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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 23 October 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's proceedings, I would like to draw the House's attention to the new shield commemorating our late colleague Sir David Amess, which was unveiled earlier today at a small gathering of his family. Sir David was a dedicated constituency MP and a powerful advocate for Southend-on-Sea, which was granted city status last year in his honour. He was a committed campaigner for the causes he believed in—most notably, animal welfare—and a highly respected and valued colleague, known to Members in all parts of the House for his kindness, his generosity and, of course, his friendship to all. He is sorely missed.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

NEW MEMBERS

The following Members made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:

Sarah Siena Edwards, Tamworth.

Alistair Luke Strathern, Mid Bedfordshire.

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CITY OF LONDON (MARKETS) BILL

Ordered,

That the promoters of the City of London (Markets) Bill, which was originally introduced in this House in this Session on 30 January 2023, should have leave to suspend any further proceedings on the Bill from the day on which the current Session ends in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next Session of Parliament, according to the provisions of Private Business Standing Order 188A (Suspension of bills).—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

BISHOP'S STORTFORD CEMETERY BILL [*LODS*]

Ordered,

That the promoters of the Bishop's Stortford Cemetery Bill [*Lords*], which was originally introduced in the House of Lords in this Session on 23 January 2023, should have leave to suspend any further proceedings on the Bill from the day on which the current session ends in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next Session of Parliament according to the provisions of Private Business Standing Order 188A (Suspension of bills).—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Chairman of Ways and Means; that was very effective. May I say, I would expect nothing less?

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

School Funding

1. **Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): What progress her Department has made on ensuring equality of school funding through the national funding formula. [906621]

13. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of core school funding for the 2023-24 academic year. [906634]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan):

The Government introduced fairness into school funding. Under Labour, we got disproportionately inflated school budgets in places such as London, while constituencies such as mine were underfunded for over a decade. It was the Conservatives who introduced the national funding formula, which funds schools fairly, objectively and, most importantly, based on the needs of pupils, not political ideology. Not only that: this year, school budgets are up by over £3.9 billion, and next year schools will be funded at their highest level in history, at £59.6 billion.

Mark Garnier: My right hon. Friend will be aware that Worcestershire County Council languishes among the weakest 10 local authorities for funding per pupil. As a result, a lot of pressure has been put on other budgets, including the high needs and special educational needs and disabilities budget. Worcestershire now faces a deficit of more than £20 million in those budgets. Can she do something to help counties such as Worcestershire to meet those important demands for our young people?

Gillian Keegan: I am conscious of the pressures that many local authorities have faced on their high needs budgets. Nationally, high needs funding is set to increase by 60% between 2019-20 and 2024-25. Next year, Worcestershire will receive more than £89 million for its high needs budget. The Department is also supporting individual local authorities to tackle financial sustainability through two programmes: the Safety Valve programme for those with the highest deficits, and Delivering Better Value in SEND, which will help local authorities, including Worcestershire, to develop plans to reform their systems to reach a sustainable footing.

Kerry McCarthy: The recent accounting error by the Secretary of State's Department will mean a cut of more than £2.5 million for schools in Bristol. That money could have been spent on breakfast clubs, SEND provision, mental health support, or even such basics as paying the energy bills. The Prime Minister said in this conference speech that his main funding priority in every spending review from now on will be education, but he is cutting school budgets now. Does the Secretary of State not realise the impact that will have on schools, whose budgets have already been cut to the bone?

Gillian Keegan: I take the error in the July notional national funding formula figures very seriously, but it is important to note that schools do not receive notification of their actual budget until February-March. The Department acted quickly to correct the error—well before schools set their final budgets. There is no cut: £59.6 billion, which I have talked about many times from this Dispatch Box, is the number that schools will be funded at next year. At my direction, Peter Wyman, the chair of the Institute of Chartered Accountants, will lead a rigorous independent external review of the Department's quality assurance processes.

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

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I am grateful to the permanent secretary for writing to the Committee as soon as that recent funding error was identified, and for her apology for the concern that it caused. Although no actual money was lost to schools as a result, it reflects the complexity of the current system. We have promised a fair formula for funding, which will flow directly to schools. When do Ministers expect to be able to legislate to put that in place?

Gillian Keegan: It is our intention to legislate, but I cannot give a date for that at the Dispatch Box. I will keep my hon. Friend informed.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): Despite North West Leicestershire delivering consistently the highest economic growth in the country, with the resulting tax revenue benefits to the Treasury, my constituents have been blighted by very low per-pupil funding for a long time, as Leicestershire has bumped along the bottom of the funding table for decades. Does the Secretary of State have any words of comfort for my constituents?

Gillian Keegan: The introduction of the NFF will direct resources according to need. That has meant that funding has been redistributed to catch up with these changes. Those with the highest number of pupils with additional needs will also be targeted via the NFF.

Students: Cost of Living

3. **Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help support students with the cost of living. [906624]

11. **Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help support students with the cost of living. [906632]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): This year and last year, the Government have provided £94 billion of cost of living support in England. In education, more than a third of children get free school meals. University tuition fees have been frozen and we have provided £276 million of student premium to help the most disadvantaged students.¹

Rosie Duffield: During my latest meeting with student leaders in Canterbury, they told me that, often, new students will visit the food bank, the Campus Pantry, before they have even unpacked their bags or settled in. In the 2021-22 academic year, 45 students visited; by 2022-23, that number had risen to 301—a 650% rise in regular food bank users. They expect a similar rise this

academic year. What will the Government do to help all those, including students and staff on campus, who are forced to turn to food banks?

Robert Halfon: I know the hon. Lady cares deeply about the welfare of her students. We are doing everything we can to help students with the cost of living. I mentioned the £276 million. One of her universities, Canterbury Christ Church University, provides a £600 bursary to students. Every family has received from the Government on average £3,300 for energy bills and other support. We are trying to be fair to the taxpayer, but fair to students and ensure the most disadvantaged are helped.

Lilian Greenwood: While the cost of food, heating and rent has rocketed, the value of the student maintenance loan has fallen by £1,500 in real terms since 2020-21. Recent research by the University of Nottingham Students' Union revealed that the cost of living crisis is affecting students' education, and their physical and mental health. It found that almost one in 10 students had a weekly budget of £20 or less after rent, and one in five had a weekly budget of £20 or less after rent and bills. Thirty-seven per cent had considered leaving university because of the difficulties they faced paying for essentials. Does the Minister think that these are acceptable conditions for students to be struggling under?

Robert Halfon: It is precisely because of the figures the hon. Lady sets out that we are helping students, with £276 million to try to ensure we help the most disadvantaged students. Her own university—she mentioned Nottingham University—gives a £1,000 bursary to disadvantaged students. We are also giving up to £90 billion of extra help to disadvantaged families, we have frozen tuition fees and we look at loan repayments if family incomes fall below 15%, so we are doing everything possible to support the most disadvantaged to get higher education.¹

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): As we have heard, this is a very serious issue. Recent research from the National Union of Students shows that almost one in five full-time students work more than 20 hours per week alongside their studies—they are working even more than in previous years—and 40% of students say that work is having a negative impact on their studies. Students are clearly struggling with the Conservatives' cost of living crisis. How does the Minister expect students to balance their studies and employment to pay their bills? Does he acknowledge that this is now forcing many students out of higher education?

Robert Halfon: Actually, the opposite is true. We have a record number of students going to university. Disadvantaged students are 71% more likely to go to university now than they were in 2010. We have a huge package of support. I have mentioned the £276 million for disadvantaged students. We are doing everything we can to help disadvantaged students. The hon. Gentleman criticises the money we are giving, but does not come up with a figure of his own. Warm words butter no parsnips.

1.[Official Report, 25 October 2023, Vol. 738, c. 5MC.]

1.[Official Report, 25 October 2023, Vol. 738, c. 6MC.]

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Minister mentions some things that are maybe trying to help these students, but recent Higher Education Policy Institute analysis shows that students who previously received free school meals are less likely to complete their degree and those who do are less likely to get a first or a 2:1. Support cannot stop once they get to university. Will he detail what support he is giving those students at every stage of their journey to make sure they really do have the same opportunities as those from more privileged backgrounds?

Robert Halfon: Many universities offer bursaries to students—I highlighted two examples to previous questioners—and we are doing everything possible to ensure that students who do courses get good skills and good jobs at the end. That is the purpose of our higher education reforms, which, as I understand it, the SNP opposed.

Maths Standards: Primary Education

4. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the number of primary school children meeting expected standards in maths. [906625]

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Since 2010, we have reformed the maths curriculum, reflecting international best practice, and introduced a network of maths hubs to boost the quality of teaching. In 2019, primary pupils achieved their highest ever score in the latest TIMSS—trends in international mathematics and science study—international survey, and Ofsted recently found “a resounding, positive shift” in primary maths education.

Mr Sharma: When will the Government learn that early years matter? One in four children leave primary school without core maths skills and never catch up. Does the Minister agree that, instead of forcing everyone to study maths to 18, we should focus on early years and encourage a more positive attitude to learning maths, rather than leave it hanging over pupils?

Nick Gibb: In fact, we are focusing on both. We have reformed the early years foundation stage to ensure that there is more interaction between adults and pupils in that stage, with a focus on numeracy and English as well. In 2011, we took the Singapore primary curriculum as the basis of our primary maths, and we introduced the multiplication tables check for year 4 pupils. An increasing number of pupils are now fluent in their times tables, in a way that generations of children in the past have not been.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) and the Minister are both right to stress the importance of maths, but what is vital to all good teaching is proper school place planning. On the Isle of Wight, councillors are proving unwilling to deliver, or incapable of delivering, a school place plan despite their legal duty. Will the Minister work with me to ensure that the Isle of Wight Council acts to fulfil its legal duties soon—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member must try to keep to the main question. He really is drifting. He must return to the subject of primary education.

Bob Seely: Will you allow me to raise this subject during topical questions instead, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: No.

Bob Seely: Okay. I am sorry, Sir. Thank you.

Will the Minister work with me to ensure that the Isle of Wight Council acts to fulfil its legal obligations? At present it is letting down parents, pupils and teachers.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. We are aware that the Isle of Wight is experiencing a decline in the number of primary school children, which is creating surplus places. The Department is monitoring the situation closely, and the south east regional director will be meeting the local authority next month to discuss this and other concerns that we have about the Isle of Wight.

Pupil Absences

6. **Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce the number of pupils persistently absent from schools. [906627]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Improving attendance is one of my top priorities. Our attendance hub now supports 800 schools, benefiting more than 400,000 pupils; 86% of schools subscribe to our attendance data tool to spot at-risk pupils; and we have specialist programmes helping some of the most vulnerable, including children with social workers, children with special educational needs, and young people facing particular issues such as mental ill health. Our approach is starting to turn the tide—recent data show that 380,000 fewer children were persistently not at school last year—but absence levels are still too high, and that remains my No. 1 priority.

Paul Maynard: As the Secretary of State has said, progress in reducing persistent absence is not as fast as anyone would like, and in places such as Blackpool the attendance monitoring pilots will be crucial. However, according to the charity School-Home Support, which has been working in Blackpool for 18 months, there is a need to focus on more than just individual pupils, and the “whole family support” model is also crucial. Will the Secretary of State meet me, along with representatives of School-Home Support, to hear about the pertinent lessons that they have learnt in Blackpool, which contains the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country? If we cannot get it right in Blackpool, where else are we going to get it right?

Gillian Keegan: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend: School-Home Support does incredible work in Blackpool. The Government’s supporting families programme, backed by £200 million, focuses on attendance by supporting the whole family. Blackpool is also one of our 24 priority education investment areas, with six family support workers helping 11 schools to improve attendance. I am

sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss these issues further.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is not uncommon for kids who have had a brain injury, particularly a significant brain injury, to receive plenty of care and support at school immediately after the event, but, some six to nine months later, to suffer real cognitive problems. They may suffer from depression or anxiety, they may sometimes be unable to inhibit themselves, and they may stop turning up for school and start getting into trouble. Can the Secretary of State commission a specific piece of work on providing protection and support for those children and their families, who desperately need it?

Gillian Keegan: As the hon. Gentleman knows, he and I both worked on this topic when I had a different role. Of course we want all children to be helped to get into school, because they can only benefit from this fantastic education if they are there, and of course schools should make adjustments if children need them. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools will be happy to meet him as well in order to understand further what more we can do in this regard.

SEND Provision

7. **Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to improve provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [906628]

10. **Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to improve provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [906631]

15. **Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs in Walsall South constituency. [906636]

16. **Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to improve provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [906637]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): In March, we published our improvement plan to transform support for children with special educational needs, and last month we launched nine regional change programme partnerships to drive reform. By 2024-25, we will have increased high needs funding by 60% since 2019-20, and we have approved the opening of 78 special free schools.

Andrew Lewer: Local authorities have spent nearly a quarter of a billion pounds fighting parents at SEND tribunals since 2014, yet they have a failure rate of over 90%. What steps is the Department taking to overhaul that process, which has caused SEND parents in Northampton South unnecessary distress?

David Johnston: My hon. Friend is right to say that tribunals are costly and stressful, but it is important to say that most education, health and care needs assessments

and plans are concluded without a tribunal hearing. We will be introducing new national standards, strengthened mediation and greater system-wide accountability to give families the support they need earlier and reduce the number of tribunals.

Peter Aldous: I was one of 31 MPs from across the Chamber who signed the f40 letter to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor urging significant investment in SEN. Will my hon. Friend, behind the scenes at least, endorse that campaign and also look at how we can reduce the reliance on education, health and care plans, which are a barrier to so many young people getting the education they need?

David Johnston: It is probably worth saying that I am an f40 MP myself, and I met the group just last week to hear its concerns. On my hon. Friend's point about EHCPs, through the reform plan we are working to get parents the support they need for their child at an earlier stage so that they do not always need an EHCP to get that support.

Valerie Vaz: There is a crisis in funding for SEND in Walsall South. In Old Church Primary, 78 pupils have special needs, which is 19% of the school total. How can the Minister target the funding to the schools that really need it? Does he agree that when Ofsted inspects, it should take into account children with special needs in schools such as Old Church so that these are mitigating factors?

David Johnston: The right hon. Lady makes an important point about the role of Ofsted and ensuring that it assesses that provision. It is worth saying that there will have been a 36% per-head increase in Walsall between 2021-22 and 2024-25, but I would be happy to meet her to discuss the issue further.

Mr French: Thanks to Government support, local Conservatives in the London Borough of Bexley have secured an incredible £39.5 million to expand and improve SEND provision in our borough. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that local authorities, charities, schools and families work closely together to maximise the educational impact of this Government-backed funding?

David Johnston: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I pay tribute to his campaigning on this issue and to the work of Bexley council. It is absolutely the case that people should be engaging not just with schools and families but with local charities, which are often best placed to understand the needs of families and their children.

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): Families in Selby and Ainsty have been waiting nearly half a decade for spades in the ground at a new SEND school for the Selby area. Will the Minister meet me to ensure that there are no further delays to this vital project?

David Johnston: The hon. Gentleman and I have exchanged letters about this matter. We remain absolutely committed to the school and I would be happy to meet him to discuss it further.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The SEND crisis extends to Devon, and my postbag is full of correspondence from parents trying to get their children the educational provision they need. It has got so bad that in some cases children are being taught in school cupboards, and Devon has appointed a SEND champion to its cabinet. What steps is the Department taking to help boost SEND services in rural areas such as mine?

David Johnston: There has been a 30% increase in the per-head funding to schools in Devon for their special educational needs provision, and the whole thrust of our reform plan is to make the system work better for parents and families and get the support for their children at the stage when they need it.¹

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): “Lose, lose, lose”, costing a “fortune” and not providing “the right service”. Those are not my words but those of the Secretary of State describing the SEND system over which her Government have been presiding for the last 13 years. Will the Minister tell the House when he expects the plans that the Government have announced for SEND to make a difference to the long waiting times and lack of support experienced by so many families across the country?

David Johnston: We have already begun the reform programme and have just launched the nine SEND change partnerships, which are already starting to make a difference to the provision. I would just say to the hon. Lady that this is yet another area where the Labour party has absolutely no policies whatsoever.²

Higher Technical Qualifications: Uptake

8. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to promote the uptake of higher technical qualifications. [906629]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): We are revolutionising our skills offering by introducing 172 higher technical qualifications at more than 140 providers at levels 4 and 5. This includes £115 million for providers and £300 million for 21 institutes of technology. I note that the Opposition want to rebadge institutes of technology as technical colleges of excellence. In our view, all our colleges are places of technical excellence.

David Duguid: I welcome the Government’s plan to introduce a new advanced British standard to help to remove the artificial divide between technical and academic qualifications. Given that the need for technical skills exists right across the United Kingdom, can my right hon. Friend confirm that this new qualification will live up to its name and be truly British, like the T-level before it, and therefore be available to education settings in Scotland that choose it?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is a champion of science, technology, engineering, maths and skills, and he will know that education is devolved. The devolved Administrations are responsible for their education systems,

but the Department for Education is working with the Governments of the UK. We engaged at both official and ministerial level when the advanced British standard was announced. We look forward to continued engagement as it is hopefully adopted across the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response and his positivity. I echo the request of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) to ensure that all the benefits of higher education are present not only here on the mainland but across the whole United Kingdom. I know that is the Minister’s wish, but can he confirm that, when it comes to higher technical qualifications, girls and ladies will have the same opportunities as young fellas and young men?

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend—he is my hon. Friend—for his question. We are absolutely committed to making sure that women take up higher technical qualifications, and we are doing everything we can to support them with careers advice to ensure that more take up STEM subjects in particular.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Increasing the take-up of higher technical qualifications is desperately needed, with low take-up leading to persistent skills gaps and holding back economic growth. Colleges, which we were proud to celebrate during Love Our Colleges Week, tell us of issues affecting take-up, including a lack of quality careers advice, challenges with stable staffing and late course approvals. With the UK seeing only 10% of adults whose highest qualification is between level 3 and level 6—the sixth lowest rate in the G7—should not the Government address their cuts to careers advice, as Labour will, so that young people do not miss out because they hear about opportunities far too late?

Robert Halfon: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her new position, but I genuinely do not know what planet she has been living on these past few years. We introduced higher technical qualifications and are transforming qualifications across the country. We introduced T-levels and spent £90 million to transform careers advice. Ninety per cent of schools are in a careers hub, and we have the National Careers Service. We are doing a lot of work to support careers, and we are spending something like £3 million to ensure that apprenticeships and skills are taught in schools up and down the country—more than 2,000 schools and 680,000 pupils. We are doing huge amounts on careers, and we are the people who transformed skills in our country.

Mr Speaker: I think we’ve got the story. The extra chapter was fine.

Music Education in Schools

9. **Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of the provision of music education in schools. [906630]

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her appointment as shadow Minister for music and tourism.

1. [Official Report, 25 October 2023, Vol. 738, c. 6MC.]

2. [Official Report, 25 October 2023, Vol. 738, c. 7MC.]

The Government expect every school to teach music for at least an hour a week, supported by our music hub network, including the Greater Manchester hub led by the Bolton Music Service, and backed by £25 million of capital for instruments and a new £10,000 bursary for trainee music teachers.

Barbara Keeley: Last month, Ofsted reported:

“There remains a divide between the opportunities for children and young people whose families can afford to pay for music tuition and for those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.”

It also said that

“half the primary schools visited did not...offer any instrumental or vocal lessons”,

and that what lessons existed were being taught by non-specialist teachers in two thirds of primary schools. This is a damning reflection of the substantial decline in the provision of music education in England over which Conservative-led Governments have presided. What urgent action will the Government take in response to these findings?

Nick Gibb: From September next year, every music hub will be required to support music tuition for disadvantaged pupils. We are investing £2 million in a music progression programme in education investment areas to support up to 1,000 pupils to learn an instrument. From 2018-19 to 2022-23, between 96.4% and 94.7% of all hours taught in music were taught by a teacher with a relevant post-A-level qualification. There are now 7,184 full-time music teachers in our secondary schools, which is up from 7,000 last year.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): XYZ Music Academy teaches over 2,000 children across Buckinghamshire on a weekly basis, employing 18 tutors. Its online primary school music curriculum “XYZ Primary” helps primary schools with smaller budgets to deliver music provision to a high standard, adhering to the model music curriculum and Ofsted requirements. Will my right hon. Friend visit XYZ to learn more from this innovative small business that could be adopted more widely across the country?

