echo my right hon. Friend's comments in that respect.

NATO remains the cornerstone of the United Kingdom's defence and security policy. Our unwavering commitment to the alliance was confirmed in the "Integrated Review Refresh", which we published earlier this year. NATO leaders, at their summit in Vilnius next week, will be ensuring that it is a key and important moment as the alliance transforms to meet the changing threat from Russia.

Putin's illegal war poses an historic challenge to Euro-Atlantic security. It is also doing huge damage to many of the nations in the global south, which are seeing a deterioration in food supplies and nutritional support, as well as rising inflation at a time when 70 million people are being pushed back into extreme poverty and 50 million are in serious danger of entering famine crisis conditions.

NATO is responding with iron-clad unity in support of Ukraine and by bolstering every flank of its operations. At last year's NATO summit in Madrid, alliance members coalesced around the need to stand with Ukraine and to stand up to Russian aggression. We also agreed to accelerate work to transform the ability of the alliance to meet evolving threats.

The Vilnius summit will further bolster NATO's support for Ukraine and will mark a major milestone for the alliance's once-in-a-generation enhancement of its war-fighting plans and capabilities. Putin's illegal war will, of course, naturally dominate talks in Vilnius, and, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear in his speech at the Munich security conference, our priority is to ensure that NATO shows Russia and the Ukrainian people that it will stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine in the short, medium and long term.

Alliance members will demonstrate that commitment in Vilnius by convening the first NATO-Ukraine council, which will provide an ongoing mechanism to strengthen political and military ties with Ukraine. We will increase NATO's practical support through the comprehensive assistance package for Ukraine, which will continue to meet Ukraine's urgent needs, in addition to facilitating longer-term interoperability with NATO, with projects including medical rehabilitation and military interoperability. We will also send a clear political signal that Ukraine has a future place in the alliance.

NATO has undertaken a once-in-a-generation military transformation to enhance its deterrence and defence. It has transformed itself in response to the evolving threats across the Euro-Atlantic, meaning that we are better prepared for the security challenges of today and tomorrow. The alliance has developed a new generation of war-fighting plans, supported by more high-readiness forces, more pre-positioned equipment and upgraded systems, which will allow us to respond faster to all threats.

I was asked about the number of British troops who may form part of that newly announced force. We do not comment on numbers, but hon. and right hon. Members may rest assured that Britain will be fully playing its role at this vital time. Political leaders will sign off on those new plans in Vilnius and make a new defence investment pledge to make spending 2% of GDP on defence an immediate and hard floor, rather

than a ceiling. Members will also agree a defence production action plan, which will increase industrial co-operation between allies and reduce barriers to interoperability in key munitions.

NATO allies will also use the summit to address NATO's wider transformation. Allies will agree new resilience objectives, which will strengthen national military and defence capabilities across the membership. We will recommit to the cyber-defence pledge that is raising cyber-security standards across the membership. We will also agree to enhance our co-operation to secure our undersea infrastructure, including through the new maritime security centre for critical undersea infrastructure, which NATO recently agreed to establish at Northwood in the UK.

Stephen Doughty: I was glad to hear the Minister mention cyber and other related capabilities. We obviously have leading capability in that area and work closely with our allies. Will he be able to say a little about what we will do with our allies on artificial intelligence, in terms of both the potential benefits and our resilience and defence? If he cannot say anything today, perhaps he could write to us.

Mr Mitchell: I will come to that in a moment, because I am conscious of time.

Although Russia is the most significant and direct threat to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, it is one of myriad evolving threats on the horizon, which is partly why the hon. Gentleman just made those comments. In response to those threats, NATO has committed to a joined-up, 360-degree approach, building on the combined strength of alliance members. We remain fully committed to supporting Sweden's NATO accession. While we may not get it over the line in the very near future, its membership will make allies safer, NATO stronger and the Euro-Atlantic more secure.

On NATO's eastern flank, we are working to enhance support to Moldova, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to equip them to tackle Russia's malign interference. To the south, we are working with partners to understand and respond to evolving challenges, such as terrorism, co-operation on migration and increasing strategic competition. On both the eastern and southern flanks, NATO is reaching out to non-alliance members to enhance our co-operation in areas where it can bolster our mutual security. NATO also takes that approach to the Indo-Pacific, whose security is inextricably linked to that of the Euro-Atlantic.

I am pleased to report that the leaders of Japan, Australia, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand will join talks in Vilnius, and the UK Government will continue to champion such co-operation. We will also push NATO to engage more with international and regional organisations. A top priority is our work to ensure that NATO and the EU are leveraging their complementary tools, and working together effectively. We have certainly been encouraged by progress this year on joint NATO-EU work on the resilience of our critical infrastructure.