Nick Gibb: I would be delighted to visit XYZ. Music in schools is a personal passion for me; I want to see more of it and a better quality of it. In 2021, we published the model music curriculum, which is designed to help primary and secondary schools to improve their music education. It took two years to produce and was written by a panel of music education practitioners, including Ed Watkins, head of music at the West London Free School, and Julian Lloyd Webber; the panel was chaired by Baroness Fleet. I would love to discuss that curriculum and learn more about XYZ.

School Buildings

12. **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): What steps she is taking to improve school buildings. [906633]

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): Well-maintained school buildings are a priority for this Government, and we will spend whatever it takes to keep children and staff safe. We have allocated £1.8 billion in 2023-24—£15 billion

since 2015—to improve the condition of school buildings, and we are working to address reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. We are transforming hundreds of schools across the country through our school rebuilding programme.

Tim Farron: The excellent Lakes School at Troutbeck Bridge serves the communities of Windermere and Ambleside and those further afield with 11-to-18 education, but it is widely acknowledged that the school needs a full rebuild because the buildings are well beyond their sell-by date. Because of the unique history of the site, on which I am happy to brief the Minister separately, it is very likely that we will have significant charitable and private funds to help towards a rebuild, as long as there is some Government support as well. Will he agree to meet me and the school leaders to talk about how we can make sure that a brilliant school has a bright future?

Nick Gibb: Absolutely; I will be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. We want all our schools, including excellent schools such as the Lakes School in the Lake district, to have the best-quality school buildings. That is our priority, and I will be delighted to meet him and teachers at the school to discuss how to make it happen in his constituency.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): This Conservative Government will fund a new school to replace the flood-prone Tipton St John primary school. However, that can happen only once a suitable alternative site is found. Will my right hon. Friend do everything possible to speed up the process so that pupils have a safe new school as soon as possible?

Nick Gibb: We are working actively with the diocese of Exeter and with Devon County Council to identify suitable sites for the school. Site appraisals are due to be completed by the end of this year. Once a site is identified, we will work with the diocese and the council to expedite the acquisition of the site. I fully understand and share my hon. Friend's desire for urgency in this matter.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Last week, the Government added another 41 schools and colleges to the RAAC list, bringing the total to 214. The Education Secretary claims that children prefer to learn in portacabins, but it is far from a joke when some are still waiting for temporary classrooms, studying from home or in cramped sports halls and dining rooms. Can the Minister confirm the total number of pupils who are already impacted and are expected to be impacted by this chaos? When will all children receive uninterrupted face-to-face learning? Surely that is the minimum that a parent can expect for their child.

Nick Gibb: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her first Education questions and her appointment as shadow Schools Minister, although this is not our first exchange since her appointment. She is right: there are 214 schools and colleges with confirmed RAAC, which is an increase from the 173 we announced in September. Of those 214 schools, the pupils at 202, or 94%, are in full-time, face-to-face education, and 12 schools or colleges are

offering hybrid face-to-face and remote education. Our objective and our focus is to ensure that schools are supported to put in place immediate measures to enable face-to-face education to continue.

Holiday Activities and Food Programme

14. **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): What recent assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of the holiday activities and food programme. [906635]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): The holiday activities and food programme introduced by this Government is hugely important to families up and down the country and supported 685,000 children last summer. We know the positive impacts that these programmes are having on a range of issues, such as by improving attendance. One child in Stoke who attended a HAF programme run by the Kingsland CE Academy increased their school attendance by 32% and is no longer considered to be persistently absent. That is just one example of the wonderful work that HAF programmes do, and there is also strong evidence that they improve health, behaviour and confidence in children.

Caroline Ansell: I have seen at first hand just how brilliant the Government-backed holiday activities and food programmes are for children and young people and their families in Eastbourne. In one magical piece of feedback, a little girl at the Art House café sidled up to me and said, “One day I will own a place just like this,” and I have seen the same energy across the piece. Given that we are hoping that there is a connection between attendance and HAF uptake, what more can we do to provide and promote opportunities for children and young people with SEND, and also for the 11-plus and early teens?

Gillian Keegan: When it launched, HAF was the first summer camp for hundreds of thousands of children—70% had never experienced a holiday club before—and this summer, 4,000 children benefited in East Sussex. HAF is open to children from ages five to 16. Local authorities should meet the needs of all cohorts, including by offering programmes for older children and those with special educational needs. I urge all hon. Members to visit their local HAF over the Christmas recess; they really are heart-warming.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I have visited my local HAF in Washington over the last few summers, and I certainly will if there is one at Christmas. Does the Minister have any plans to extend the scheme further? There is obviously a lot more need than the current HAF schemes can meet, especially with the cost of living crisis.

Gillian Keegan: As I mentioned, 685,000 children were helped just this summer. Our independent evaluation found that around two thirds of the 700,000 children attending overall live in some of the most deprived areas across the country, so we believe we are getting the targeting right. We are very proud of this programme, which we think is a brilliant addition to the landscape, and we want to ensure that it benefits as many people as possible.

Provider Access Legislation

17. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Whether her Department has conducted a review of the effectiveness of provider access legislation. [906638]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): We are hugely strengthening technical and provider access in schools. We have legislated for pupils to have six encounters with apprentice organisations and technical colleges. Ofsted is looking closely at careers guidance, and the apprentice support and knowledge network is going into over 2,000 schools, supporting 680,000 pupils and encouraging them to take up apprenticeships or other skills offerings.

Damien Moore: Colleges in Southport have raised concerns about careers advice opportunities for students with SEND—specifically, about the suitability of the oversight and the supposed added value of these sessions. Will my right hon. Friend detail what steps the Government are taking to ensure that these sessions are personalised better to support SEND students in their transition into employment?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is a champion for special needs pupils, and he is absolutely right. We need to ensure that special needs pupils have employment opportunities, along with everybody else. We are investing over £18 million over the next three years in supported internship schemes for high special needs 16-to-19 pupils. We have a mentor scheme for disabled apprentices, the Careers & Enterprise Company has put in SEND support to ensure high-quality careers guidance and training, and 82% of SEND schools are now part of careers hubs.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): As supportive as I am of this scheme, I do not think that up to six sessions really cuts it. Will the Minister consider a scheme similar to Aimhigher, which was introduced by the previous Labour Government to encourage young people into higher education and down the vocational route? This would give young people mentors who have been through apprenticeship schemes and really get them hooked on the opportunities that vocational education can bring.

Robert Halfon: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's question. My first speech in the House of Commons was about that very subject. The six encounters that I mentioned are the minimum. Obviously, many schools do more. Only last week, I attended Oasis school in Bristol, and watched students being encouraged to take up apprenticeships and to hold an apprenticeship careers fair. We are doing huge amounts. I mentioned the apprenticeship skills and knowledge network, which is going around schools and encouraging pupils to take up apprenticeships. That involves more than 2,000 schools and 680,000 pupils. We need to do as much as possible to educate students about apprenticeships and to ensure that they have the encounters that he rightly talks about.

Childcare

18. **James Grundy** (Leigh) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase access to childcare for working parents. [906639]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): This Conservative Government are investing more in childcare than at any other point in our country's history, ensuring that parents do not have to choose between having a family or having a career. With 30 hours of free childcare on offer from the end of parental leave to the start of school, the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston)—I welcome him to his place—is working hard to expand the capacity through new capital investment, more avenues into the workforce and increasing childcare rates.

James Grundy: At a Westminster Hall debate on childcare earlier this year, before the Secretary of State's proposed changes were announced, I expressed concern that low-income families were facing high childcare costs that might make it sub-economic to return to work. Will she tell me how the changes that she has been making will help prevent that?

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Just to remind everybody, under Labour, parents got just 12.5 hours for three and four-year-olds—less than an hour of free childcare per year in office. We will be spending more than £8 billion a year by 2027-28 to fund 30 hours of free childcare for working parents of children aged nine months to the start of primary school and giving every parent access to wraparound childcare between 8 am and 6 pm. Meanwhile, Labour still does not have a policy for parents.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): A nursery owner in my constituency told me how the Government's funding for so-called "free" hours covers only about half of their costs, and even with the recently announced uplift for three and four-year-olds, the rate simply does not meet their needs. The Early Years Alliance found that a third of childcare providers suggested that they may close within a year due to rising costs. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that all these parents who are being told that they are now eligible for free childcare are actually able to access some?

Gillian Keegan: Specifically, I will deliver free childcare for all parents of nine-month-olds until they start school. We have worked with 10,000 businesses to make sure that we get this right. We are supporting the development of new places, by increasing the rates by up to £200 million this year and £288 million next year. We also have a huge programme of work. We will be considering all options to make sure that we are increasing the capacity in the system and that there is enough money in the system to deliver on our policies.

Multi-disciplinary Subjects

19. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Whether her Department is taking steps to increase the number of multi-disciplinary subjects taught to students before university. [906640]

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): I share my hon. Friend's view about the importance of a broad curriculum, which is why the English Baccalaureate combination of core GCSEs is so important. English, maths, at least two sciences, a humanity and a foreign language are a key preparation for the Advanced British Standard at ages 16 to 19. The proportion of pupils entered for the EBacc has increased from 22% in 2010 to 39% in 2022.

Michael Fabricant: When I was a student—and a bit of a surfer dude—at the University of Southern California, I was struck by the fact that Americans, when they go to university, do not have to make the choice when they are 16 or 17 between arts and sciences. Will the initiative announced by the Secretary of State in Manchester mean that, in future, British students will not have to make that early choice?

Nick Gibb: Increasing the number of subjects under the Advanced British Standard means that students will have the benefits of the greater breadth of study that my hon. Friend references from his own experience as a surfing dude. The intention is that majors will have comparable depth and rigour to A-levels so that they can support progression, including to university.

Education: 16 to 19-year-olds

20. **Mrs Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support people aged 16 to 19 in education. [906641]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): We are investing an additional £3.8 billion over the course of the Parliament to strengthen post-16 education and training, and we will boost 16-to-19 funding by £1.6 billion compared with 2021-22. We have launched our T-level programme, and 52% of apprenticeship starts in 2022-23 provisionally were by young people under 25.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does the Department have any jurisdiction over an academy refusing to offer a sixth-form place to a high-performing pupil with special educational needs who has more than met the academic requirements for one?

Robert Halfon: I was really sorry to hear about the difficult experiences of my hon. Friend's constituent; I was disturbed to hear what has gone on. I know that my hon. Friend has raised the matter in correspondence with the Department, which the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston), recently addressed. I hope that her constituent is now safely settling in at her new college, but the Schools Minister and I will absolutely look at this again.

Mr Speaker: I call Emma Hardy—not here.

Apprenticeship Starts: 2022-23

22. **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the number of apprenticeship starts in the 2022-23 academic year. [906643]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): There were more than 335,000 starts in the 2022-23 academic year and more people undertaking high-level apprenticeships, with starts at level 4 and above increasing by 7%. Those are provisional figures; further figures will be set out in November. We are increasing investment in apprenticeships to £2.7 billion by 2024-25.

Steve McCabe: I thank the Minister for that answer, but given the decline in level 2 and 3 apprenticeship starts, might it be an idea to consider the views of leading industry experts who are calling for the ringfencing of apprenticeships for 16 to 18-year-olds?

Robert Halfon: I say to the hon. Gentleman, whom I respect enormously, that 70% of apprentices are at level 2 or 3. I hoped that he would be getting up to celebrate the 10,130 apprenticeship starts in Birmingham, Selly Oak since May 2010.

High-quality Childcare

23. **Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to help ensure the availability of high-quality childcare. [906644]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): We are investing over £4.1 billion to expand the current free childcare entitlement offer to eligible working parents of children aged nine to 36 months. We are also increasing the hourly rates for childcare providers for the existing entitlements, and funding rates will be confirmed in the autumn.

Stella Creasy: The Government's proposals will lead to thousands more families expecting to access childcare, so we might expect to see more childcare opening. However, in the past year some 600 nurseries have already closed, and in my constituency of Walthamstow there are now three children chasing every childcare place. Why does the Minister think that is the case, what will he do about it, and how will we ensure that in April parents who are not already accessing childcare can do so?

David Johnston: Part of the reason why we are staggering the entitlement is to ensure that we have the staff in place to deliver it. In the next few weeks we will announce changes to the processes for recruiting people. We will launch a big campaign of recruitment in the new year to increase the workforce, and I have every confidence that we will meet the commitment.

Special Needs Education: Funding

24. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of funding for special needs education. [906645]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): Higher needs funding for children and young people with complex needs is increasing by a further £440 million next year, bringing the total higher needs budget to £10.5 billion in 2024-25—60% higher than it was in 2019-20.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful to the Minister for that response, and I heard the earlier responses, but there is a shortage of places in special needs schools—special schools for children who need those places. Will he carry out a national assessment of the number of places that are available in special schools against the number of places that are needed, because it is resulting in some children having to attend mainstream schools when actually they should be in special schools?

David Johnston: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have approved the opening of 78 special schools, and this year we collected new data from local authorities on their capacity and demand forecast for special schools. That will help us to support them more effectively to fulfil their duty to provide sufficient places.

Topical Questions

T1. [906646] **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Mr Speaker, I stand with this House in condemning the barbaric terrorist attacks on Israel. The brutal actions of Hamas have sent shockwaves that have reverberated all the way to our shores. My ministerial team and I recently met leaders from the Jewish education community. I was deeply moved by the experiences that they shared but horrified by the rise in antisemitism that they faced. That is totally unacceptable. All students deserve to learn without fear or harassment.

Disturbingly, I have also seen evidence of students and academics appearing to support Hamas. Let me be crystal clear: Hamas is a terrorist organisation and supporting it is a criminal act. The Government will take action against those who do. With my Ministers, I have written to schools, colleges and universities, reminding them of their duties under Prevent and that incidents of antisemitism will not be tolerated. We teach our children the British values of liberty, mutual respect and tolerance. This Government will always stand by those values.

Sir David Evennett: I join my right hon. Friend in the comments that she has just made.

Strike action in schools has caused significant disruption to children and parents in my constituency and resulted in the loss of some 25 million school days across the country. I welcome the part that my right hon. Friend played in bringing the dispute to an end, with the largest pay award for teachers in 30 years. However, what further steps is she taking to protect children from the impact of future strike action?

Gillian Keegan: My right hon. Friend is correct: it is unacceptable that the disruption caused over 10 days of strike action saw millions of school days lost. That is why the Government are introducing minimum service levels in schools and colleges, to protect children and parents from the damaging impact of future strike action. We must find a balance between teachers' right to strike and protecting children's education. In the first instance, we have asked unions to work with us on a voluntary agreement.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in recognising the impact of the conflict in the middle east on our education system here and the importance of every child being able to attend school safely.

Rates of persistent absence are now double what they were five years ago. Labour's plan starts with resetting the relationship between families and schools, delivering new mental health hubs, and having counsellors in every secondary school and breakfast clubs for every primary school child. The Prime Minister's first step was to say that he had maxed out on supporting our children, and now the Secretary of State is blaming parents for keeping children at home with a cold. When are Ministers going to get a grip on this serious problem?

Gillian Keegan: We do take this issue extremely seriously; as I said, it is my No. 1 priority. The Attendance Action Alliance includes the Children's Commissioner, Department of Health and Social Care representatives, social workers and many others working together. The letter was sent to help parents because we have noticed that in some cases there has been a change in attendance as a result of parents not being clear about whether they should send their children to school with minor ailments. Chris Whitty took it upon himself to write, and we very much support his action.

Bridget Phillipson: Persistent absence is a symptom of a wider breakdown of trust right across our school system. It is no surprise, given that the Conservatives reopened pubs before they reopened schools, that they have left schools to crumble, and that they have allowed disruptive strike action to drag on for months. Labour's first priority will be to rebuild that relationship between schools, families and Government. Does the Secretary of State not believe that parents and children deserve a lot better than the sorry mess she is presiding over today?

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Lady talks about responsibility and accountability. When Labour were warned about RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—in 1997, 1999, 2002 and 2007, they did nothing. When Labour spent money on school rebuilding, they ignored school conditions altogether. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady needs to listen to this. They even rebuilt three schools and left RAAC within the buildings. A school even collapsed in 2018. What did they do in Wales? Absolutely nothing. We make the tough decisions. Labour cannot even make a single decision.

T3. [906648] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): In the wake of the massacre that occurred in Israel—the greatest loss of life since the holocaust—cases of antisemitism in this country have risen by 582%, and Jewish students on our campuses feel very unsafe. Glorification of this massacre has been carried out at Warwick University, Bristol University, University College London and the School of Oriental and African Studies. It is unacceptable for universities to tolerate such activity, so will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning antisemitism and state what she will do to ensure that Jewish students feel safe on campus and can study like every other British citizen?

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): Sadly, there are a number of Hamas's useful idiots—a fifth column—across some of our universities. The Secretary of State has said that she will not stand for it; the Home Secretary will not stand for it. We have written to universities. This is absolutely unacceptable; we expect our universities to be safe places for all Jewish students.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): If the pay offer for teachers in England had matched the award for teachers in Scotland, the Secretary of State would have averted the current strike action. Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, has said that minimum service levels for teachers are

“nothing short of an overtly hostile act from the Government and an attack on the basic democratic freedoms of school leaders and teachers.”

Will the Secretary of State explain how she expects to tackle the staffing crisis in teaching when she goes out of her way to alienate the profession?

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): We have a record number of teachers in schools in England: 468,000. That is 27,000 more teachers today than in 2010. We accepted the recommendations of the School Teachers' Review Body for a 6.5% pay rise—the highest in 30 years—for teachers and headteachers in our school system.

T4. [906649] **Kate Kniveton** (Burton) (Con): Like all county councils, Staffordshire County Council is struggling with the rising demand for special educational needs and disabilities support in schools, and with lengthy delays in issuing education, health and care plans. That is leaving children and families with a lack of vital support and appropriate education for their needs. What steps are the Government taking to tackle the shortage of educational psychologists and to ensure that children receive the education that they need to achieve good outcomes?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of educational psychologists. We are investing £21 million to train 400 more educational psychologists, building on the £10 million already announced to train more than 200 from this term.

T2. [906647] **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): The Department for Education has stated that

“Where responsible bodies discover lead piping, they must take action”.

Will the Secretary of State confirm whether those bodies are asked to look proactively for lead piping? What action are they asked to take if any is found?

Nick Gibb: Schools must have suitable drinking water facilities. Where responsible bodies, such as local authorities or academy trusts, discover lead piping in a school, they must take action, working as appropriate with water companies. Capital funding allocated to schools each year can be used to fund the removal of pipe work if required, but when a school has a particular concern, it can contact the Department for assistance.

T6. [906651] **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): I welcome the idea of the advanced British standard assessment, although the name is unwieldy—acronyms are used elsewhere—and difficult to export. That aside, has there been any more exploration of what the curriculum would look like and of how many years young people would need to study for the qualification? Does it mean the end of GCSEs?

Nick Gibb: No, it does not. The advanced British standard will offer a broad, balanced and knowledge-rich curriculum that builds on reforms of the last decade. Its curriculum will form a core part of the formal consultation in the coming months. GCSEs remain important, rigorous and highly regarded qualifications, providing preparation for the new advanced British standard.

T5. [906650] **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): When does the Minister anticipate that it might be possible to deliver at least half of all education, health and care plans for SEND children within the Government's own legal timeframe?

David Johnston: We are undertaking a significant programme of reform to ensure not only that EHCPs are delivered in the right timeframe but that children get the support they need at an earlier stage without needing one.

T7. [906652] **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline the support provided to the Metropolitan Borough of Bury by the Government to enhance educational provision for children with special educational needs?

David Johnston: The Metropolitan Borough of Bury is getting significant support. In addition to the funding increases, we have appointed a SEND adviser to work with the borough to improve services. The Council for Disabled Children is supporting it to strengthen EHCPs. Two special free schools have been approved, and Bury is also one of 34 areas in our safety valve programme.

T8. [906653] **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): In recent weeks, we have seen reported instances of antisemitism rise by 1,300% and Islamophobia by 150%, with Jewish kids afraid to go to school and Muslim kids asked, "Whose side are you on?" What are the Government doing to ensure that children are taught sensitively but robustly about the wrongs of such intolerance, and does Ofsted have a role in ensuring consistency of approach in all schools?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member is absolutely right: antisemitism has no place in education. It was an honour to join the Secretary of State's visit to Menorah High School last week, together with the whole ministerial team, standing in solidarity with that school and with the Jewish community. We have written to all schools and colleges urging a swift response to hate-related incidents and active reassurance for their students

and staff, and we continue to work with faith leaders, schools and Ofsted to monitor the response to those concerns.

T9. [906654] **Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), since Hamas's attack, Jewish students on campus report that they have had a year's worth of antisemitic incidents in only two weeks. Some have been targeted, the attack itself was celebrated, and some have received death threats. As such, does the Minister agree that universities should work with the Union of Jewish Students to publicise the welfare hotline that it has established; avail themselves of the training that the UJS offers; and work to implement the recommendations of the recent report of the taskforce on antisemitism in higher education?

Robert Halfon: I have made it clear that we will not tolerate antisemitism on campus. We are working closely with the Union of Jewish Students and the higher education Jewish chaplaincy service, as well as the Community Security Trust. I welcome the taskforce's report and its recommendations, and we absolutely urge universities to prioritise the implementation of that report.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Having recently visited a local nursery in Birdwell, I know that its staff are very concerned about their ability to plan for provision for children in the year 2024-25. When will the Government give them certainty on hourly rates?

David Johnston: We will be setting out the funding rates very shortly.

T10. [906655] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): One day after Hamas's brutal massacre in Israel, a student at the University of Manchester spoke of being full of "pride and joy" at a once-in-a-lifetime experience—not only a disgusting comment but one that points to possible extremism in our university campuses. Far too many think that there are no consequences for spreading such hate in our educational settings, so will my right hon. Friend set out what the real consequences are?

Robert Halfon: I mentioned previously that unfortunately, we have some of Hamas's useful idiots across our campuses, and we will not stand for it—they represent a fifth column supporting terrorism. We are doing everything possible. The Prevent duty requires higher education providers to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism, and we will work with the universities to ensure that they take any extremist activity very seriously.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): James, a 14-year-old lad from my constituency, has been passed from pillar to post by schools that simply cannot deal with his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism. Will the Minister meet me on that specific case?

David Johnston: I would be delighted to meet with the hon. Gentleman.

Israel and Gaza

3.38 pm

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): Mr Speaker, last week I visited the middle east, bringing a message of solidarity with the region against terror and against the further spread of conflict. I met with the leaders of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority to co-ordinate our response to the crisis before us, but also to renew the better vision of the future that Hamas are trying to destroy.

I travelled first to Israel. It is a nation in mourning, but it is also a nation under attack. The violence against Israel did not end on 7 October. Hundreds of rockets are launched at its towns and cities every day, and Hamas still hold around 200 hostages, including British citizens. In Jerusalem, I met some of the relatives, who are suffering unbearable torment. Their pain will stay with me for the rest of my days. I am doing everything in my power, and working with all our partners, to get their loved ones home. In my meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Herzog, I told them once again that we stand resolutely with Israel in defending itself against terror, and I stressed again the need to act in line with international humanitarian law and take every possible step to avoid harming civilians. It was a message delivered by a close friend and ally. I say it again: we stand with Israel.

I recognise that the Palestinian people are suffering terribly. Over 4,000 Palestinians have been killed in this conflict. They are also the victims of Hamas, who embed themselves in the civilian population. Too many lives have already been lost, and the humanitarian crisis is growing. I went to the region to address these issues directly. In Riyadh, and then Cairo, I met individually with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman from Saudi Arabia; the Amir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani; President Sisi in Egypt; and President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority. These were further to my meetings with the King of Jordan last week and calls with other leaders, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's extensive travel in the region.

There are three abiding messages from all these conversations. First, we must continue working together to get more humanitarian support into Gaza. The whole House will welcome the limited opening of the Rafah crossing. It is important progress and testament to the power of diplomacy, but it is not enough. We need a constant stream of aid pouring in, bringing the water, food, medicine and fuel that is so desperately needed, so we will keep up the diplomatic pressure. We have already committed £10 million of extra support to help civilians in Gaza, and I can announce today that we are going further. We are providing an additional £20 million of humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza, more than doubling our previous support to the Palestinian people. There are major logistical and political challenges to delivering this aid, which I discussed with President Sisi. My right hon. Friend the Development Minister is leading an effort to ensure the maximum amount of aid is pre-positioned, with UK support ready to deliver. We are also working intensively to ensure that British nationals trapped in Gaza are able to leave through the Rafah crossing when it properly reopens.

Secondly, this is not a time for hyperbole and simplistic solutions. It is a time for quiet and dogged diplomacy that recognises the hard realities on the ground and delivers help now, and we have an important role to play. In all my meetings, people were clear that they value Britain's engagement. The UK's voice matters. We have deep ties across the region—ties of defence, trade and investment, but also of history. President Abbas pointed to that history—not the British mandate in Palestine or the Balfour declaration, but the UK's efforts over decades to support the two-state solution.

Thirdly, growing attacks by Hezbollah on Israel's northern border, rising tensions on the west bank, and missiles and drones launched from Yemen show that some are seeking escalation, so we need to invest more deeply in regional stability and in the two-state solution. Last night, I spoke to the leaders of the United States, Germany, France, Italy and Canada. We are all determined to prevent escalation. That is why I am deploying RAF and Royal Navy assets, monitoring threats to regional security and supporting humanitarian efforts. Our support for a two-state solution is highly valued across the region, but it cannot just be a clichéd talking point to roll out at times like this. The truth is that, in recent years, energy has moved into other avenues such as the Abraham accords and normalisation talks with Saudi Arabia. We support those steps absolutely and believe that they can bolster wider efforts, but we must never lose sight of how essential the two-state solution is. We will work with our international partners to bring renewed energy and creativity to that effort. It will rely on establishing more effective governance for Palestinian territories in Gaza and the west bank. It will also mean challenging actions that undercut legitimate aspirations for Palestinian statehood.

Mr Speaker, Hamas care more about their paymasters in Iran than the children they hide behind. So let me be clear: there is no scenario where Hamas can be allowed to control Gaza or any part of the Palestinian territories. Hamas is a threat not only to Israel, but to many others across the region. All the leaders I met agree that this is a watershed moment. It is time to set the region on a better path.

I also want to say a word about the tone of the debate. When things are so delicate, we all have a responsibility to take additional care in the language we use, and to operate on the basis of facts alone. The reaction to the horrific explosion at the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital was a case in point. As I indicated last week, we have taken care to look at all the evidence currently available, and I can now share our assessment with the House. On the basis of the deep knowledge and analysis of our intelligence and weapons experts, the British Government judge that the explosion was likely caused by a missile, or part of one, that was launched from within Gaza towards Israel. The misreporting of that incident had a negative effect in the region, including on a vital US diplomatic effort, and on tensions here at home. We need to learn the lessons and ensure that in future there is no rush to judgment.

We have seen hate on our streets again this weekend. We all stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people—that is the message I brought to President Abbas—but we will never tolerate antisemitism in our country. Calls for jihad on our streets are a threat not only to the Jewish

community but to our democratic values, and we expect the police to take all necessary action to tackle extremism head on.

This is a moment for great care and caution, but also for moral clarity. Hope and humanity must win out against the scourge of terrorism and aggression. The 7 October attack was driven by hatred, but it was also driven by Hamas's fear that a new equilibrium might be emerging in the middle east, one that would leave old divisions behind and offer hope of a better, more secure, more prosperous way forward. It is the same motivation that drives Putin's war in Ukraine—the fear of Ukraine's emergence as a modern, thriving democracy, and the desire to pull it back into some imperialist fantasy of the past. Putin will fail, and so will Hamas. We must keep alive that vision of a better future, against those who seek to destroy it. Together with our partners, that is what we will do, and I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

3.48 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of his statement.

The brutal attack in Israel just over two weeks ago was the darkest day in Jewish history since the holocaust—two weeks of grief for the innocent people who lost brothers, sisters, children; two weeks of torture for the families whose loved ones were taken hostage by Hamas. There was a small glimmer of light this weekend with the release of two American hostages, Natalie and Judith Raanan. I met members of their family last week, and I know that they will be overcome with relief. But Hamas still hold hundreds more—sons, daughters, mums, dads are still missing. They are innocent people who could, if Hamas willed it, be released immediately. But they remain hostage because Hamas want the chaos of war. Hamas want Jews to suffer. Hamas want the Palestinian people to share in the pain, because the Palestinian people are not their cause, and peace is not their aim. The dignity of human life—Jew or Muslim—means absolutely nothing to them. In light of their barbarism, Israel has the right to defend herself. Yes, to get her hostages home, but also to defeat Hamas so that nobody need suffer like this again and so that we might once more see a road to a lasting peace, with a Palestinian state alongside a safe and secure Israel.

This operation can and must be done within international law. We democracies know that all human life is equal. Innocent lives must be protected. Those are the principles that differentiate us from the terrorists who target Israel. There must now be clear humanitarian corridors within Gaza for those escaping violence. Civilians must not be targeted. Where Palestinians are forced to flee, they must not be permanently displaced from their homes. International law is clear. It also means that basic services, including water, electricity and the fuel needed for it, cannot be denied. Hamas might not care for the safety and security of the Palestinian people, but we do. We cannot and will not close our eyes to their suffering. Gaza is now a humanitarian emergency. There is not enough food. Clean water is running out. Hospitals are going without medicine and electricity. People are starving, reduced to drinking contaminated filth. Babies are lying in incubators that could switch off at any moment.

The deal struck by the United States to get a flow of trucks through the Rafah crossing is an important first step. There were 20 on Saturday and 14 on Sunday, but it is nowhere near enough. Gaza is not a small town facing a few shortages; it has a population the size of Greater Manchester. It is a place where, even before this devastation, life was a struggle. Gaza needs aid, and it needs to be rapid, safe, unhindered and regular.

Countries able to provide support must step up, including the United Kingdom, so I welcome the increased funding for humanitarian aid that the Prime Minister has announced this afternoon. The EU has promised to treble humanitarian aid and the US has appointed a special co-ordinator for international aid to Gaza. I ask whether the Prime Minister can commit to the same, because Britain must stand ready to ensure that aid gets to the right places, to deploy British experts and medical support teams, and to work with international partners to give UN agencies the resources they need for the long term, because there is a long term. Even as we stand by Israel in her fight against Hamas, our eyes must also look to the future: a future where Israeli citizens live free from the fear of terrorist attacks, and a future for the Palestinian people where they and their children enjoy the freedoms and opportunities that we take for granted.

For too long, we have talked about a two-state solution and the dignity and justice of a Palestinian state alongside a safe and secure Israel, without a serious path or will to make it happen. For too long, we have allowed welcome progress in improving relations between Israel and her neighbours to sit without any progress on the future for Palestine and its people. That must change. We stand with Israel and her right to defend herself against the terrorists of Hamas. We stand for international law, the protection of innocent lives and humanitarian support for the Palestinians. We do so because we stand for a political path to a two-state solution and a better future. These are dark days, but the light must never go out. We must not let it.

The Prime Minister: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his constructive comments and his support. Just to recap, on humanitarian aid, by announcing an additional £20 million today, we will be doubling our aid to the region, where we are already one of the leading contributors of any country in the world. The Development Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), will remind me, but I think that about 10% of the UN mission in the region is funded by UK contributions. Most of our aid is funnelled through that. It is also worth bearing in mind that President Sisi specifically commended the efforts of the UK alongside the US in ensuring that the Rafah crossing could be open and functioning. That is testament to the work of the Development Minister, the Foreign Secretary and our team on the ground.

In response to the Leader of the Opposition's question with regard to the UN, the Development Minister is in close contact—on an almost daily basis—with Martin Griffiths, the head of the UN's humanitarian relief efforts, to ensure that the UK can play a leading role in supporting what is happening on the ground. There are considerable logistical challenges in getting aid to the people who need it, and there are areas where we can make a difference, particularly around el-Arish, the

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logistical hub that supplies are moving to. I confirm that tomorrow the Development Minister will lay a written ministerial statement setting out further details of the increase in humanitarian aid that we have announced today.

In closing, I concur with what the Leader of the Opposition said. There is absolutely a future available to us that is more prosperous and more stable for people living in the region; one where people can live with dignity, with security and with opportunity. That is the future that Hamas are trying to destroy. We should stand united to stop that happening.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend get any impression from his discussions with Arab leaders that they understood the purpose of Hamas terrorism to derail their efforts to find a better way of living in the middle east? Was he satisfied that they were sufficiently aware of the benefit that Russia hopes to derive from all this and the need to deter Iran from further escalation?

The Prime Minister: I can tell my right hon. Friend from all my conversations across the region with Arab leaders that there is absolutely no love or affection for Hamas. Indeed, it is the opposite, as the Palestinian President said with me when he condemned in no uncertain terms the terrorist atrocities that they have perpetrated. All leaders see Hamas as a destabilising influence in the region and want to work with us and others to prevent the situation from escalating and to limit Hamas's ability to carry out attacks like this in the future.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the SNP.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I said last week that history would judge us based on our response not just to the abhorrent terrorist attack in Israel but to the humanitarian crisis that was undoubtedly unfolding in Gaza. In our collective unequivocal condemnation of the abhorrent attacks of 7 October, the House has been and continues to be fully united, just as we are united in our condemnation of any form of antisemitism that rears its head on these isles, and in our thoughts and prayers for all the hostages, who need to be returned safely to their families.

However, in respect of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, while I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement, I believe that we must go further. Here is why. Turning off electricity and water to Gaza is collective punishment. Limiting the free access of food and medicines to Gaza is collective punishment. Preventing people, including British citizens, from fleeing Gaza is collective punishment. Dropping leaflets in northern Gaza telling people to flee or they will be deemed partners of Hamas is a precursor to further collective punishment. All of us in the Chamber know that collective punishment is prohibited by international law. I ask the Prime Minister to use his office to do some good on the humanitarian side of the conflict in Gaza and to answer the question I asked last week. Given the severity of this appalling situation, will he now agree that a ceasefire is required in the region?

The Prime Minister: I would characterise the situation differently from the hon. Gentleman, with the greatest of respect. Israel has suffered an appalling act of terror. It has the right to defend itself and ensure that something like it does not happen again. He talked about people moving from the north to south of Gaza; it is absolutely right that Israel takes every precaution to avoid harming civilians. In my conversation with the President, he confirmed that Israel intends to act within international humanitarian law, but Hamas are preventing people from moving, keeping them in harm's way. The hon. Gentleman did not mention that in his question, but he would do well to recognise that that is Hamas's policy: embedding themselves in civilian populations, using civilians as human shields and preventing them from leaving when they have been given advance notice.

Where I agree, and have been very clear, is that we must do everything we can to support humanitarian efforts in Gaza. I refer the hon. Gentleman to my previous comments. I raised all those issues with the Israeli Prime Minister, and we will continue to do everything we can. Again, I point out that it is not just a function of money but about the logistics of getting very considerable amounts of aid into the region. The UK has capability and expertise that we are very willing to bring to bear, and we are having active discussions about how best to do so.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Let me start by thanking the Chelmsford Muslim community for hosting a meeting that brought together Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders on Friday. All were deeply shocked by the events of 7 October. There is no place for hate, but there is great concern about the loss of civilian life since then, and the risk of contagion and of the situation escalating even further. I thank our Prime Minister for saying that, in defending itself from terror, Israel also needs to act within international law. How is that being monitored? If there are breaches, how would any perpetrator be held to account?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend will know that there are established mechanisms for that, but I am reassured by what the Israeli President has said very publicly and in our conversations that Israel intends to act within humanitarian law and is taking every precaution to avoid harming civilians.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): We all condemned the attacks by Hamas on innocent civilians, but since then thousands of innocent Palestinians—including children—have been killed by the Israeli army's bombardment, which I also condemn. Over a million Palestinians have been displaced, and many more are suffering without access to food, water, electricity, fuel and medicines, which is inhumane and against international law. Will the Prime Minister join me in calling for a ceasefire today, to end this collective punishment?

The Prime Minister: Again, Israel has the right to defend itself in line with international and humanitarian law, and it has our support in doing that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The statement will run until 5 o'clock, so let us help one another to get everyone in.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): How can members of the British Jewish community feel safe when people are allowed to chant on the streets of Britain in favour of jihad, call for the raising of religious armies to go and fight Israel, call for the mobilisation of the intifada, and walk down our street holding signs that display despicable ancient antisemitic tropes? Those are marches not for peace but for hate. They glorify the worst murder of Jews since the holocaust, and they have to stop.

The Prime Minister: Hateful extremism has no place in our society. Calls for jihad and for Muslim armies to rise up are a threat not only to the Jewish community but to our democratic values. The police are operationally independent, but the Home Secretary has a role in holding police forces to account. As Members will know, she raised this matter with the Met police commissioner at their meeting earlier today. Anyone who commits a crime—whether inciting racial hatred, glorifying terrorism or violating public order—should expect to face the full force of the law.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. I agree with him and the Leader of the Opposition that the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is truly horrifying. To prevent a catastrophe it is essential that far more aid reaches the people who need it and it is vital that the hostages are unconditionally released. Hamas's evil attacks have claimed far too many innocent lives already. Israel unquestionably has the right to protect its citizens and target these brutal terrorists in line with international law, just as we all have a duty to prevent more needless civilian deaths. Does the Prime Minister agree with many of us, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, that the UK should be leading diplomatic efforts to secure a pause in hostilities with a temporary humanitarian ceasefire to allow for the hostages to be released and to get aid into Gaza?

The Prime Minister: Let me just say exactly what I have been trying to do over the past week: ensure that we can diplomatically engage with partners in the region—as, indeed, the Foreign Secretary has been doing. That has resulted in humanitarian aid coming into Gaza. More needs to come, but that is a sign of progress. In all our conversations, particularly with the Emir of Qatar, we are focused on releasing hostages of all nationalities, but we are particularly concerned about the British hostages. We will continue to have that engagement with our partners to do everything in our power to secure the release of the hostages.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that I am one of the Members of this House who takes the most satisfaction in the fact that it is he who is Prime Minister of this great democratic country, with all the powers of analysis that he brings to his role. We are all in this nation accountable before the law—perhaps the only one who is not has to act on my right hon. Friend's advice anyway, and he is accountable before the law like everyone else. I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, but we do not quite get to the conclusion. This is a watershed moment: we are either going to build a future that is based on a killing field in Gaza, or we are going to have a ceasefire and the opportunity to bring the necessary aid there for all the people who are

suffering now so appallingly. My right hon. Friend knows that we must operate within the law. The law is clear and it requires a ceasefire to be implemented now.

The Prime Minister: It is difficult to tell Israel to have a ceasefire when it is still facing rocket fire on an almost daily basis and when its citizens are still being held hostage. It has suffered an appalling terrorist attack and has a right to defend itself, but, as I have said, it is important that that is done in accordance with international law and it is important that Israel takes every possible precaution to avoid harming civilians. Based on all my conversations, that is something we will continue to expect and continue to impress on the Israeli Government.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Nobody is arguing about whether Israel has a right to defend itself, but my constituents want to know what has already been asked by Members from the Prime Minister's own side: what happens if international law is not followed? Can the Prime Minister give some assurance to the country, and to people in my constituency, that if Israel breaches international law in its endeavours to defend itself, he will stand at that Dispatch Box and say so?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady well knows, there are established processes and mechanisms to take account of international law. But again, we cannot lose sight, just a week or two later, of the fact that Hamas—an absolutely evil terrorist organisation—have perpetrated a horrific attack on over 1,000 people in Israel, and Israel has the right to defend itself and ensure that that does not happen again.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his recent attempts in the middle east and for his reminder that the UK, regardless of political party, has been behind the two-state solution from the word go. It is also becoming very clear, as he referenced, that Iran's hand is behind all the genocidal murdering and kidnapping of Jewish Israeli people. I therefore ask a simple question. If we know all this, and we now know it is abroad in the UK creating useful idiots to go out and promote its propaganda, is it not time that we reviewed again the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps with a view to banning its activities, and the role of Iranian banks here in the UK, in the City of London? Why are they still here getting money and putting it towards terrorist activities?

The Prime Minister: We have already taken strong action, such as sanctioning more than 350 Iranian individuals and entities, including the IRGC in its entirety. Furthermore, the National Security Act 2023 implements new measures to protect the British public, including new offences of espionage and foreign interference. As my right hon. Friend knows, we do not comment on specific organisations and whether they are being considered for proscription, but he can rest assured that we discuss Iran and how best to contain it with all our allies on a regular basis.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Indiscriminate bombing and obliterating entire neighbourhoods is a war crime. Collective punishment and starving a population

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of necessities is a war crime. Ordering 1.1 million people to leave their homes and forcibly displacing them is a war crime as well. I absolutely condemn Hamas's killing of Israeli civilians, and I echo the calls for the release of hostages, but that does not excuse war crimes, and merely saying that international law should be followed when it is clearly not being followed is an insult. Let me ask the Prime Minister this: how many more Palestinians must die before he condemns Israel for violating international law, and calls for an immediate ceasefire?