The NATO summit in Vilnius will be a shot in the arm for Ukraine's defence of its territorial integrity. It will demonstrate to Russians and Ukrainians that NATO will support Ukraine in the short, medium and long term. The summit will be the culmination of years of

work to ensure that NATO's deterrence effect is fit for the threats that we face today, and those on the horizon. It will also provide impetus to NATO's partnerships around the world, ensuring that the alliance and those who work with it are stronger together.

John Spellar: The Front-Bench spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), asked about AI, and I raised the question of information warfare, which is about not just technology but generating the message and understanding the environment in which that is done.

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He will forgive me if, in the interests of time—I suspect that my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell will want a word—I do not answer that now, but I will write to him and others who have attended the debate.

The UK's commitment to NATO is ironclad and unwavering. It is evident at every level of our engagement with our allies—in Brussels and in capitals across the Euro-Atlantic, and between our Parliaments. I reiterate our gratitude to my right hon. Friend and to all delegates from both Houses, who will continue to provide UK

leadership at the Parliamentary Assembly, and who help to ensure that NATO remains the most effective and powerful guardian of collective security anywhere in the world.

4.28 pm

Alec Shelbrooke: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. I am extremely grateful that we were able to show the work of the NATO PA. Anybody who is observing our proceedings can see all the reports on NATO-PA.int, because we are a completely open body with open source material. The reports that we produce go on to form important lessons. It is important that the public recognise the work that goes on constantly at a political level to support and defend democracy and freedom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and NATO Summit 2023 in Vilnius.

4.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 6 July 2023

TREASURY

Armed Forces and Firefighters Pension Schemes

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Public service pension schemes (PSPS) are a crucial and valued part of public sector remuneration. One of the valuable features of these defined-benefit schemes is provisions to ensure that accrued pensions of active and deferred members are adjusted at a rate set out in statute that is not dependent on investment returns. Depending on the scheme of which they are a member, the accrued pension of an active member of the career average revalued earnings (CARE) PSPS introduced from 2014 and 2015 is revalued each year by an amount equal to the change in CPI, CPI+X% or average weekly earnings (AWE).

The process for this revaluation is set out at section 9 of the Public Service Pensions Act (PSPA) 2013. This legislation specifies that it is achieved through a Treasury order made in each year for the period, which

“may determine the change in prices or earnings in any period by reference to the general level of prices or earnings estimated in such manner as the Treasury consider appropriate.”

In practice, accrued pensions of active PSPS members have been revalued in April of each year based on Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates of the September-to-September increase in CPI for the previous year for most schemes, or based on ONS estimates of the September-to-September increase in AWE for the 2015 firefighters’ pension scheme (FPS) in England and its devolved equivalents and the 2015 armed forces pension scheme (AFPS). ONS practice is to publish each year a provisional AWE figure for the September-to-September increase in November, followed by a revised figure in December.

During work leading up to the laying of the Treasury revaluation order published in April 2023, it was noted that the Treasury revaluation orders for 2021 and 2022 specified an AWE figure based on provisional ONS figures, rather than revised ONS figures, which had been used in previous Treasury revaluation orders from 2015 to 2020. Although the legislation setting out the revaluation of PSPS does not specify a figure of AWE growth to be used for the purposes of revaluation, it is the Government’s view that the previous practice of using revised ONS estimates should have been maintained in 2021 and 2022. The Government thus intend to correct the position affecting those currently active, deferred and pensioner members who were in active service in one of the affected PSPS at any point between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2022. This will ensure all members receive the correct amount of pension. For a member who was in active service throughout the entire period, their accrued pension up to 31 March 2022 will be up to around 0.6% larger following this change. This change in pension value will not affect the benefit entitlement of those who were active members of the legacy pension schemes for the armed forces or firefighters during the years in question if they choose legacy design benefits under the upcoming choice exercise to remedy the discrimination identified by the McCloud/Sargeant litigation.

The corrected pension benefit amounts for affected PSPS members will be provided through scheme regulations made under section 3(2)(a) of the PSPA 2013. As these regulations will be specific to the affected schemes, they will be consulted on and legislated for by the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence for the 2015 FPS England and the 2015 AFPS respectively. It will be for the Scottish and Welsh Governments to make similar changes to firefighters’ pension schemes in those countries. The FPS in Northern Ireland is fully devolved; therefore, it will be for the relevant authorities there to take forward any similar change for the FPS in Northern Ireland.