The Prime Minister: As I have made very clear, we support the Palestinian people because they are victims of Hamas too. We mourn the loss of every innocent life; we mourn the loss of civilians of every faith and every nationality who have been killed in this conflict. However, I simply disagree with the hon. Lady's characterisation of what is going on. There is a significant difference between a terrorist organisation that deliberately and specifically targeted the killing, mutilation and murder of innocent civilians—including children and women and babies—a couple of weeks ago, and Israel's lawful right to defend itself and go after those perpetrators.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for all the efforts that he and his team are making at this time. During the important discussions that he was having with leaders in the region at the end of last week about getting more humanitarian assistance into Gaza—and that is exactly right—was he able to obtain any new information about the welfare of hostages who have been taken by Hamas into Gaza? They include many elderly people, toddlers with medical needs and disabled people. Is it not important for us to make sure that they are not forgotten, and that the supplies going into Gaza reach the hostages as well?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising an excellent point. It is difficult to ascertain that information precisely, but I give him the reassurance that we are talking extensively to our partners. I had a very constructive conversation with the Emir of Qatar about this issue to put pressure on those holding the hostages to release them unconditionally and to ensure their wellbeing in the meantime.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. Given that Hizb ut-Tahrir is a fundamentalist organisation that is banned in 40 countries and across most of the Arab world, why are its members allowed to parade on the streets of London and call for the destruction of the state of Israel?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we do of course keep the list of proscribed organisations under review, but we do not routinely comment on whether an organisation is or is not under consideration for proscription. I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier comments: hateful extremism of the type that we saw this weekend has no place in our society, and it should be met with the full force of the law.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): A group of 100 journalists from around the world have just been shown some indescribable raw footage of the

Hamas attacks in a private screening. According to a BBC journalist, it features a father and two sons aged roughly seven and nine seen running into a shelter in their underwear. A terrorist throws a grenade into the shelter, killing the father and badly injuring the two boys, who run back into the house covered in blood. The two children are screaming for their father, and saying that they are going to die. The terrorist is seen calmly drinking water from the family's fridge. That is just one of the videos that have been shown to 100 journalists from around the world in the last couple of hours. Will the Prime Minister confirm that any person in the United Kingdom supporting this vicious terrorism will be subject to the full force of the law?

The Prime Minister: I saw much of the same footage myself on my visit to Israel last week and I can tell the House that it is absolutely horrifying to watch. When we hear in this House about Israel's actions, it is important to have those images in our mind. What happened to its citizens was unforgivable and it has every right to defend itself against that. I can also provide my right hon. and learned Friend with the reassurance that, as he well knows, under the Terrorism Acts of 2000 and 2006, the glorification of terrorism, support for proscribed organisations and the encouraging of terrorism are all offences and will be met with the full force of law.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister said in his statement that this was a moment for moral clarity, and I agree with him. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is dire at the moment: 34 trucks have gone in, set against a normal backdrop of hundreds going in every day. We are on a precipice, with people including women and children in hospitals dying because of shortages of power, water and food. I welcome the money for aid but, if it cannot get in, it is not helping. What can the Prime Minister do to get that aid in, in the quantities that will prevent avoidable deaths in Gaza?

The Prime Minister: Last week, President Sisi himself commended the United Kingdom for our diplomatic efforts to ensure the access of humanitarian aid into Gaza, and I thank my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Development Minister for their efforts in that regard. We in this House should be proud of the UK's efforts to ensure that that access is now open. Of course we need more, and that is why the logistical support that we can provide to ensure that high volumes of aid can flow freely to the people who need it is imperative. The Development Minister is extensively engaged with the UN on that topic.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. My constituency has been the location for two major solidarity with Palestine protests over the past two Saturdays, and I suspect that there will be more to come. The Jewish community in Westminster has highlighted to me that these protests start just a few minutes' walk from synagogues and that they coincide with the end of Shabbat services. Does the Prime Minister agree that, if further such protests go ahead, the timing and location of their starts should be considered, to take into account that members of the Jewish community are still worried about their safety and that the protests coincide with their Shabbat?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. There is no place on British streets for demonstrations, convoys or flag-waving that not only glorify terrorism but harass the Jewish community. There is no place for antisemitism on our streets, which is why we have also increased funding for the Community Security Trust to protect British Jews from these types of incidents. The decisions that she refers to are typically operational decisions for the police and local communities, but I will very much bear in mind what she has said in our further engagements with those entities and individuals.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement and for his calmness in the face of the barbarity that the world has witnessed. I also welcome the comments from the Leader of the Opposition and agree with the solidarity that has been expressed—hopefully profoundly—across the House. I want to draw the Prime Minister's attention to the murder by the terrorists of Kim Damti, a 22-year-old Irish-Israeli woman. I have searched this city long and hard for a book of condolence for her, but unfortunately none is to be found in the Irish embassy or anywhere else, so I want to put her name on record so that she too is immortalised and remembered forever.

The Prime Minister: I know that Kim's family will be grateful to my hon. Friend for what he said, and I know that the whole House's thoughts will be with them at this unspeakably difficult time.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Hamas has not just abducted civilians but refused to release proof of life or lists, which is clearly adding even more to the distress. Will my right hon. Friend outline the steps he is taking to ensure that the Red Cross does everything possible to extract that information from this terror group?

The Prime Minister: One of the things we have been discussing with our regional partners, including the Qataris, is how best to ensure humanitarian access to those hostages and to get better information on their wellbeing. That is something we will continue to press on.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The killings on 7 October were appalling and have to be totally condemned, as everyone has today. However, the loss of 5,000 Palestinian lives in Gaza is continuing and getting worse. The question is: why did the Prime Minister instruct Britain's representative to the UN not to support the call for a very minimal thing, which is a humanitarian pause to allow aid to go in and a ceasefire to take place, to start to bring about a process of peace? Ultimately, that is the only way forward. Ultimately, the only way forward is the end of the occupation. Ultimately, the only way forward is recognition of the rights of the people of Palestine.

The Prime Minister: Our regional and diplomatic engagement has focused extensively on how we can bring about a better and brighter future for the people of Palestine and the Palestinians, but I am surprised the right hon. Gentleman has made no reference to the fact that an organisation he once described as a friend has perpetrated an absolutely appalling act of terrorism against more than 1,000 people.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Earlier this afternoon, the all-party parliamentary group for Israel, which I co-chair, heard from victims, the families of victims and the families of hostages held in Gaza. Their one ask, above all else, is of course for hostages to be returned home, safe and sound, but there are babies aged nine months and many elderly people who are totally dependent on medicines that they were not carrying when they were taken hostage. The Prime Minister has already mentioned the role of the International Red Cross. Could he update the House on what is happening to enable the International Red Cross to gain access to the hostages and to supply them with the medicines they need to keep them alive?

The Prime Minister: I can tell my hon. Friend that is exactly what we are trying to do. We are also working with the Egyptian Red Crescent, which is engaged on the ground. Our priority is to provide food, water, medicines and fuel to those who need them. We will continue our extensive dialogue with partners to increase both the speed and the duration of aid, and to help to get aid to the people who need it.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I think we can all agree that there is no place on our streets for hateful extremism, so what does the Prime Minister have to say to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, who said that, at the moment, law enforcement do not have the powers they need to combat hateful extremism?

The Prime Minister: The Home Secretary met the police chiefs this morning and, of course, we continue in dialogue with them. Where there are gaps in the law, we are happy to address and look at them, but we believe that at the moment the police do have the powers to arrest those who incite violence or racial hatred. There is no place on our streets for that type of behaviour, and we will work extensively to clarify the guidance to officers on the ground so they are fully aware of the powers and tools available to them to make sure these people feel the force of the law.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his dignified strength and leadership in these challenging times. Indeed, I also thank the Foreign Secretary for his leadership.

There is a time for peace and a time for war. Of course, this is a time of war for Israel. Does the Prime Minister agree that, post conflict, we cannot go back to the status quo and that there will need to be a comprehensive peace settlement for the region as a whole, involving many actors in the region, perhaps including some people we may not want to talk to today? Although Britain and the United States will be at the vanguard of that, it has to be a regional solution and a long-lasting solution, and the people of Gaza should never, ever be represented by an organisation that wants to kill rather than save lives.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent contribution. He is absolutely right. The Foreign Secretary and I are having those conversations with people across the region as we speak. We cannot go back to the status quo ante; that is not right and it is unacceptable. That means we have to work positively

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and with energy on a better future for the people of Gaza especially. That is a huge priority for us in the coming days and weeks.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Fourteen hundred Israelis have been killed by Hamas attacks, which I utterly condemn. Over 4,700 Palestinians have been killed by the airstrikes and, according to Save the Children, a child is dying every 15 minutes inside Gaza. Last week, I asked the Prime Minister what steps were being taken to de-escalate the conflict so that it does not engulf the wider region. This is happening. Can he say more about what he is doing to support any other UN resolutions that may help to de-escalate the conflict and create the humanitarian space that is desperately needed to help civilians and bring some kind of end to this conflict?

The Prime Minister: The biggest risk on escalation comes from Iran and its destabilising behaviour. We have seen worrying rocket attacks from the Houthis over the past few days, but also increasing rocket fire from Hezbollah. It is important that those are restrained. Our engagement, particularly with Arab leaders, has focused on them putting pressure on those who have influence in the region to de-escalate those tensions. We have also sent Navy assets to the region to help, and to make sure that arms shipments are not getting to those nefarious actors.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Events in Israel and Gaza have a direct influence upon my constituents. In May 2021, a convoy for Palestine drove through north London with loudspeakers advocating that people raped Jewish girls and mothers. On Saturday, as the Prime Minister said, “jihad” was called for on the streets of London, and a London underground driver said the same over the tannoy. Only yesterday, a long-term resident of my constituency has been identified as a Hamas operative. Indeed, two further names have been drawn to my attention. The Prime Minister says that action will be taken, but it simply is not. My constituents do not expect the law to be enforced; they demand it.

The Prime Minister: May I thank my hon. Friend for everything he does to champion particularly his Jewish constituents and the community more broadly? I can let him know that, at this point, I am aware of over 38 arrests that have been made by the police over the past week or two on this particular issue.

On the other issue that my hon. Friend mentioned, the British Transport police are actively working with Transport for London to look into it. Of course, that is an operational matter for the police, but the Government are clear that everyone should have the right to travel safely and without intimidation. I would also hope that the Mayor of London and others responsible for transport will take steps to make sure that that is the case.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): In their joint policy statement, the Prime Minister, President Biden and other leaders said that they have

“committed to continue coordinating with partners in the region to ensure sustained and safe access to food, water, medical care, and other assistance required to meet humanitarian needs.”

Fuel is not mentioned specifically. However, in his statement today—at page 4, line 7, in the advance copy—the Prime Minister does mention fuel. Is securing the delivery of fuel a UK policy aim only, or is it the joint position of all the leaders?

The Prime Minister: The UK is working hard to ensure that humanitarian aid gets to the people who need it, and fuel is one of the things that we are working on.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement today of an extra £20 million in humanitarian aid. Last week, I met a group of senior leaders from my mosques in Bolton. At the very end, a note was passed to me that said, “Can we stop just having words on the two-state solution and actually have some action?” I welcome what the Prime Minister has said, and I recognise that we are in the acute moments of the conflict right now, but—looking to the future—what ideas, international collaboration and leadership will we put in to bring about a two-state solution? Where there is a vacuum, others will fill it.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that we need to redouble our efforts and inject fresh energy into demonstrating progress towards that better future. The most immediate thing we can do is ensure that there is a future in Gaza after Hamas that provides Palestinians with the opportunity to live with dignity and security. That is something that we are actively engaged on with our international counterparts.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Prime Minister, you state in your statement that you stand with the people of Palestine and recognise their suffering, but according to NGOs on the ground in Gaza, 100 children are dying every day due to Israeli aerial bombardment. Military solutions are not going to end this conflict. Only an immediate ceasefire will, so are you going to call for an immediate ceasefire—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: This House stands united in saying that Israel has a right to defend itself. Then it should stand united with Israel’s right to defend itself in line with international humanitarian law.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): After the appalling protests this weekend, will the Prime Minister endorse the October declaration, which so many Members of this House and the other place have signed, and encourage all people across this country to stand up for British Jews? I welcome the decision to double the aid in this situation, but will he reassure the House that not a single penny of it will fall into the hands of Hamas?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend obviously speaks with experience on this issue. I assure him that the Development Minister is very seized of that particular question. Historically, the vast bulk of our aid has been both humanitarian and channelled through the UN, but we will of course make sure that it gets to the people who need it and is not syphoned off or hijacked by Hamas.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I hope the Prime Minister is right in his belief that these recent traumas could give fresh impetus to a process towards a two-state

solution because, frankly, to many of us that seems further away than it has for decades. In that context, what is his understanding of the Israeli Government's medium and long-term strategy, in the event of their ground operation in Gaza going ahead?

The Prime Minister: The Israeli Government are obviously best placed to speak for themselves, but they have a right to defend themselves. They have said very clearly that they want to protect their citizens. I think they do not just have a right to do that; they have a duty to do that, to ensure that attacks like this cannot happen ever again.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Constituents of mine have been in touch to express how appalled they are at a report in *The Times* about how an individual with known links to Hamas was not only given UK citizenship, but given a council house and allowed to buy it at a discount. Will the Prime Minister investigate this case to ensure that nothing like it ever happens again?

The Prime Minister: The House and my right hon. Friend will understand that I cannot comment on any individual case, but the Metropolitan police have set out that they will always take appropriate action when provided with information about alleged activity that may be linked to terrorism perpetrated either abroad or here in the UK.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): We stand on the edge of the land invasion of Gaza, which will put at risk both Palestinian lives and the hostages' lives. What estimate has the Prime Minister made of the potential number of civilian casualties there will be if the land invasion goes ahead?

On a constituency matter, four weeks ago the Muslim women's centre in my constituency suffered an arson attack, which was particularly distressing because the Holy Koran was burnt in the room that was targeted. What assistance will be provided to the Muslim centres that have been under attack in that way?

The Prime Minister: I can say to the right hon. Gentleman that we will not tolerate anti-Muslim hatred in any form and will seek to stamp it out wherever it occurs. In June, the Security Minister confirmed that additional funding of around £24.5 million would be available to provide protective security at mosques and Muslim faith schools, and the deadline for the protective security scheme has been extended to cover more applications.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his unstinting work in the region to bring about a positive influence. The release of two hostages on Friday evening offered the smallest of hopes to many, many people for further releases as time goes on. In his statement on Friday, he specifically referred to Qatar and Israel. Will he say a little more about the negotiations and the influence he is bringing to bear, and the hope that we will see further hostages released as a result?

The Prime Minister: Qatar is an important ally to the UK. We have a wide-ranging bilateral relationship, and because of that it is helpful to discuss with the Emir of

Qatar their efforts—they are taking a lead on this—to secure the release of hostages. I welcome and commend Qatar's leadership in helping to secure the release of the first two hostages, but I know that the Emir and Qatar are focused on securing further releases, and we will continue to work closely with them.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I was disappointed that nowhere in this statement did the word "ceasefire" appear. Of course, we absolutely and unreservedly condemn Hamas embedding themselves within the civilian population, but that surely is a compelling reason for a ceasefire, because only by ending the killings can progress towards a political solution take place. So why, even at this late stage, will the Prime Minister not join the growing number of voices calling for an immediate ceasefire, before this catastrophic conflict engulfs the entire region?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to what I said previously. Israel has the right to defend itself. It is facing an appalling terrorist organisation, which has committed appalling acts, and it has the right to ensure that those acts stop and do not hurt its citizens again.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister's work and leadership in engaging with the Arab world to try to find a solution to the difficult and challenging situation that we face in the middle east. This is not the first time that the terrorist organisation, Hamas, have carried out terrorist activity and killed innocent Jewish people to derail the peace process. They did that in 2002, when they killed innocent Jewish people on the night of Passover, just before the Arab peace initiative was about to be launched. That then derailed the peace initiative for the region. I ask the Prime Minister this: from his meetings with Arab leaders, can he tell us whether they are still committed to the Arab peace initiative on the 1967 borders? If that is the case, and given that we were previously committed to it, are we? Moreover, will he host an international summit on a two-state solution as President Clinton did at Camp David in 2000?

The Prime Minister: One thing we must do collectively is re-energise progress towards a two-state solution. That has been the long-standing position of the UK and it remains so. In all the diplomatic engagements of both myself and the Foreign Secretary over the past few days, we have emphasised that with our Arab partners in particular and discussed how we might demonstrate visible progress towards that goal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. This session must end at 5 o'clock. Patently, I am afraid, not all Members will be called. We will do the best that we can, but it would help colleagues if questions were short.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): With reports that 50 dual citizens who are hostages may be released this evening, Walthamstow is grateful to the Prime Minister for all that he has done, and for the commitment that he has made to one family to help get their kidnapped

[Stella Creasy]

family members released. May I ask him about his commitment to other Walthamstow residents—some of the 200 UK nationals—who are stuck in Gaza? Rania and her children are terrified and confused, because they have been to the border several times following Foreign Office advice, only to find that it is closed. Can the Prime Minister update us on whether any UK nationals have yet been rescued and whether there could be a single point of contact at the border for these families if they do make such a perilous journey?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady that I know that it will be a frightening time for British nationals in Gaza and for their families. We continue to provide assistance to them, and they are in contact with the Foreign Office. We have not been able to secure the movement of any British nationals the other way across the Rafah crossing, but we have had discussions with the Egyptians, including the one that I had with President Sisi, to ensure that when the possibility is there, those people can cross. Indeed, we have pre-positioned rapid deployment teams from Border Force in Egypt, close to the border, to make sure that, logistically, we can collect those people and get them home as safely as possible when that happens.

Siobhan Bailie (Stroud) (Con): The new army of online middle east experts, the unverified bots from nefarious sources and the rise of sophisticated artificial intelligence risk seriously undermining the work that the UK and the international community are doing to de-escalate the conflict. Everybody sharing divisive and abusive messages—including, sadly, people in this place—needs to understand that they are serving only to raise the heat on the families of the people with loved ones in Israel and Gaza. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the UK and Governments around the world are working to put pressure on the tech companies to tighten up their controls and ensure that we have prosecutions here where necessary to provide the deterrence that we need?

The Prime Minister: I reassure my hon. Friend, who raises an excellent point, that online offending is as serious as offline offending and that we have robust legislation in place to deal with threatening or abusive behaviour, or behaviour that is intended or likely to stir up hatred. That applies whether it takes place offline or online, and we have worked with the police to fund an online hate crime reporting portal and to ensure that they have all the tools they need to bring those who break the law to justice.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The scale of violence that we have seen in Palestine and Israel over the past few weeks has been horrific and the deaths of innocent people on both sides is a tragedy. The Prime Minister is right that the violence did not end on 7 October, but it did not start then either. Recent wars broke out in the region in 2008, 2012, 2014, 2018 and 2021. What is the Prime Minister doing not only to address the immediate violence, but to bring about a long-lasting peace in the region?

The Prime Minister: We are working hard to make sure that we can provide the people of Palestine with a better future, because they have legitimate aspirations

to live with measures of security and freedom, justice, opportunity and dignity. We will strive to build that future for them in all our dialogue with regional partners.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): On Saturday, Hen Mazzig tweeted that a pro-Palestinian protestor carrying a black flag was “too similar to ISIS”. The Met police disagreed, retweeted him, and publicly said that it was not true. That caused a barrage of antisemitic and homophobic abuse on a scale that he had never seen. I spoke to Hen, and he said that after seeing the most horrific massacre of Jews since the holocaust he thought that he was safe in London, and that British people always made him feel welcome, but now he is worried to leave his home. Does the Prime Minister agree that that example is disgraceful? The Met has a responsibility to protect Jewish communities at this most difficult time, and should be held to account for allowing that barrage of antisemitic abuse towards a member of the Jewish community.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for all that she does to champion the Jewish community. I met most recently with Ministers, police chiefs and the Community Security Trust in Downing Street to discuss how we can better protect the British Jewish community at this difficult time, as well as additional funding. I have been clear that there is zero tolerance in our country for antisemitism. What we have seen recently is unacceptable and it should be met with the full force of the law.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Hamas’s crime was not just what was once called “the banality of evil”; it was the calculation of evil, which is why Hamas must be defeated. The Prime Minister is right that a humanitarian disaster is unfolding in Gaza. That is why he is right to say that we need a constant stream of aid pouring in. The UN Secretary-General is very clear that only a binding-on-all-sides negotiated cessation of hostilities will allow that aid to pour in as the Prime Minister said. Is the UN Secretary-General wrong, and if he is not what will the Prime Minister do at the United Nations to bring about that binding-on-all-sides negotiated ceasefire so that aid can flow and lives can be saved?

The Prime Minister: Aid is already flowing into Gaza as a result of the diplomatic efforts of many, including the UK, and now we are providing further not just financial but logistical support to increase the supply of that aid. We will continue to do so. It is vital that we get it in, and we are working very closely, as I said, with the head of the UN’s humanitarian agency, who is in constant contact with the Development Minister.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Two weeks ago, Hamas committed an unprecedented and heinous pogrom against Jewish people—men, women, babies and children. We all stand with our British Jewish community, so Rotherham Council town hall flew the Israeli flag in solidarity. However, within hours it was attacked, the flag torn down and the flagpole broken. Rotherham Council is refusing to re-fly the Israeli flag. Does the Prime Minister agree that we must stand up against those who wish to intimidate our Jewish community, and re-fly the flag to show that we will always stand up against antisemitism and stand with our Jewish community?

The Prime Minister: We have zero tolerance in the UK for antisemitism, and I thank my hon. Friend for everything that he is doing to champion his Jewish constituents at this difficult time. I am clear that where people incite racial or religious hatred or their conduct is threatening, abusive or disorderly, or causes distress to others, the police can and should take action, and those who commit those crimes should face the full force of the law.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister talk of the need to get fuel into Gaza, but as the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) said, that was not referenced in yesterday's joint statement, even though fuel is due to run out in the next few days and without it there will be no water, no functioning hospitals, no bakeries and so on. Can I press the Prime Minister on a question that he has not been prepared to answer so far: does he consider the withholding of fuel to be in line with the Government of Israel's obligations to act within international law?

The Prime Minister: The Government of Israel will manage their behaviour in line with international law. Our job is to ensure that we get aid into the region, and that is what we are focused on doing.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): During his visit to regional partners in the middle east last week, did the Prime Minister get any sense of the extent to which any necessary Israeli action in Gaza can and will be contained from wider involvement by malign actors?

The Prime Minister: It is important that this conflict does not escalate. That is why our Navy presence to stop illegal arms shipments to entities such as Hezbollah is important, as is the diplomatic engagement that we have had with leaders across the region to ensure that those who would seek to exploit this already awful situation for their own further ends are stopped, and that they hear that message in no uncertain terms from everybody.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): This weekend I went to Whitefield shul and attended a vigil in Manchester for the hostages. The community is scared at what we are seeing on the streets. Since Hamas's barbaric terrorist attack on Israel over two weeks ago, the Community Security Trust has reported a more than 700% rise in antisemitic hate incidents, and Tell MAMA has reported a more than 500% rise in Islamophobia over the same period. Does the Prime Minister agree that there is no place in Britain for antisemitism or Islamophobia, and that those who proliferate this hatred and poison on British streets will be met with the full force of the law?

The Prime Minister: I have been clear that there is zero tolerance for antisemitism or indeed anti-Muslim hatred in any form. We will seek to stamp it out wherever we see it.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): A great many constituents whose families found refuge here in the UK from the holocaust in Europe have reached out to me in the last few weeks to tell me about how they have been personally and directly affected by the ongoing attacks from Hamas in Israel. They would like me to commend my right hon. Friend for the work that he has been doing with our allies to bring

peace and stability, and they pose this question: what further efforts can be made to ensure that, once the current threat from Hamas is addressed through Israel's actions, the evidence is gathered and the perpetrators are identified so that the due process of international law can bring them to justice?

The Prime Minister: It is important that people act in accordance with international law, that those procedures are followed and, indeed, that Israel takes every precaution to avoid harming civilians. In the meantime, we will ensure that we get humanitarian support into the region. Those efforts are starting to bear fruit, but we must double our efforts.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The horrific death toll of this crisis now includes 1,800 Palestinian children. More children will die while the bombs are dropping. The aid needed will not get through. The United Nations Secretary-General is calling for a ceasefire; so is the EU foreign policy chief and so are France, Spain, Japan and Brazil. We need more than just expressions of regret about the loss of civilian lives; we need action to stop it. Is it not time to back a ceasefire, binding on all sides?

The Prime Minister: I think that is a mischaracterisation of some of what some of those countries have said. I spoke to the President of France last night and also leaders from the US, Canada, Italy and Germany. We are united in supporting Israel's right to self-defence, acting in accordance with international law, and committed to getting humanitarian aid into the region, as we are now doing.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I pay tribute to the statesmanlike actions of my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary on this terrible issue. At the weekend, shocking footage travelled the world showing flags of proscribed organisations on the streets of London, with extremists proclaiming Allah's curse on the Jews and others calling for jihad. British Jews are increasingly feeling unsafe in their own country. But what has made that worse is the apparent refusal of the Metropolitan police to do anything about it, other than stand to one side and then issue a self-justificatory tweet that, frankly, was an insult to the intelligence of anybody who read it. What steps has my right hon. Friend taken to ensure that the leadership of the police will in future enforce a zero-tolerance policy for incitement and extremism on our streets, for the good of all our people?

The Prime Minister: Hateful extremism has no place in our society. Calls for jihad and Muslim armies to rise up are a threat not only to the Jewish community but to our democratic values. Of course, the police are operationally independent, but the Home Secretary has raised this with them. Anyone who commits a crime—whether it be inciting racial hatred, glorifying terrorism or violating public order—should expect to face the full force of the law.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment in his statement to challenging actions that undermine the prospects for Palestinian statehood. What is his assessment of the impact of continued illegal settlement building in the Palestinian territories on the prospects for Palestinian statehood?

The Prime Minister: Our position on illegal settlements is of long standing and is in accordance with the UN Security Council resolution, which I know the right hon. Gentleman will be familiar with.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): May I start by sincerely thanking Members who have shown me support over the last week? It has been really meaningful.

There is a narrative developing that I think we need to challenge. Someone can stand for Israel and still care about what is happening in Gaza. Someone can stand for Palestine and not support Hamas or the atrocities that they have committed. Both can be true. It is an incredibly sensitive time both in our communities and, as the Prime Minister will know, diplomatically. Will he look again at the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill, which is coming to the House on Wednesday and relates to this specific conflict? Whatever one may think of the content of the Bill, I hope that he agrees that now is not the time.

The Prime Minister: The Bill to which the hon. Lady refers delivers a manifesto commitment to ban public bodies from imposing their own boycott, divestment or sanctions campaigns against foreign countries. Those could be divisive policies that undermine community cohesion. It is important that the UK has a consistent foreign policy and speaks with one voice internationally.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I have—not just now but for a very long time, since 2007—condemned Hamas for their action, which has always led to Palestinian bloodshed in Gaza, and I will continue to do so. I condemn, of course, the action against the Israelis on 7 October—the slaughter of men, women and children. However, I also want to look at the issues in Gaza. I want support for the people whom Hamas use as shields, and I want their rights protected. I want aid and support for them, because they have just as much of a right to life as anyone else. I ask for a ceasefire in the interim to allow people to get the right amount of aid and to feel safe in their territory.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that Hamas are using innocent Palestinian people as human shields, with tragic consequences. We mourn the loss of every innocent life, of civilians of every faith and nationality who have been killed. We support the Palestinian people because they are victims of Hamas, too. That is why we are so focused on getting aid into Gaza. As he can see, those efforts are starting to bear fruit. Of course, there is far more that we need to do, but he has my assurance that we are working around the clock to bring that aid to the people who need it.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): The Prime Minister said earlier that aid is flowing into Gaza. May I draw his attention to the fact that every single non-governmental organisation is saying that the aid is only of a token amount? What is he doing to ensure that aid goes to Gaza in the quantities that are needed?

The Prime Minister: I just gently point out to the right hon. Lady that aid is going in, but I have also said that it is not enough and there needs to be more. We are

working incredibly hard to ensure that happens. That is a function of the financial support that we are providing, more than doubling our financial support to the region, as well as the logistical support, which is why the conversations that the Development Minister is having with the head of the UN's humanitarian agency are so important. The logistical effort required to bring about high volumes of aid is considerable. The UK has specific expertise, capabilities and equipment that may be able to help with that, particularly at el-Arish airport, and we will work very hard not just to increase the supply of aid into Egypt, but to ensure that it can get to the people who need it across the crossing.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): We must all recognise the responsibility of global leaders to ensure the protection of innocent Palestinian civilians. To that end, may I ask the Prime Minister what steps he is taking to be certain that independent observers are able to monitor fully the ongoing situation in Gaza, to ensure that there is no collective punishment of the innocent and that international law is upheld at all times?

The Prime Minister: Our overriding priority is to ensure that aid gets to those who need it, which is why we are not just increasing our financial contributions to the region, but intensifying our diplomatic efforts with all parties to allow for safe access to aid for those people, and to make sure, as I said, that the logistical efforts are put in place to ensure that aid can actually be delivered once it finds its way to Egypt. None of those things is easy, but we are making progress on all three, and we continue to be committed to all of those things. I am confident that things can keep getting better over time, in terms of both volume and scale.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Clearly, Israel is not going to have a ceasefire while it is still under attack, and it has every right to defend its citizens. However, the deaths in Palestine are increasing, and international concern about that is growing. Too few aid lorries are getting into the country, hostages are being held in Gaza, and we also need to ensure that we stop the deaths of innocent people in Gaza. Is the use of safe zones or humanitarian zones part of a solution that would allow the aid to get in and the hostages to be got out, and would save more lives?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. When it comes to the release of hostages, those conversations are happening—as he can imagine—and we are diplomatically involved in applying as much pressure as we can for the unconditional and safe release of hostages. We saw welcome progress with the first two hostages released, but there is clearly more to do.

With regard to aid, again, we are having those conversations about ensuring that aid can get across the Rafah crossing safely to those people who need it. That is why diplomatic engagement with all sides is important, and we will continue our efforts with the US and other allies in the region to make sure that happens.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Has the Prime Minister considered calling on Israel to allow patients in a critical condition in Gaza to be medically evacuated for urgent care?

The Prime Minister: At this point, there are no people leaving Gaza the other way across the Rafah crossing. That includes the people whom the hon. Gentleman points to, but also British nationals. We continue to press for that, and will continue our diplomatic activity to ensure that those who need to come across can do so. As I said, we have pre-positioned Border Force operatives in Egypt, with the logistical support to ensure that once British nationals do get across the Rafah crossing into Egypt, we are able to collect them and bring them home safely. However, there is still dialogue to be had to make sure that can happen.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): The Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, has now called for a humanitarian ceasefire, alongside Leo Varadkar, the Irish Taoiseach; Humza Yousaf, the Scottish First Minister; the UN Secretary-General; and the EU's High Representative on Foreign Affairs. Will the Prime Minister urgently consider a humanitarian ceasefire on the basis of not just aid, but giving our diplomatic efforts the chance to free those hostages?

The Prime Minister: Those hostages should be freed unconditionally—they should never have been taken in the first place. We will continue our diplomatic efforts to ensure not just their wellbeing but their safe release. That is why our conversations with the Qataris, among others, are so important, and evidence that that diplomacy is paying off has been demonstrated in the past few days. However, there is clearly considerable work to do, given how many more hostages are being held against their will. These people were kidnapped from Israel. They are innocent people. They should not be there, and they should be unconditionally released.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I received an email from a constituent the day after the horrific terrorist attack in Israel. She was worried about the safety of her brother and his friend, who are also both Vauxhall constituents. Working with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, they thankfully made it to the border with Jordan, and are now back home. However, I recognise that this is not the case for so many people. So many people are still worried for their loved ones. The killing of innocent people at a music festival should shock us all, and the kidnapping of innocent children should be condemned. Every night that I put my six-year-old and eight-year-old to bed, I think of those innocent children, kidnapped without their parents. We should all call this out.

Israel has the right to defend itself, and how Israel does so matters. The Prime Minister has touched on the humanitarian work that he has been doing, which I

welcome. However, having listened to Members this afternoon, and given the volume of emails I have received from Vauxhall constituents, does he agree that a temporary humanitarian corridor will help get that urgent aid through to Gaza?

The Prime Minister: We are working on efforts to get more humanitarian aid into Gaza. The crossing is now open, aid is being pre-positioned to el-Arish and neighbouring areas, and we are intensifying our conversations on logistical support as well as further financial support. I am pleased that the hon. Lady's constituent's family were able to exit—I assume via the west bank. Just for Members' information, we are also working on that side of the conflict to ensure we can support those British nationals who have registered with the Foreign Office in their safe departure from the west bank, should they so choose. Border Force teams and others are engaged on that side of the conflict as well.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I apologise to the House, but we are out of time. For those watching, I would like to place on record the fact that a significant number of Members have not been able to be called, but the fact that that is so does not mean they are not interested. I thank them all very much for their patience.

Florence Eshalomi: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is it connected to the statement?

Florence Eshalomi: It is, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Earlier this afternoon the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) mentioned some of the horrific chanting this weekend. He also mentioned that a London Underground tube driver had said the word “jihad”. To ensure clarity—at this really sensitive time, our words matter—should the hon. Member not come and correct what he has said, because it has been stated that the London Underground staff member actually said “Free Palestine”, not “jihad”?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady is well aware that all hon. Members are responsible for their own words in this place. If the hon. Gentleman feels that he has something that he wishes to amend, he will do so, but that is not a matter for the Chair.

Storm Babet: Flooding

5.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Storm Babet has affected a number of communities across the UK, with the worst impacts being seen in Scotland and the very sad loss of life in Scotland and England. I know only too well the devastating impacts that flooding can have on individuals and communities. My thoughts and sympathies are with all those affected, and in particular with the friends and families of those who have tragically lost their lives in recent days. I thank emergency responders, local authorities, volunteers and the Environment Agency for their tireless efforts to help communities across the country.

Storm Babet brought persistent and heavy rain to the north and midlands of England overnight on Thursday 19 October, and through Friday and Saturday. Met Office amber and yellow warnings for rain and a yellow warning for wind were in place across large parts of England. The range was so broad due to the storm being easterly—atypical in the UK—and eastern and south-eastern facing slopes took the brunt of the rainfall. This was further complicated by a band of high pressure over Scandinavia, which trapped rainfall over the north of England and Scotland.

As the Secretary of State set out in the House last week, an emergency response centre was set up. In advance of the storm, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Cabinet Office convened the national flood response centre to co-ordinate the response. Cross-Government meetings have taken place daily since last Wednesday, and they will continue to do so this week.

Meeting in advance of the storm enabled the Environment Agency and local responders to increase the readiness of flood defences and the clearing of potential blockages, such as sluice gates and drains. Equipment was transferred from different parts of the country to areas that had been forecast to be most badly affected. Over the weekend, severe flood warnings were issued for parts of the River Derwent in Derbyshire and the River Idle in Nottinghamshire. The worst areas impacted by the storm were in Suffolk, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and south Yorkshire, where major incidents were declared.

Yesterday, I visited Bewdley on the River Severn, where I saw at first hand how intense bursts of local rainfall had led to the Severn's tributaries putting more water into the main channel, leading to an exceptional 1-metre rise in just two hours on Friday. When the water receded a few hours later, the EA was able to complete erecting the demountable barriers to ensure that potentially floodable properties were not flooded at these incredible peak levels. At its peak more than 300 flood warnings were issued by the Environment Agency, and several severe flood warnings. The Environment Agency flood line service experienced its busiest day since 2015-16, with more than 1,800 calls.

As of this morning, we are aware of 1,258 properties that have flooded. There was also wider disruption to road and rail networks, as well as flooding on agricultural land that will have impacted crops. The Environment Agency agreed to requests for early abstraction for

some farmers, so that they could take water out of the system to store in their on-farm reservoirs. I add my thanks to those farming communities, particularly in Suffolk, who responded so quickly to the needs of their local communities.

On the impact in Scotland and Wales, the House will know that this is a devolved matter. Although the storm has now passed, over the course of the week, rainfall will continue to flow into river networks, and the overall flood risk for England and Wales is currently medium. Significant river flooding impacts remain probable in parts of South Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, and significant river flooding impacts are also probable more widely. Further rainfall is expected later this week but not on the same scale, and it is not expected to lead to further significant flooding. Two major incidents remain in place in South Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire, and both are moving from response to recovery.

I take my role as the flooding Minister extremely seriously, and I am aware of the devastating impact that flooding can have on local communities. Local flood authorities will decide whether to initiate section 19 inquiries. I know that will happen in Horncastle and is being considered in other areas. The Secretary of State visited sites in Nottinghamshire today. Before she left she met the chief executive of the Environment Agency on Saturday, and she met me again this morning. My teams and I have been in constant communication throughout this event with the Environment Agency and all concerned, and particularly with all Members of Parliament from affected areas. Although unfortunately some properties have been flooded, we estimate that approximately 42,000 homes in England have been protected that otherwise might have been flooded during this incident. That includes towns such as Matlock, where the recently completed flood defence—basically a big wall—in the centre of the town on the River Derwent held up well and protected the town. Its Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines), got in touch with me to share pictures to show how that defence was working, and it had only just been completed.

The Environment Agency considers that its assets and response have largely been effective. We should also consider more widely those areas that have been protected due to flood defences that have been installed within the last decade. We invested £2.6 billion in flood defences between 2015 and 2021, which has better protected 314,000 homes all over England. We are currently deploying more flood schemes between 2021 and 2027, with a record £5.2 billion of investment. That includes both hard defences and natural flood defences. It includes areas such as Hull, for example, where a £42 million scheme was opened in 2022, which I visited. It is in the constituency of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy).

However, we know of some areas where the assets were overwhelmed, not having been designed for such rare, extreme levels of rainfall. We will of course be reviewing our response once the risk of flooding has passed. That will consider flood warning triggers and local mobilisation of assets. We should bear in mind that local resilience forums are the principal authorities for deciding and co-ordinating responses, working off established protocols and existing flood risk management plans.

Some of this flooding was due to surface water flooding, which is the primary responsibility of local authorities. However, we work with local authorities, and a third of our current funding is linked to projects for tackling surface water flooding across the country. The Government are also working to improve the local and national response to flooding, including improving surface water flood forecasting. We are investing £1 million in that, and through an Environment Agency, Met Office, and Flood Forecasting Centre project, we hope to come up with some valuable suggestions and actions.

Finally, as local authorities move to the recovery phase, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is already in contact with affected councils to assess impacts as these communities look to recover.

5.9 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. Our hearts go out to all the family businesses and farmers affected by this tragedy, but especially to those affected by the tragic loss of life. I thank the emergency services and Environment Agency workers for their tireless work around the clock to keep people safe. More than 1,200 properties have been flooded, and hundreds of people have been evacuated from their homes. Lives have been lost.

Events such as Storm Babet are not unexpected, however. We know that floods happen every winter. The Minister's statement that assets have not been designed "for such rare, extreme levels of rainfall" shows complacency. We know that climate change is bringing more frequent and more severe rainfall events and, as I know from the terrible floods in 2007, where 16,000 properties were flooded in Hull, flooding has a devastating impact on people's lives, with their belongings lost and businesses destroyed. The country must be better prepared, and we need to take our climate change goals seriously.

It is therefore incredibly worrying that the National Infrastructure Commission stated last week that "there is no measurable long term national target to reduce flood risk...and the current target does not factor in risk increasing due to climate change."

To make matters worse, one in six homes in this country is at risk of flooding—a number that is only set to rise. According to the Environment Agency, more than half of local planning authorities surveyed rarely or never inspected new developments to check flood risk planning conditions had been carried out. Research commissioned by insurers found that almost one third of homes built in the five most flood-prone areas were approved without a flood assessment.

The Government are asleep at the wheel. Why have they put homes at risk of flooding by failing to ensure that local planning authorities can carry out essential works? As I told the Minister last Thursday, an estimated 190,000 homes across the country were under threat from inadequately maintained flood defences in 2020. Does the Minister know where these inadequately maintained flood defences are? Did any of them fail over the weekend? Does she have any plans to find out? Are any of the overwhelmed assets that she mentioned these inadequately maintained flood assets? The Government have failed to get a grip on the challenges facing our country over flooding, but these risks, as I keep saying, will only increase.

The independent review of flooding for London in 2021 noted that the inability of organisations to share data and co-ordinate emergency preparedness action had undermined the response to flooding. I note that the Minister referred to the DEFRA and Cabinet Office meetings two days before the floods were due, but that is not nearly enough. It is time that we ended the Tory practice of waiting for disaster to strike. While the Government want to pass off responsibility to other agencies, a Labour Government would establish a Cobra-style flood preparedness taskforce to protect communities from the danger of flooding. We will plan for the long term and co-ordinate central Government, local authorities and emergency services to minimise the damage of flooding every single winter—importantly, before the flooding takes place. That would ensure that communities have the adequate drainage systems and flood defences to protect themselves.