The revised position and regulation change announced in this statement will only uplift an affected PSPS member’s accrued benefits. The Government intend to consult and legislate to implement these changes as quickly as is feasible.

[HCWS921]

EDUCATION

Academies: Commissioning Guidance

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Today my noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System and Student Finance (Baroness Barran), has made the following statement:

Today, 6 July, the Department for Education has published the guidance document, “Commissioning High-Quality Trusts: How the Department for Education’s Regions Group takes decisions about the creation, consolidation and growth of academy trusts”.

The guidance will improve the consistency and transparency with which the Department works with the sector. It delivers the commitment made in the academies regulatory and commissioning review to publish clearer, consolidated commissioning guidance, along with finalised descriptions of trust quality.

“Commissioning High-Quality Trusts” sets out how the Department for Education’s regions group will take decisions about academy trust creation, consolidation, and growth. The guidance responds directly to calls from the sector, heard through the academies regulatory and commissioning review, for more transparency about how the department commissions trusts, including the evidence that informs decisions. The approach outlined in the guidance makes clear that the department will prioritise the quality of education offered by trusts, whilst also reflecting the priorities and needs of the local area.

The guidance will encourage and support trusts to direct their own self-improvement activity. This supports our objective to grow capacity, capability, and choice across the system so that each school can be matched with the right high-quality trust to support the needs of its pupils and students.

The guidance consolidates existing documents relating to commissioning, so trust and school leaders will be able to understand the Department’s strategic approach to commissioning and the key processes more easily.

[HCWS918]

Academies: Financial Oversight

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Today, my noble Friend, The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System and Student Finance (Baroness Barran) has made the following statement:

The 2023 Academy Trust Handbook (ATH), published today and applicable from 1 September 2023, will introduce improvements to the financial oversight framework for academy trusts.

These improvements will maintain the rigour of the current framework, while achieving a better balance for academy trusts, including:

A more streamlined and concise ATH that more clearly describes the framework for Academy Trusts, removing unnecessary detail/prescription, with links to additional guidance for more detailed support where appropriate.

A change in the approval requirements for related party transactions (RPTs) means that from 1 September 2023 RPTs between an academy trust and a college/university, or a school which is a sponsor of the academy trust, or with other state funded schools/colleges will be required to be declared only. In addition, the approval threshold is increased from £20,000 to £40,000 and this will only apply to singular transactions of this value or above.

A range of other improvements such as cutting out duplication across financial returns; prepopulating collection tools; extending the Budget Forecast Return deadline; clarifying requirements through improved guidance are currently being prepared and delivered over the course of this year. There are then areas for action that will be delivered over a longer timescale, and we will continue to engage the sector in this process.

The changes form part of the departmental response to the commitments in the academies regulatory and commissioning review, published in March this year.

The existing framework is robust and thorough with academy trusts—as companies, charities and public sector bodies—subject to high levels of scrutiny. Standards of financial management and governance are high across the sector. In 2020-21, 99.5% of academy trust accounts received unqualified opinions and independent reporting accountants concluded that there were no regularity exceptions in trust financial statements for 92% of trusts.

The framework exists to safeguard taxpayers' money and ensure it is being used for its intended purpose. This supports the department's ambition to ensure every pupil is receiving an excellent education and that all young people can realise their potential.

However, we also want to ensure that the framework is appropriately balanced so that it places proportionate requirements on the sector, as well as enabling the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and Department for Education (DfE) to fulfil their responsibilities, including the provision of assurance on its stewardship of public funds to Parliament.

In developing these changes, ESFA and DfE have worked closely with a range of representatives of the academy sector. Advisory groups were established, made up of sector experts, representative organisations and academy trusts CEOs and CFOs. The groups provided in-depth feedback on the current ATH requirements. While there was agreement about the core of the financial oversight framework and the key principles that underpin it, we heard that aspects of the current framework are either hard to understand, overly complex or excessively prescriptive.

These changes are possible because of the capability of trusts across the academy sector which has matured significantly in recent years. As the sector continues to develop, we can continue this conversation with sector representatives about the financial oversight framework, identifying further opportunities to improve and streamline.

[HCWS920]

National Colleges

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): Today I have laid before the House, a departmental minute giving notice of a contingent liability in respect of Ada National College for Digital Skills.

The proposal will be reported as a contingent liability in line with the HM Treasury contingent liability framework and managed in accordance with managing public money (MPM).

As the forerunner of the institutes of technology, the national college programme established bespoke institutions to meet the skills gaps identified by employers.

Ada, the National College for Digital Skills, has played an essential role in establishing industry support and collaboration to deliver high quality education and build a strong reputation that will be hard to replace.