It is time to turn the page on the Tories' sticking-plaster politics and make the long-term decisions to protect communities from the devastating impact of flooding. That is how we give Britain its future back.

Rebecca Pow: First, we are far from complacent; quite the reverse. The hon. Member suggested that we need to be better prepared; that is what our whole flood budget is geared up to doing. That is why we doubled it to £5.2 billion. It was £2.6 billion, and it is now £5.2 billion, with all the associated flooding schemes that that is delivering—both hard infrastructure and a range of nature-based solutions, which are a high proportion of many of our schemes. I would have thought that she for one would have recognised that, given the £42 million invested in Hull—her own constituency. I visited the scheme in 2022—I invited her but do not think that she came to the launch—and the people I met could not have expressed more wholeheartedly what it had done for Hull and how it had protected properties and businesses. It is now attracting businesses to Hull that previously would not have come as it was too risky for flooding. That is a prime demonstration of what the Government are doing.

On asset maintenance, we continue to invest in all our flood and coastal defence maintenance and have dedicated an extra £22 million to maintenance in the current review period of 2024-25. Of course, checking assets and keeping them well maintained is a critical part of the Environment Agency's work. Virtually 94% of major flood and coastal erosion risk management assets are in their target condition. In addition, when the warnings began a week ago, the Environment Agency and local authorities went out to check assets, clear culverts and drains and do all the small things that make such a big difference to whether there is or is not flooding in our local areas.

On planning applications, the Environment Agency gives advice when there is any suggestion of flood risk, and 96% of all planning applications complied with Environment Agency advice on flood risk. It is important that there are strong safeguards in place where there is flood risk, and there are, but of course planning departments have to decide whether to take note of the Environment Agency's advice. We are working hard with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on this very issue—I see the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities,

[*Rebecca Pow*]

my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young), in his place alongside me—as it is critical to protecting our island.

I would have thought the hon. Lady would have welcomed the Cabinet Office meetings. We already have exactly what she is asking for, as we do have a national flood response centre with the Cabinet Office, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and various Government Departments engaging. That was set up on Wednesday, and the Met Office information and the warnings that had begun fed into its meetings—that is why information was able to go out to people. If we can do more and keep more people safe, we will always do that. That is why we have taken note of the incidents. When it is safe to do so, we will review particular things to see whether we can improve people's safety even more.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement. The wider consequences of sudden torrential rainfall, which is happening much more frequently, are being clearly seen in constituencies and communities such as mine. I was dealing with the aftermath on Friday.

There are two observations to draw. First, there is the need for long-term planning with regard to providing more retention ponds and understanding the flow of watercourses in local areas such as mine. Secondly, short-term culvert clearing and drain clearing operations clearly need to get better. Will she meet me to discuss how we can better co-ordinate local authorities and the Environment Agency, as well as the utility companies, which also have a responsibility in this area?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for those astute observations. He is right about the more frequent incidence. This is linked to climate change—there is no doubt about that. We are focusing exactly on the whole flow of water through our plan for water, working at a catchment basis, which will be so important in future. It is local authorities' role to keep culverts clean and all of that, so I will volunteer the Minister from DLUHC to meet him to discuss that important issue.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): My thoughts and those of my colleagues are with all those who have lost loved ones as a result of the storm. We are also thinking about those who have lost pets or have been displaced from their homes or businesses as a result of water or wind damage during Storm Babet. I would like to thank the emergency responders and all those working in public services—whether SSE, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, local councils or the emergency services—who stepped up to protect and prevent risk to people, and to protect homes and businesses wherever they could. The River South Esk in Brechin reached 4.4 metres above normal levels. The flood defences there were designed to cover 3.8 metres above normal levels, so they were overwhelmed by the extreme weather.

The Scottish Government are committed to helping communities. Our First Minister Humza Yousaf has been out in Brechin to speak to those affected. The UK Government hold the purse strings, and it would be

much easier for us to provide the right level of protection if they took financial action. When will the UK Government begin unlocking the recovery and repair funding? Will the Minister please commit to delivering the consequential of that funding to Scotland as a matter of urgency?

Rebecca Pow: I fully support the hon. Lady's thanks to all those emergency services working in Scotland—interestingly, she named the coastguard's involvement in her area. To everyone involved, we give our heartfelt thanks, and we give our sympathies to those who experienced tragedies. As I pointed out, this area is devolved, so I cannot comment on a lot of what she said. She knows it is devolved, and I will leave it at that.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for taking time on Saturday to discuss the dire situation developing across Erewash. More than 500 homes and many businesses have now been flooded, including homes on Station Road and Station Street in Ilkeston, Rutland Grove, Regent Street and Westminster Avenue in Sandiacre, and the Nottingham Road area of Long Eaton. Many residents yet again feel abandoned by the authorities, especially the Environment Agency. Will my hon. Friend take action to ensure that my constituents get the support they need, not only to deal with the clean-up operation but to mitigate future flooding? With more heavy rain forecast, what is she doing to ensure that homeowners are informed of flood risk at the earliest opportunity and not just by social media, which often excludes the older and vulnerable populations across Erewash?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for all she did this weekend. She was straight on the phone, rightly representing her constituents. I believe that the waters are now receding in Erewash. I give my sympathies to those who have been flooded. A lot of the flooding is surface water flooding, so our new scheme to improve forecasting of surface water flooding will be a real help to constituencies such as hers. DLUHC Ministers are working on what might be in place to help with the clear-up, and I will speak to them later, as will our Department.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Flood Babet hit Chesterfield very hard on Friday, with the River Rother and the River Hipper bursting their banks. Tragically, 83-year-old Maureen Gilbert of Tapton Terrace lost her life in her own home. Her death has hit both her family and her neighbours very hard. On behalf of the whole House, I send our condolences to the family.

As many as 400 homes across Brampton, Birdholme, Riverside and Tapton Terrace have been flooded, and countless businesses now face a fight for their survival. It is particularly hard to bear as the vast majority of those properties are the same ones that flooded into 2007, despite the Government implementing schemes to protect the River Rother. Why did residents on Tapton Terrace receive the phone call from the early warning system after their houses had been flooded? What assessment has the Minister made of the success of the early warning system?

The financial cost facing flood victims and the council are huge. Can the Minister explain when the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will confirm that residents qualify for financial support from the

flood recovery framework, and that the council will be covered for the huge additional cost via the Bellwin scheme? How quickly will the Government be in a position to announce that?

Rebecca Pow: I reiterate our condolences to the family of Maureen. Nothing could be more tragic, so huge sympathies go out to the family. I was in touch with the hon. Gentleman over the weekend about the situation in Tapton Terrace. I fed that straight into the Environment Agency, which is working very closely with people up there to fully review what happened. That will be part of the review that we instigate. On the costs of clear-up, the Bellwin scheme is triggered by DLUHC, the recovery Department. As I said, we will be meeting to discuss whether that is appropriate, when it would be appropriate and who might apply for it.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): On Friday, Rother Valley was hit by flooding. Homes in Laughton Common, Whiston, Brookhouse, Woodsetts and other places were flooded, with more flooding in the areas of Kiveton, Todwick, Treeton, Stone, Harthill and across the whole of Rother Valley. What was clear when I met residents on Friday and Saturday was the concern that a lack of drainage and culvert cleaning had caused the flooding, as well as huge overdevelopment on the green belt, especially in areas such as Whiston and Laughton Common. What guidance can the Minister give to councils, such as Rotherham Council, to dissuade them from building over green spaces that are natural sinks for water, and to encourage them to clean the culverts and drains more frequently, because it will lead to more and more flooding if they do not?

Rebecca Pow: Building and development has been considered, working with DLUHC, in our holistic plan for water. It is why we so urgently need sustainable urban drainage, for example, in our new developments and to get that switched on. It is being reviewed and hopefully that will start to happen, because it will make such a difference in trapping and capturing water, as do schemes such as grey water harvesting, semi-permeable driveways and so on. I urge planning departments to consider them, because they will make such a difference in areas such as my hon. Friend's.

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): Flooding devastates communities across Selby and Ainsty. Residents are caused enormous anxiety and panic when events like Storm Babet occur. Will the Minister outline what steps she is taking to work with the Environment Agency regionally in Yorkshire to ensure that towns like Tadcaster are safe from flooding in future?

Rebecca Pow: I can give the hon. Gentleman an absolute assurance that we are working very closely with the regional Environment Agencies. In fact, they come to the fore in incidents like this and we are in constant communication with them. They feed into plans for flood management and water resources. It should be a cohesive programme, working together. That is also why, as I mentioned earlier, working in catchments is so important.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): I was grateful to the Environment Agency for a call earlier updating me on the situation in Derbyshire, which has been particularly

badly affected by the flooding. We remain nervous about the impact of potential rainfall this evening, but generally we are moving to the recovery phase. I place on record my thanks to all the communities and authorities who have been so brilliant this weekend. However, there is obviously a great concern around the funding as we move into the recovery phase. We need to make sure that Derbyshire County Council, unlike in 2019, is given the proper funding it needs to get things back to normal. When the Minister meets DLUHC later, will she make sure that she emphasises the need for the funding to be put in place quickly?

Rebecca Pow: I hear what my hon. Friend says. That is why we will be working closely with DLUHC on what is possible to help local authorities with the clear-up. Derbyshire has been really badly hit, but it has also had £74 million of flood defence schemes, better protecting 3,900 properties. A great many properties were protected that might otherwise have been flooded. We also have to bear that in mind.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister may not be aware of this, but the BBC website has confirmed in the last hour that there are now three confirmed deaths in Scotland as a consequence of Storm Babet. Each one is a tragedy, and I am sure that we all send sympathies and condolences to them and their families. The loss of life could have been so much worse, but for the willingness of others to put themselves in harm's way. In Shetland, the Lerwick lifeboat was at sea for 18 hours in atrocious conditions to save the lives of those on the Danish trawler Westbank, and the coastguard helicopter airlifted 45 workers from the Stena Spey, an offshore drilling rig. Does the Minister agree that they deserve our gratitude and commendation, and will she have a word with her colleagues in the Department for Transport, who are currently proposing that the response time for the Shetland coastguard helicopter be increased from 15 minutes to 60?

Rebecca Pow: Of course I send condolences for all three of those deaths—any death is absolutely tragic—and I commend the lifeboat team who did such spectacular work in rescuing the trawler and those who rescued the people on the oil rig. This is a tremendous story and accolade for them. I am not sure that I am the one who can trigger the commendation, but I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman's suggestion will be fed in, and I will certainly pass his other comments to the Department for Transport.

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): One of the victims was apparently from Far Forest, which used to be in my constituency, and obviously our thoughts and prayers are with the family at this moment. This is going to happen again. On the ground, the Environment Agency workers do a great job. Is it not time to merge the agency with Natural England, so that there are fewer managers and more people to protect us?

Rebecca Pow: Again, I send my condolences following that very sad case in Far Forest. I was in the area on Sunday, so I heard a great deal about it from the local people.

My hon. Friend has made an interesting proposal. I think we should deal with the immediate issues first, but on the ground those in the Environment Agency have

[Rebecca Pow]

done a tremendous job in almost every case, particularly those whom I met in Bewdley. I must also give some praise to the community officers who meet so many worried and upset people on the streets, and also meet with some aggression. They have done a tremendous job in all the parts of the country where they were sent out.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Over the last six years, Northwich, in my constituency, has been flooded twice. This time round, having learned from the section 19 report, the Environment Agency, Cheshire West and Chester Council, the Canal & River Trust, the emergency services and other local councils did a sterling job to prevent it from happening again. My concern for the future, however, relates to the huge cuts in the trust, amounting to £300 million. I issue this plea to the Minister: will she look at that and think again?

Rebecca Pow: I am pleased to hear that all those organisations did such a grand job locally. We understand the huge benefit brought by the Canal & River Trust and the great work that it does, but that £300 million figure is something of a bone of contention. The trust has adjusted the figure for inflation, and the Government do not normally do that with their funds.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her visit to Retford and Ordsall today to meet some of the hundreds of people who were evacuated, such as those in Darrel Road, and to see the devastation at first hand. For many of those residents, it is not the first time that this has happened. I also thank the Minister for her reassurance that we will provide as much support as possible, and will invest in the appropriate flood defences to make sure that we can mitigate the impact. Does she agree, however, that we need to remind councils of their responsibilities to communicate information effectively to our constituents? In my case, one of the emergency respite centres was closed with only 20 minutes' notice, and one of the emergency phone lines was down for nearly two days. Can we also please ask councils to stop building on floodplains?

Rebecca Pow: I know that the Secretary of State visited my hon. Friend's constituency today and will have seen for herself exactly what local people are facing. I know that my hon. Friend has rightly been a great champion for them, and he makes a good point about the role of local authorities in the local flood forums. It is important that everybody plays their part in this, not just the emergency services who come in if there is a problem. It is about the messaging early on, and that is why the Environment Agency has a comprehensive system of warnings that people can sign up to. Some 1.6 million people are signed up to its flood warning scheme and I would urge people to ensure that they know how to join it. I also urge local authorities to play the role that they really should be playing, and I will be talking to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to stress that further.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): Following the storm at the weekend, several areas in my constituency were affected. There are still active flood alerts across Cheshire, so many areas are not out of the woods yet.

On Saturday morning, I visited a number of my constituents living in close proximity to Finchett's Gutter who expressed serious concern over the timings of the flood alerts received over the weekend. Some of them were already standing knee-deep in water by the time the alerts came through. I join Members across the House in asking the Minister again what discussions have been had to ensure that as the rainfall continues, alerts are sent out in a timely fashion to give residents plenty of warning.

Rebecca Pow: Of course it is critical that warnings go out appropriately at the right time, and that was why this incident started to be flagged the previous weekend and why the national flood response centre was set up. There is a comprehensive Environment Agency flood warning service and I advise people to sign up to it, as well as checking whether they are in an area that might be at risk of flooding. One of the issues is awareness. The EA runs a lot of comms programmes on this, but if there is more that should be done, I will look at that in the review.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): When Storm Arwen hit Cumbria two years ago, many of our villages and other communities lost electrical power for several days due to damaged power cables. I know that that has happened to many communities over the last few days. What progress have the Government made since 2021 to make Britain's power infrastructure more resilient—for example, by creating a national bank of mobile generators to ensure that communities are not left cold, dark and vulnerable for days on end? Have the people hit by Storm Babet benefited from lessons learned from Storm Arwen, or are we no further forward?

Rebecca Pow: I would like to assure the hon. Gentleman that DEFRA has been working closely with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, which has a strategy for exactly this issue, because it is critical that power outages are considered when emergencies such as this take place. Effective action was taken over the Rolls-Royce plants in the Derbyshire area; that was a very effective alignment with the Energy Department. Just as an aside, we work closely with the water industry on preparedness, should there be electricity outages, some of which might be linked to flooding. In fact, there was another incident near Derby and it had a clear management plan.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): My heart goes out to all the communities affected, and particularly to those who lost their lives. The images on the news of the devastation of the floods will also have an impact on communities who have been flooded previously and have escaped. Many people in Prestolee on the River Irwell in my constituency will be among those watching with great anxiety. I have raised this issue several times in the Chamber and with the Minister. Can she assure me that every house in every community that has faced repeated flooding this week and in previous years, including Prestolee, will get the funding they need to be able to protect their lives, livelihoods and property?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady and I have met and discussed her issues a number of times. I will just flag that we launched the frequently flooded fund of £100 million, which allocated funds to 53 projects. The areas that put forward viable projects for the funding are finding it very effective, and another round will open shortly.

Insurance is also really important for houses where there is a possibility of flooding, and Flood Re works intensively on that. The process has been tweaked to ensure that as many houses as possible can get into it and a huge number of properties have been helped. Those that have difficulties can go to the inventory that has just been set up, and 13,000 people who had slightly more difficult cases have been helped through that. The Association of British Insurers has worked closely to ensure that all people are being catered for. There is also an extra “build back better” £10,000 to build one’s property back better.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Many of my constituents in Dundee and Angus were hit very hard by the storm, and I wish to add my thanks to all the emergency services and others, particularly at Dundee City Council and Angus Council, who did so much to help. It is absolutely tragic to see cars submerged, homes flooded, businesses closed, bridges washed away and, of course, lives lost.

Given that we are seeing more, and more frequent, extreme weather events, and given that the Minister recognised climate change in her statement, does she not now regret the Prime Minister’s recent statement rolling back many of the measures necessary to tackle climate change quickly?

Rebecca Pow: Contrary to what the right hon. Gentleman proposes, we take this matter extremely seriously. That is why we have doubled the flooding budget to £5.2 billion, as we are aware of these extreme weather incidents. It is also why we have opened a range of other funds, such as the £200 million flood and coastal resilience innovation programme, to look at how we can accelerate flood protection in areas where it will be trickier as sea levels rise, and so on. Another £8 million project in the Thames estuary, the Humber estuary, the Severn estuary and Yorkshire is looking at pathways to deal with exactly these things.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): My heart goes out to everyone affected by flooding, particularly in Barnsley, Darfield, Wombwell, Worsbrough, Lundwood and Darton. The response to flooding is obviously fragmented by its nature because there are so many agencies involved, from the emergency services to the local authority, the Environment Agency, the water companies and national Government.

I mention in particular Worsbrough Bridge Athletic football club, which has suffered flooding five years in a row. Because it is not a home or a business, it often struggles to get support. What advice and, more importantly, action can the Government give to community groups such as Worsbrough Bridge Athletic football club that are affected by persistent flooding?

Rebecca Pow: Individual businesses can seek insurance. There is insurance out there, which I urge Worsbrough Bridge Athletic football club to seek. There are many other measures, including our natural flood management schemes, which are looking at much wider ways of encouraging flood protection. We have just launched a new £25 million fund on that, and there is also our frequently flooded allowance. There are funds out there, but the hon. Lady’s local authority could also do a lot to come up with the correct plans for its area.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I thank the Minister for her statement, but she made a significant omission in relation to the impact on the railway network, which has implications for funding and the response in Scotland, because the network is not devolved.

Following August 2020’s fatal derailment at Carmont, near Stonehaven, in which three people lost their lives, Network Rail gave a commitment to the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers that it would put in place additional resources to address the drainage maintenance failures that were responsible, but the RMT’s Gordon Martin has claimed that Network Rail’s modernising maintenance project has less to do with improvement and everything to do with cuts. As the Minister is responsible for flooding and its impact, will she raise this with her counterpart in the Department for Transport to ensure that Network Rail’s failings do not again lead to death and injury, as they did in August 2020?

Rebecca Pow: I will certainly pass on those comments to the Department for Transport.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her statement and for her enthusiasm when it comes to improving and doing better, which I think we all welcome. Does she accept that this storm and others like it have adversely affected coastal erosion around the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, especially in areas such as the Ards peninsula in my Strangford constituency? Has she had any discussions with the Cabinet about creating a dedicated fund to build up defences in coastal communities against the battering winds and waves that are literally beating away our coastlines and impairing road and rail safety?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman mentions the particular challenges that coastal areas face. We have launched a £200 million flood and coastal innovation programme to look at those issues in particular. I urge him to suggest that his own Cabinet looks at some similar projects. We are happy to share the detail.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My sympathies are with all those affected by these terrible floods. Thousands of residents of Reading, Caversham and Woodley in my constituency live in areas that could be affected by catastrophic flooding, yet plans to build flood defences next to the River Thames in Reading have been delayed. Will the Minister write to me urgently with an update on this important issue, to reassure local residents and businesses?

Rebecca Pow: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the water resources management plans are under discussion right now. Protections, reservoirs and water supplies will all be discussed within those plans. I cannot comment on what will be in the plans yet, but I am sure that he has fed into them. I urge him to continue to do so, because keeping people safe along this great river is of the utmost importance.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Vast areas of my constituency are once again under water, despite Storm Babet not being the most serious that we have experienced in recent times. Although my residents are

[Helen Morgan]

largely dry this time around, they are often cut off for weeks when floodwaters rise, and many of them are old and vulnerable. What conversations has the Minister had with her colleagues in DLUHC about protecting people who are cut off from basic services for such long periods when floodwaters rise?

Rebecca Pow: I have had a great many discussions with DLUHC about these issues; we also work closely with the Environment Agency, as the hon. Lady will know. The local resilience forums will be factoring in areas at potential risk of being cut off, so that they have emergency systems in place.

I have been right up the river into the hon. Lady's constituency to look at these issues. I know how closely the Environment Agency is working on those plans, and how mindful it is of getting the right warning systems in place for any such areas. That is why our nature-based solutions funding, our frequently flooded allowance and our £5.2 billion fund is so important.

Points of Order

5.46 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you for this opportunity to raise a point of order about a serious incident affecting my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) on a Select Committee visit to Canada last week.

On checking in for their flight at Heathrow, all Committee members got through except my hon. Friend, who was delayed for questioning for a considerable period. He was told that this was because his name is Mohammad. He was asked whether he was carrying a knife or other offensive weapon; he was also asked where he was born. The questioning was undertaken by officials from Air Canada and, we believe, the Canadian Government, despite my hon. Friend having already been given a visa to enter Canada. After proving that he was an MP, with help from our Committee Clerk, he was eventually allowed through. At Montreal airport, the same issues were raised by Canadian immigration. At Toronto airport on the way back, my hon. Friend was again challenged. He got on his flight with assistance from our consul general, who was very helpful.

My hon. Friend has received apologies from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Canadian Minister for Immigration and from Air Canada. However, given the racist and Islamophobic nature of these challenges, I believe that as well as writing to the Canadian high commissioner, which I will do, it is important to put these concerns on the parliamentary record. It was completely unacceptable for a Member of this House to be treated in this way. Because he was an MP, my hon. Friend was allowed on his flights; if, however, one of our constituents had been so challenged, they might have been refused.

We raised the issue with our high commissioner in Ottawa, who was very supportive. She was amazed at what had happened, given the multicultural nature of Canada as an open and welcoming country. She has raised the matter with the Canadian Government and appreciates that I am raising it in Parliament, to try to ensure that no one is treated in this way in future. I look forward to any help that you can give in this matter, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order and for giving me advance notice of it. I am sure that the whole House shares his dismay at the treatment of the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). It is wholly unacceptable under any circumstances, but it is particularly concerning when it occurs, as it did, in the course of official travel on parliamentary business. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) is absolutely right to put his concerns on the record. I am sure that Ministers on the Treasury Bench will also have noted his comments.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Today, after I had asked for a statement from the Paymaster General on the recently announced delay to the infected blood inquiry's final report, a short, 193-word statement has been laid by the Government. That number is in

stark contrast to the 485 people who are estimated to have died since the inquiry started, with one person dying every four days on average. The short statement failed to deal with the final recommendations made already by Sir Brian Langstaff for making interim payments, for which there is now an even stronger case because of the delay to his final report. There was no detail on progress to establish a compensation scheme, as has also already been recommended by Sir Brian Langstaff, and no explanation of why contaminated blood victims are being treated differently from victims of the Horizon scandal, who are already going to receive £600,000 in compensation before that final report is produced. What more can I do, Mr Deputy Speaker, to get the Government to deal with this matter in a timely way, and to ensure that as much information as possible is disclosed and that these people are shown some compassion?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I appreciate the right hon. Lady's concerns, but she in turn will understand that that is not a matter for the Chair; it is a matter for the Government. However, as before, I am sure that her remarks will have been heard by those on the Government Front Bench.

Renters (Reform) Bill

Second reading

[Relevant documents: Fifth Report of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, Reforming the Private Rented Sector, HC 624 and the Government response, HC 1935; Oral evidence taken before the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on 10 July 2023, on Follow-up: Private rented sector report and the Renters (Reform) Bill, HC 1481; Correspondence between the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and the Minister of State for Housing and Planning, on the Renters (Reform) Bill, reported to the House on 28 July 2023 and 11 September 2023; Correspondence from Shelter to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on the Renters (Reform) Bill, reported to the House on 11 September 2023; Correspondence from the National Residential Landlords Association to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on oral evidence given on 10 July 2023, reported to the House on 28 July 2023; Correspondence from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Students to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on meeting on 5 May 2023 on Renters (Reform) Bill, reported to the House on 28 July 2023; Correspondence between the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, on the Renters (Reform) Bill and the private rented sector, reported to the House on 26 May 2023, 5 June 2023, 12 June 2023 and 10 July 2023; Correspondence from the British Property Federation to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on the Renters (Reform) Bill, reported to the House on 12 June 2023; and, Correspondence from the Minister of State for Housing and Planning to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on the Government response to the Committee's report on Reforming the Private Rented Sector, reported to the House on 17 April 2023.]

5.50 pm

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

Before I get into the detail of what the Bill allows for and the reforms that it portends, may I say a few words of thanks? In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). During his time at the Department, he was responsible for the White Paper that essentially did the groundwork for the Bill, but prior to working in the Department, he worked for a variety of third sector and voluntary organisations, helping the homeless and standing up for those in poor-quality housing. His foreword to the recent report by the Centre for Social Justice on the importance of reform in the private rented sector is both eloquent and effective. May I take this opportunity to thank him for his excellent work?

I also thank the Centre for Social Justice, which was founded by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) some time ago. The report that it has prepared makes a compelling case for reform in the private rented sector, in order to help those most in need. May I also thank those organisations, including Shelter and the National Residential Landlords Association, that have supported me and the Department in framing this legislation?

[*Michael Gove*]

May I also thank the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and its Chair, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for the recommendations in its report on the need to reform the private rented sector? There were a series of recommendations in the report, upon which we have acted. It is the case that we will bring forward changes to ensure that the student market, which operates differently from other aspects of the private rented sector, is regulated in a different way; it is the case that we will bring forward details of a decent homes standard in the private rented sector, as requested by the Select Committee; and it is the case that we will ensure that the justice system, which is controlled by the Ministry of Justice and His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service, is fit for purpose before we move ahead with some of the reforms in the Bill.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I add my thanks to my right hon. Friend for finally publishing a response to the Select Committee? He will recall that, as Chair of the Liaison Committee, I wrote to him last week—he responded very promptly, for which I am grateful. However, the Government's response was published only on Friday, more than six months after the Committee published its original report, yet it is de rigueur in the civil service code that responses should be published within two months. Will he explain to the House why it took so long, can he give an assurance that it will not happen again, and will he say what measures are being taken to ensure that such delays will not recur?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which gives me an opportunity to apologise to the House, on behalf of the Government, my Department and in particular myself, for the delay in responding to a number of Select Committee reports that have been put forward. The Chairman of the Select Committee knows that I hold him and his Committee in the highest regard. I deeply regret the delays in responding to the many excellent reports that the Select Committee has put forward. The reasons for that relate to policy discussions within Government. We wanted to make sure that we had a clear and settled position in response, but that does not excuse us of the need to do better. I have discussed with Ministers and others in the Department the vital importance of responding quickly and showing respect for this House, so may I again apologise to my hon. Friend and to the Chairman of the Select Committee?

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The delay has cost hundreds of families in my constituency their homes. Section 21 evictions have been carried out on so many families, as the sector has moved into the Airbnb short-term let market. Will the Secretary of State apologise to those families? Will he also very quickly bring in the change of use designations that I know he is considering, to ensure that short-term lets and also second homes are separate categories of planning use, so that we can protect our lakes and dales communities and ensure that they can survive?

Michael Gove: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have an enormous amount of respect for the work that he does in this area. I would draw a distinction between the

response to the Select Committee's report and the bringing forward of legislation, but he is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that we need to consider—and we are—our responses to the consultations on registration and on changes to planning use requirements in the short-term let market. We hope to come forward shortly with our response to those consultations. I should also say that I had the opportunity last week to talk to the founder of Airbnb, and I outlined concerns very similar to those that the hon. Gentleman has outlined.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) *rose*—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Michael Gove: I will not give way at this stage; I will make a wee bit of progress, then I hope to give way shortly.

I want to emphasise that a healthy private rented sector is in all our interests. Making sure that both landlords and tenants have a new deal and a fair deal is critical.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: Not for the moment.

The private rented sector has doubled in size since 2004, to the point where it now constitutes between 19% and 20% of the total housing stock in our country. Given the number of people in the private rented sector, it is absolutely vital that we ensure that tenants have the rights that they deserve, while also recognising the importance of the private rental sector to our economy and the fact that the overwhelming number of private landlords provide an excellent service. It is also important that we provide them with the rights to redress required when dealing with antisocial tenants, tenants in arrears or other factors that may mean that they need to have recourse to securing vacant possession of a property.

The private rental sector is vital for reasons of labour mobility and personal convenience and, overall, because of the different ways that we respond to the labour market and other pressures at different points in all our lives. We need a healthy private rented sector. I would like to place on the record my thanks to Ben Beadle and the National Residential Landlords Association for the work they have consistently done to ensure that the voice of landlords is heard and to ensure, as Ben Beadle has made clear, that landlords, the overwhelming majority of whom provide a good service, can be certain—because of our property portal, the ombudsman and the other changes in the Bill—that the small minority of poor landlords who victimise tenants can be driven out of the system and the good name of those in the private rented sector upheld.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Gove: I am very happy to give way to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), then to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), then to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) and then to the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark).

Caroline Lucas: There is plenty to welcome in this Bill, but it should have been an opportunity to increase minimum energy efficiency standards. When the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero last week tried to defend the scrapping of energy efficiency standards for the PRS, she essentially said, on the Floor of the House, that it was because they could cost property owners up to £15,000. The right hon. Gentleman will know that the regulations include a £10,000 cap, so the cost cannot possibly be £15,000; indeed, according to the Government's own assessment, the average cost of upgrading homes to an energy performance certificate rating of C would be less than £5,000. Will he please correct the record, apologise on behalf of his colleague, who has misled the House, and put it on the record that it could not possibly cost £15,000? His own assessment suggests that it costs less than £5,000.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady; no one could doubt her sincerity or her commitment to making sure that we improve the condition of homes and that we deal with energy efficiency. The first thing to say is that the cost will be determined in the market. The amount that an individual might have to pay can be capped by legislation, but the cost is a function of the market. The second thing that it is important to stress is that the decent homes standard, and indeed the work we are doing on retrofitting overall, will improve, and has improved, energy efficiency, but we need to balance the improvement of energy efficiency against the costs that individual landlords and tenants face in a cost-of-living time that is challenging.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) *rose—*

Jim Shannon *rose—*

Michael Gove: I am happy to give way to the hon. Member for Strangford.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is right to say that the encouragement of private landlords is important to ensure that rental properties are available, but it is also incredibly important that unscrupulous landlords are not facilitated in avoiding their obligations. In relation to the obligations, Citizens Advice has recently announced some figures, which show that 48% of evicted tenants have been told that their landlord wanted to sell. This is a common reason for ending a tenancy. With respect, nothing in this legislation suggests that landlords must give evidence that they have followed through on their intention to sell. Will the Minister rectify that?

Michael Gove: Of course, landlords and any property owner must have the right to sell their home if they need or wish to do so; nothing should interfere with that. None the less, it is the case that there may be circumstances in which there will be some landlords who use an attempt to sell, or a claim to sell, as a feint in order to evict a tenant. In Committee, we will explain how we will ensure that, in those circumstances, the situation is effectively dealt with.

Mr Perkins: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. This weekend I was out meeting flood victims in Chesterfield. The flood damage of one of them was up to 3 feet high in their front room. They were told by the landlord, who was busy as I arrived, hoovering the carpet, which had sewage and river effluent all over it,

that they must accept that the landlord would attempt to clean the carpet rather than a renter expecting a new one and that if they would not tolerate that, she would end their tenancy and throw them out. Does that not demonstrate how the balance of power between landlords and renters is totally skewed? Is there not all the more need for the strongest possible legislation to ensure that we do take action against those rogue landlords?

Michael Gove: I agree with the hon. Gentleman up to a point, but I would not characterise it in quite that way. On the basis of everything that he has said, that was completely the wrong response from the landlord concerned, but I would stress that there is only a minority of bad landlords and also that the law clearly delineates, and has done so for some time, the responsibilities for repair between the tenant and the landlord. It is important that we always strike a balance between the need of landlords to ensure that their business is effective and the protection that tenants enjoy. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me about that specific case, I will see what I can do to help.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. My constituents, Esther and Fred, lost their son two weeks ago in the most horrific of circumstances. The very week that they lost their son they were served a section 21 notice, despite the landlord knowing their circumstances. What message does it send to renters like Esther and Fred that the Government are yet again delaying the abolition of section 21 evictions?

Michael Gove: I am deeply sorry to hear about the personal tragedy that the hon. Lady's constituents have suffered—please do pass on my sympathy and condolences. I would say, though, that this Bill leads to the abolition of section 21, and it does so in a way that I believe is right and proportionate. I will explain why I think it is necessary, but before doing so I must give way to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn).

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. I noted he said that, nationally, around 20% of the population live in the private rented sector. In constituencies such as mine, the figure is 30% to 35%, and many people feel very insecure in their lives. For those on universal credit and housing benefit, the problem is that the local housing allowance does not meet their rent needs. Therefore, they are actually subsidising landlords through their benefits and living in desperate poverty as a result of it. In turn, this forces people in mainly ex-council properties to leave the borough, so we end up with a sort of social cleansing of our inner cities all over the country. Does the Secretary of State understand that we need rent control, so that those people who cannot afford to remain in their own home get some comfort and are allowed to continue being a valuable part of our local communities?

Michael Gove: Although the right hon. Gentleman and I have had many disagreements, there is no one who doubts that he is a very assiduous constituency Member, and he is right that the pressures faced by a number of people in the private rented sector are significant. The principal reason for those rental pressures is inflation. We can debate the causes of inflation, but this Government

[*Michael Gove*]

are determined to do everything possible to halve it. and I believe the steps that we are taking have shown progress so far.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) *rose*—

Michael Gove: Please forgive me; I am just responding to the right hon. Gentleman. It is the case that our effective system of tribunals ensures that excessive rents that are way out of kilter with the market can be dealt with. However, one of the challenges of rent controls of the kind that I believe he is advocating, and that have been advocated by others on the Labour Front Bench, is that they are proven to reduce supply overall, and a reduction of supply on the scale that an intervention of the kind that he puts forward would only increase rents and reduce the capacity of people to be able to live in the private rented sector.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend not agree that the Bill would do exactly what he has just been saying is the problem with rent control, which is to drive private landlords out of the market? Is that not entirely contrary to the Government's main aim right now, which is to bring down inflation? Private rents are the key cause of core inflation, and this is a disastrous Bill for every renter in the country who wants to see a well-supplied housing market.

Michael Gove: I am very fond of my hon. Friend, but that is just not true. We have seen an increase in the number of homes in the private rented sector recently, not a reduction. [*Interruption.*] As we say in Scotland, "facts are chieftains that winna ding."

There is no evidence at all that the abolition of section 21, and at the same time the enhancement of section 8, will lead to any reduction in the number of homes in the private rented sector. However, let me say to him, and to the whole House, that what we need is not so much an arbitrage between the private rented sector and the number of homes available for private ownership, or indeed the social rented sector, but more homes overall. It is that which is at the root of our challenge, and we will solve it with our long-term plan for housing, which was outlined in July of this year.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Gove: No, I have been generous so far. Every intervention only takes time from those who wish to contribute to the debate. Let me develop my argument and then I will give way to some other colleagues—but perhaps not all.

I just wish to stress what the abolition of section 21 involves. Getting rid of section 21 means that a weapon used by unscrupulous landlords can no longer be in their hands. Essentially, section 21 no-fault eviction is used by that small minority of bad landlords to intimidate tenants. It is the case that a significant number of tenants have concerns about the quality of their home, or indeed about excessive rent rises, but section 21 has been used to silence those who have complained about the quality of their property, to intimidate them into accepting excessive rent rises, and in certain circumstances

it has been prosecuted anyway, leading to a significant number of people—20,000 in the past year—finding themselves rendered homeless, and therefore the taxpayer and local authorities having to pay for their accommodation.

It is in nobody's interests to allow unscrupulous landlords to continue to behave in this way, to allow vulnerable people to be rendered voiceless in this way, and to force the taxpayer to pick up the bill. The idea that abolishing section 21 is somehow un-Conservative is to me absolutely nonsensical. Conservatives exist to protect the vulnerable in society, to make sure that markets work and to save the taxpayer money. I have to say to any hon. Member who thinks that such a policy is un-Conservative that they should consider the Conservative record. The artisans' dwellings Act 1875, the Law of Property Act 1925, the Leasehold Property (Repairs) Act 1938, the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985—when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister—the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and the Tenant Fees Act 2019 were all Conservative measures introduced by Conservative Prime Ministers in order to ensure that the private rented sector could work better and, critically, they all make provision for the rights of tenants.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) *rose*—

Michael Gove: I am more than happy to give way—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I think that I am right in saying that the hon. Lady has only just entered the Chamber. She should wait for a wee while before she rises to intervene.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Gove: I will give way to colleagues in a moment. The key thing to consider when thinking about how those in the private rented sector live is that the overwhelming majority of landlords do a great job, but we know that, because of section 21, 23% of tenants in that sector who wished to complain about conditions chose not to do so, and 31% of those who did were subsequently evicted under section 21. As I mentioned, 20,000 people were assessed as homeless as a direct result.

I am absolutely committed—as was the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) when she was Prime Minister, as was the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip when he was Prime Minister, and as all Conservative Members were when we put it in our 2019 manifesto—to getting rid of section 21, but it is important to recognise that in so doing we need to strengthen the provisions that landlords have in order to deal with those tenants who, for whatever reason, need to be evicted from their property.

We are outlining an extensive range of provisions under section 8. We are moving to ensure that antisocial behaviour is dealt with more effectively by making it mandatory grounds for removing a tenant. We are lowering the threshold so that it is easier to establish antisocial behaviour. We are dealing more effectively with rent arrears, and the way in which some unscrupulous tenants have hitherto manipulated the system on rent arrears. We are making it clear that anyone who wishes to occupy their property because they need to sell it,

repair it, or have family member within it, or for any other reason, can do so. It is about strengthening both protections for tenants and powers for landlords in the cases where they need it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Gove: I am now more than happy to give way to a range of colleagues.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I will allow the right hon. Gentleman to do that in just a moment, but first let me set the record straight. The Clerks have informed me that the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) was in the Chamber from the start. I apologise. I would not wish that to influence the decision of the Secretary of State on who he gives way to.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I accept entirely the force of what the Secretary of State has said, but clearly under section 8 many landlords will, for perfectly legitimate reasons—to get rid of a tenant for antisocial behaviour or whatever—have recourse to section 21 simply because of the convenience and ease, particularly in the face of tenants who make particular difficulties. That is why the provisions that he is making in respect of the courts being able to deal with such things effectively and efficiently are vital as part of the reform that he is bringing forward.

Michael Gove: Actually, I agree with my right hon. Friend. It is vital that we ensure that the courts system is reformed and that we have end-to-end digitisation. We have seen section 21 abused, but if a determined tenant wishes, for whatever reason, to ignore section 21, that ends up in the courts anyway.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): My constituent Jan Childs rented a property in Much Wenlock to an individual she got into a dispute with. He has now scarpered, owing my constituent £10,000, and nobody seems to be interested in helping her to retrieve the money—neither the police nor the local authorities. How will this Bill help my constituent Jan Childs to retrieve her £10,000?

Michael Gove: It is not so much this Bill; it is more the steps that we are taking in order to improve the justice system that will help, but I would be grateful if my hon. Friend would write to me about that particular situation. It is always the case, no matter how well framed any piece of legislation might be, that if we are dealing with unscrupulous characters who seek to evade justice, we have to rely on the agencies of the criminal justice system to pursue them.

Sir Desmond Swayne: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise; I should have referred to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests when I intervened.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is nearly always right and always honourable.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I, too, put on the record my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Some months ago, I raised with the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), who is present, my concerns

about the illegal eviction laws, which are over 40 years old, complex and difficult to understand. Unless we reform illegal eviction law alongside section 21, I worry that bad landlords will take matters into their own hands. Has the Department taken into account the concerns that I raised with Government officials about reforming illegal eviction law at the same time?

Michael Gove: I know that my colleague the Housing and Planning Minister has met the hon. Lady, and we will respond in further detail about the steps that we propose to take.