I am pleased to announce that work has commenced to relocate the college to the former Sir Simon Milton UTC building in Westminster. DfE is fully supporting this move and would like to thank the Greater London Authority for the role it has played in ensuring that Ada will thrive and continue to provide quality skills education at all levels.

HM Treasury has approved the proposal. A full departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS919]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

FCDO Services

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): FCDO Services operates as a trading fund of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). I have set the following performance targets for 2023-2024:

An in-year surplus in excess of 0.0% before interest, tax and dividend.

Achievement of the return on capital employed (ROCE) of at least 6.5% (weighted average).

A productivity ratio of at least 82%, measuring actual billable hours versus available billable hours.

An in-year customer satisfaction rating average of at least 82%.

An average Civil Service People Survey "Your Say" score for 'Employee Engagement' of at least 61%.

An average Civil Service People Survey "Your Say" score for 'My Manager' of at least 65%. FCDO Services will report to Parliament on its success against these targets through its Annual Report and Accounts for 2023-2024.

FCDO Services provides a range of integrated, secure services worldwide to the FCDO and other UK Government departments, supporting the delivery of Government agendas. Services include protective security, estates and construction, cloud computing, communications and monitoring, logistics, translation and interpreting. This is combined with a portfolio of work supporting the FCDO's programme of maintenance for their buildings and residences worldwide. FCDO Services also manages the UK National Authority for Counter Eavesdropping (UK NACE), helping protect UK assets from physical, electronic and cyber-attack.

[HCWS917]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Safer Streets Fund

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): The Government remain committed to preventing and reducing crime and ensuring the public is better protected across all parts of the country; every crime matters, every victim matters and every

neighbourhood matters. To that end, the Safer Streets Fund is central to the Government mission of levelling up. Everyone in this country should have the security and confidence that comes from a safe street and a safe home.

This is why the Government are today announcing an additional £60 million investment in improving public safety through the launch of the fifth round of the safer streets fund, running over the second half of 2023-24 and the whole 2024-25 financial year.

Since the launch of the fund in 2020, this Government have invested £120 million through four rounds of funding, and an additional £5 million through the safety of women at night fund, supporting over 292 projects across high-crime areas.

Earlier this year we published the formal evaluation of the first round of the fund, which reflects that the initiative is improving understanding of crime prevention measures and making communities feel safer.

We will build on the successes of the previous rounds through round five, which will continue to tackle antisocial behaviour (ASB), neighbourhood crime and help to combat violence against women and girls in public places. All 43 police and crime commissioners, and equivalents, across England and Wales will be eligible to receive £1.4 million funding for tackling crime and ASB in their local area.

Among the range of interventions we will be funding are: CCTV and streetlighting, which deter offenders by making it more difficult to commit crime, public guardianship initiatives, reducing opportunities for potential crime and policing interventions.

This additional funding will continue to play a key role in ensuring our streets and communities are safe.

[HCWS916]

Petitions

Thursday 6 July 2023

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Female judges and prosecutors in Afghanistan

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that female judges and prosecutors in Afghanistan, who have stood for the rule of law and a more inclusive and equal Afghanistan, are now deeply concerned for their own safety; further that they live with daily death threats and in constant fear of violent reprisals; and further that female judges and prosecutors, their children and their families are at continued risk of violent attacks.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately help evacuate and resettle female judges and prosecutors, and their families from Afghanistan by providing emergency visas urgently.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Wera Hobhouse, Official Report, 9 May 2023; Vol. 732, c. 311.]

[P002830]

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

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And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Joanna Cherry, Official Report, 3 May 2023; Vol. 732, c. 172.]

[P002832]

Observation from the Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick):

We have the utmost concern and sympathy for the situation that many individuals, including female judges and prosecutors, find themselves in due to their work in standing up for human rights and the rule of law in Afghanistan. This is one of the key reasons why the Government made generous resettlement offers under the Afghan schemes.

To date, nearly 24,600 people affected by events in Afghanistan have been brought to safety in the UK. This includes British nationals and their families, Afghans who loyally served the UK and others identified as particularly at-risk, such as female judges and women's rights activists.

The UK remains committed to the people of Afghanistan by continuing to operate safe and legal routes for those affected by the events in Afghanistan to come to the United Kingdom: the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP). These routes have been designed to be fair in identifying those most in need of relocation and resettlement.

We recognise that there are many vulnerable individuals who remain in Afghanistan and the wider region. Unfortunately, the capacity of the UK to resettle people is not unlimited and difficult decisions about who will be prioritised have to be made.

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**not later than
Thursday 13 July 2023**

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