Munira Wilson: Given that the Secretary of State is getting quite a few pot shots from behind him, let me help him out by saying that I welcome the ban on section 21 no-fault evictions. It is sadly very overdue, and I hope that he will not delay in implementing it, because as a London MP I have had countless people in my surgeries and contacting me via email who have been evicted under section 21. A most egregious case involved a father of two young children, both of whom were gravely ill. He had to tackle the mould in his home himself because the landlord was not dealing with it. Then the landlord evicted him for making the repairs. Will the Secretary of State commit to implementing the reform without delay?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. The sooner the Bill is on the statute book, the sooner we can proceed. Alongside that, we of course need to ensure that the justice system, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made clear, is in a position to implement it effectively. That is why the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), is present. He and I, and the Minister for Housing and Planning, are working to do just that.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): On the enhanced grounds for antisocial behaviour, I have one constituent who has been evicted because their baby was crying too much, and another who has been evicted because her husband was beating her too loudly. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that the grounds need to be discretionary ones on which the courts can deliberate, not mandatory ones? Otherwise, it will be a handle for abusers to use.

Michael Gove: I very much take the hon. Gentleman's point. I do not believe that either of those two cases would count as antisocial behaviour under our proposals, but we need to ensure that we are clear about what constitutes antisocial behaviour liable to lead to eviction and what is, as in those cases, either a preposterous claim or an example of domestic abuse that the police should be investigating.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I, too, welcome the intention to scrap no-fault evictions. A year ago I asked about the matter at Prime Minister's questions, saying, "It's going to be winter. It's cold." As 2019 was a long time ago, I welcome the proposals, although some detail is needed on the burden of proof.

Under Thatcher, from my recollection, the Conservatives were the party of the family, so why has the blanket ban on unscrupulous landlords saying, "No children," vanished,

[*Dr Rupa Huq*]

as has the no-people-on-benefits stipulation? A I know from my weekly surgery, landlords who say, “No DSS” are the big barrier to unlocking this part of the market, because pensioners and others are excluded. Have the Conservatives done away with Thatcher, or is their tail being wagged by all the people—apparently one in five Tory MPs is a landlord—making declarations of interests?

Michael Gove: First, we will be clear that landlords cannot have blanket bans of the kind that the hon. Lady rightly draws to the House’s attention. Secondly, colleagues will declare interests, but landlords are good things. We need landlords to provide homes. It is nothing to be ashamed of to be in the business of providing a safe, warm and decent home for someone, and there is nothing wrong with people who have saved and work hard investing in property. You do not need to be Margaret Thatcher to believe that that is right.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee raised the need for an effective and efficient court system to deal with such matters. Evictions will now have to go to court because they will not be automatic under section 21. Also, many more tenants may go to court over landlords refusing to do repairs, because they will no longer fear retaliatory evictions.

Officials in the Department have suggested that the delays in implementing the Bill came about because of the need to reform the courts, and that that is down to the Select Committee. As I am sure the Secretary of State is aware, the Select Committee actually recommended a specialist housing court—we did that several years ago. If the Secretary of State had agreed to that at the time, there would no longer be any need for delay. The court would be up and running, and be effective and efficient in dealing with cases in the future.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee, but the view of the Ministry of Justice, His Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service and others involved in the court system is that the creation of a specialist housing court would divert resources from the effort to make the existing system work better. But good people can disagree on that point.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I rise as what is known as an “accidental landlord”, who conveniently owns and rents out a property in Tamworth. Speaking as a landlord, I welcome the Bill—particularly the property portal, which will allow councils to focus their resource better on landlords who provide poor-quality accommodation and give councils the opportunity to drive them out of business.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Two of the less conspicuous but important parts of the Bill are the creation of the property portal and the role of the private rented sector ombudsman. If they work effectively, both should obviate the need for the court processes that the Chair of the Select Committee and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) have mentioned. The property portal should ensure that we can identify properties in

the private rented sector whose landlords have not registered, and we can focus our enforcement action on them.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I welcome better protections for renters; in my constituency, swathes of constituents have been evicted so that landlords can flip their properties to become short-term holiday lets. Nationally, there may have been a growth in landlord numbers, but the Country Land and Business Association and the English housing survey both report that rural seats have seen a demise in landlord numbers of about 24%. In my constituency, we have lost 67% of our long-term landlords since the end of the pandemic. What steps will be taken to reverse the trend, so that long-term landlords come back into constituencies such as mine?

Michael Gove: What I would like to see in my hon. Friend’s constituency and so many others is an increase in housing overall—houses for social rent, for private rent and, above all, for people to own. As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) pointed out, there is a particular challenge in the very attractive parts of the country, such as those my hon. Friend represents, that attract tourism.

There has been a phenomenon whereby houses that would have been available for rent to the local community have been Airbnb-ised, although not just through that company. They have been turned into short-term lets and effectively been operating as shadow B&Bs or shadow hotels. There is nothing wrong—there is everything right—with making sure that we utilise property as efficiently as possible, but that has created percussive and deleterious consequences in some areas. That is why we are consulting on both using the planning system and also, with our colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, a form of registration to ensure that the situation works. Ultimately, however, the challenge is increasing supply overall.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just mentioned the private rental ombudsman, a post that I welcome. Is he considering the case for giving that job to the existing housing ombudsman, who supports the social housing sector at the moment?

Michael Gove: Yes, we are. There is a case for both a separate organisation and for having the issue fall to the existing ombudsman—who, I have to say, has been doing a very effective job.

I must draw my remarks to a close shortly so that all colleagues who wish to contribute can, but the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention provides me an opportunity to suggest that the condition of housing in this country—particularly housing built in the ’50s, ’60s and ’70s—is a profound cause for concern. Many of those homes are reaching the end of their natural lives. As a result of how they were built, we are seeing not just building safety issues but children in particular living in homes that are not decent.

The tragedy of Awaab Ishak’s death reminded us that damp, mould and other poor housing conditions can have a deleterious effect not just on life chances but on lives themselves. That is why the Social Housing (Regulation) Act, the actions of the housing ombudsman

and the actions that my Department has taken have been focused on ensuring that registered providers and social landlords live up to their responsibilities.

What we seek to do in the Bill is ensure that the small minority of private sector landlords who also need to up their game do so. We are not targeting any one sector. We are not targeting registered providers of social housing while leaving the private rented sector off the hook; nor are we directing particular attention to the private rented sector and letting registered social landlords off the hook. What we are doing is ensuring that citizens, who deserve a warm, decent, safe home, get one. That is what the establishment of the decent homes standard through this legislation will do.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Bill would have been a good opportunity to bring forward provisions ensuring that homes are kept at a decent standard. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that he will bring forward measures before the next election that will address decent home standards for the private rented sector?

Michael Gove: At the very beginning of my introduction to the Bill, I stressed my gratitude to all those who had worked to shape the measure and make recommendations on how we could improve it. I am sure that in Committee we will hear representations from different Members and different organisations about how we can improve the Bill further. I am open-minded about that: my aim is to ensure that we get a new deal and a fair deal for both landlords and tenants.

I have listened to representations from the National Residential Landlords Association and others about making sure that the overwhelming majority of landlords, who do a great job, are able to deal with a small minority of tenants who behave badly. I have also listened to representations from individual tenants and those campaigning for them, who want us to move ahead with the abolition of section 21 and the establishment of the portal. The establishment of the portal and the existence of the ombudsman will, I believe, ensure that landlords are on firmer ground and no longer undercut by rogues, and that tenants get a better deal. It is because the Bill provides both landlords and tenants with stronger protections for the future that I commend it to the House.

6.27 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to open this debate on behalf of the Opposition. I start by saying that we on these Benches will not oppose the Bill today—that may be more than can be said for some on the Benches behind the Secretary of State. After nearly five years of foot dragging, it appears that they need to be appeased with yet more delays. We disagree. Renters are at the sharp edge of the current housing crisis and urgently need the protections and support in the Bill—protections that, unfortunately, are just too late for many renters struggling right now in this cost of living crisis. But as they say, better late than never.

I welcome the Bill. In fact, I welcome much of what the Secretary of State said in his opening remarks. We have been calling for such measures for some years. We will be pleased to finally see the abolition of section 21,

whenever that actually comes. Labour also welcome the simplification of tenancies, which will give renters more flexibility and rights. It is right that periodic tenancies should become the norm, meaning that renters can give two months' notice and get out of a tenancy at any point.

We further welcome the creation of a new ombudsman; that has the potential to be an essential part of the redress system. For too long, renters have lacked basic power and control over one of the fundamentals of life: their home. Tenants have struggled to challenge unfair treatment without undergoing lengthy and expensive court proceedings. If this ombudsman is given the proper teeth and resources, they will have an important role to play in levelling the playing field. I think the Secretary of State agrees.

We are pleased that the Tory rebrand of Labour's proposed landlords register has made it into the Bill, too. The register is good for landlords and tenants. Finally, it is good to see the Government build in provisions to make it easier for renters to have pets. As I am sure the Prime Minister agrees, pets are an important part of the family, just as long as we remember not to let them off the lead illegally.

After four and a half years of foot-dragging, there can be no more dither and delay in ending no-fault evictions. The Secretary of State made strong points in his opening remarks, but I am afraid that he did not see the faces behind him—I can see why he has spent years arguing with the landlords on his Back Benches. Tenants across the country have been wrongfully evicted, kicked out of their homes and made homeless. In fact, since his Government first announced the end of no-fault evictions back in April 2019, a total of 71,310 households have been kicked out on to the street. That is more than 70,000 families put at risk of homelessness since this Government first proposed to protect them. Every single day another person suffers the same fate. According to Shelter, private renters over the age of 55 are served a section 21 eviction notice every 16 minutes. It has taken the Government four and a half years to reach the Second Reading of the Bill.

Mr Perkins: The Secretary of State was at pains to stress that the majority of landlords are good ones. It is almost like saying that there has been a delay to murder legislation because most people do not kill people. The reality is that we need legislation because there are some bad landlords, and the imbalance between renters and landlords is huge. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although it is welcome that we have finally got to Second Reading, many people have been let down by how long it has taken? It is now the responsibility of us all to get the legislation moving as quickly as we can.

Angela Rayner: I agree. I hope I can bring the House together when I say that it is right that we get moving on this issue. The Secretary of State has made it clear that the Government will move on it, but I am concerned about potential delays. I will come to those points in more detail.

Jim Shannon: There may well be consensus in the House—I hope there is; we will see how it goes later on. A major issue that comes to my attention and that of many others is mould, condensation and damp in houses,

[Jim Shannon]

about which tenants tell me regularly. Does the right hon. Lady feel that the Bill can satisfactorily address that to ensure the health and safety of tenants and their families?

Angela Rayner: We need legislation for decent homes alongside these provisions. I hope that we can get into that, and how we can protect people, in Committee. As the Secretary of State acknowledged, at the moment many families face a situation of inadequate housing, which goes beyond the scope of the Bill. I think we all agree that that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

Caroline Lucas: On decent home standards, would the right hon. Lady support the integration of Awaab's law into the Bill? We are talking about delays, but my concern is that if those provisions do not make it into the Bill right now, our constituents, including some of mine in Brighton, will still be living in absolutely atrocious accommodation, with water streaming down their walls, mould and kids getting ill.

Angela Rayner: If we can address that in the Bill, we should push for it, but we should also push to ensure that, whether in social housing or private rentals, people should have confidence that their homes are safe. Homes should be a safe place, but at the moment, that is not the case for too many.

Huge swathes of renters have been left paying a heavy price for the Government's inaction on section 21. This is real for people such as the Brady family, who live in Wiltshire and have experienced two no-fault evictions in the past two years. Mr Brady is a gardener and Mrs Brady works full time. After being forced out of their home, where they had lived for 15 years, they have resorted to living in their van. The family are able to bid on council houses when they become available, but so far, everything has been at least an hour away from where they live. Mr Brady said:

"There is a housing crisis and there are reasons behind it—you can use whatever excuses you want but it is a political decision. It was a political decision not to build enough houses, it was a political decision to sell off the social housing stock."

Those are not my words but the words of a man who would still have a roof over his head if the Government had not dragged their feet.

I feel that more delay is inevitable. Conservative Members threatened in the newspapers this weekend to choose their self-interest over the national interest by opposing or delaying the Bill. They do not want to see these changes enacted. Then, on Friday evening, the Department snuck out the suggestion that section 21 changes are dependent on court improvements, which could take years to complete. Today we discovered—not from an announcement to the press, to Parliament or to the public, but from a leak—that that is indeed the core part of a grubby private deal that the Secretary of State has struck behind closed doors with his own Back Benchers. So the Government who broke our justice system are now using their own failure as an excuse to break their own promises.

Just how long will it take? Can the Secretary of State promise that the Government will meet the pledge they made at the last general election, which he mentioned,

before the next general election? Renters simply cannot afford any more excuses or delays; he must provide clarity on that. [Interruption.] I know that he is a confident Secretary of State—he says so from a sedentary position—and I have confidence in his abilities, but people who are facing section 21 notices cannot afford any more dither and delay. He will get support from those on the Labour Benches in enacting this legislation to protect families who need protection.

We think that the Bill is a good starting point. We fear that a number of loopholes have been left in it, however. One such loophole is the commencement clause, which leaves Ministers the power to decide when—or, perhaps, whether—to actually bring an end to section 21. But that is not the only loophole. I hope that the Minister will engage with us constructively in Committee to close all those loopholes and strengthen the Bill in a range of areas.

For example, the new grounds for and protections from evictions are a welcome step, but the details on those grounds remain vague. On evictions, there remains a loophole by which renters are protected only for the first six months of their tenancy if their landlord decides to sell the property or move back in. That time limit needs to be increased as part of the Bill to give renters proper protection.

On section 21, it is not just a question of when the law is implemented but of how. Every household threatened with homelessness by a section 21 notice has the right to assistance from their local council to prevent them from becoming homeless, but the Bill removes that right to immediate help. That loophole could lead to a huge spike in homelessness and must be closed.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I am grateful to her for highlighting that point; I have come across such cases, and it is an absolutely appalling situation. Often young families are thrust out of their homes with very little notice, and local authorities struggle to cope. At the moment, many such cases that I have come across involve people being moved to B&Bs out of the area.

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that concern. To be fair to the Secretary of State, he acknowledged the challenges in his remarks—not just the housing challenges but all the challenges faced by families. People are scared and live insecure lives because of the devastation and ripple effect of the challenges they face.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the human cost of those evictions, but there is also a financial cost to councils. Bristol City Council pays exorbitant amounts to put people into emergency and temporary accommodation, which it should not have to do, so does she agree that, on top of helping people by ensuring that they do not have to go through the pain of eviction, the Government have a financial interest in resolving the issue?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree. I also think that, as the Secretary of State mentioned, most private landlords want to do the right thing and are a good part of our housing mix. They should therefore welcome the fact that we are doing our best to ensure that their good

name is upheld and that they are not stained by the tiny minority who do not do the right thing, who are the reason why these protections are so overdue.

We are also concerned that the changes to antisocial behaviour grounds are, as they stand, ambiguous and open to abuse. Mental health needs and domestic abuse are sometimes reported as antisocial behaviour, so that definition must be made more pragmatic and focused on genuine antisocial behaviour. The Secretary of State made reference to this issue, and I heard what he said; I look forward to working with him in Committee to address it, because it is important.

The Bill is also silent on the issue of economic evictions. While it strengthens the law to ensure landlords can only increase rents once a year, which is welcome, the mechanism for tenants to contest excessive rent hikes is not strong enough, giving people little real protection against so-called economic evictions.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Is there not a particular problem with the evidence that the rent tribunals will look at? The proposal is that they will look at the average market rents, but the local housing allowance is set at only 30% of the local average, meaning that rents could increase above the LHA and no one would be able to complain about it.

Angela Rayner: It is absolutely right that we get into these challenges, because I do not think people feel that the current situation provides redress for the challenges they face. I hope that in Committee, the Secretary of State will listen to points made by Members across the House to ensure that people get the redress and support that they need, and that we strengthen tenants' rights in this area.

Mr Betts: The Bill does not really deal with the issue of affordability at all. One of the big issues is the freezing of the local housing allowance: some 90% of properties in the private rented sector are not affordable with the amount of LHA that is payable. The Select Committee recommended that we go back to the 30% figure, as was previously the case, so could we push for that to happen? Currently, many people simply cannot afford anything at all in the private rented sector.

Angela Rayner: We have to get into that issue, but we also have to deal with the root cause, which is that we do not have enough adequate social housing in this country. We do not have enough housing, and that is because of 13 years of the Tories' failure to build the housing that we need and to challenge Members on their Back Benches. The Prime Minister has failed to challenge those on his Back Benches who have delayed house building in this country when we need it so desperately.

The Secretary of State mentioned the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and the White Paper, but I am disappointed that many of the proposals in the Government's White Paper have since been dropped. The Secretary of State said that he is open-minded, and I am glad about that, because the Bill is silent on proposals to make blanket bans on renting to families with children or those in receipt of benefits illegal. That sort of unacceptable practice must be stamped out, and I hope he will work with us to make sure the Bill does so. In the White Paper, the Government also promised to introduce the decent homes standard to give renters

safer, better-value homes and remove the blight of poor-quality homes in local communities. That standard is missing from the Bill, but I did hear what the Secretary of State said in his opening remarks. I gently say to him that we cannot miss an opportunity to give private renters the protection—the long-term security and better rights and conditions—that they deserve.

Wera Hobhouse: To ensure that tenants have that safety, does the right hon. Lady agree that we need a new regulator for all private rentals with the power to subject landlords to regular inspections?

Angela Rayner: The Bill talks about the ombudsman. We need to make sure that landlords understand their obligations, and where they do not, we need to ensure that there is redress. As I mentioned earlier, that ombudsman must have real teeth, and I hope the Secretary of State understands that. While I respect the landlords who are in the Chamber and those who are listening to this debate—I know many of them do a good job and are trying their best—we have to have a minimum standard. We cannot have circumstances, as we have seen in Greater Manchester, where children are living in very poor conditions. It is really important that we have regulation and, where people are in accommodation that falls below those standards, we have redress.

After four years, the clock is ticking. There can be no more delay, but the Government's track record does not instil much confidence. On the Tories' watch, mortgage bills and rents are soaring, fewer people are able to buy their own home, and over 1 million people are stuck on social housing waiting lists. Those problems are only going to get worse because the Prime Minister could not stand up to his Back Benchers on house building targets. Now it appears that once again, he is caving in to them, rather than keeping his promises to the British people.

This Bill is an important step forward, supporting renters at the sharp edge of the cost of living crisis, so Labour will work constructively throughout its passage. We will not be the cause of delay—I hope the Secretary of State can say the same about his Back Benchers. If they cannot act in the national interest and support a renters' reform Bill worthy of its name, let me make clear that our offer is to do so instead, because over the course of our proceedings today, 33 renters will have been put at risk of homelessness because they were issued with a section 21 notice and 11 will have got a visit from the bailiffs evicting them. Every single one of those people will be faced with anxiety about the future—anxiety about having to pay eye-watering moving costs and about whether they will be made completely homeless. They cannot afford to wait for the Prime Minister to find a backbone and stand up to his party. They cannot afford to wait for the Secretary of State to buy off his Back Benchers, and they cannot afford to wait yet more years for this Government to keep the promises they made to them.

We stand ready to work in the national interest, and will do so with anyone else who is prepared to join us. I urge the House not to waste this chance.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It will be obvious to the House that a great many people want to catch my eye. We have a long time—we have

[*Madam Deputy Speaker*]

three hours ahead—but I want to be fair in the way that that is divided up, so we will begin with a time limit of seven minutes.

6.46 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): In 2014, fellow housing expert Calum Mercer and I published a then-seminal paper called “Nation Rent”. That paper challenged what was then the status quo, which was that generation rent affected only younger people and would be a passing phase. “Nation Rent” set out that it was a changing structural environment in the housing and financial markets that had occurred since 2003, which saw a rapid acceleration of the private rented sector—overtaking social rent—together with a fall in home ownership. That structural change started long before the credit crunch and financial crash, but accelerated after them.

A decade on, little has changed in structural terms, and it should concern Members of all parties that generation rent has now become nation rent. The percentage of people aged between 35 and 44 and between 45 and 54 who are renting privately has tripled over the past two decades, and has more than doubled for those aged between 55 and 64. Nation rent is now embedded, not just in the younger generation but through the generations. As I set out in my 2018 paper with the Housing and Finance Institute, “A Time for Good Homes”, that structural change towards private renting affected around 2.4 million homes, or around 6 million people.

The need for legislation reflects that long-term structural shift. The private rented sector is no longer a flex or transitory tenure: it is the main tenure for millions of people for much, if not all, of their lives. The current legislative framework—a short-term tenure for long-term living, one person’s pension pot but another person’s only home—is not fit for that purpose. That is why there is tension and strain, which is reflected in the design of the Bill and the comments that have been made about it. There is a need to find a new balance that reflects this new reality for millions of people in our country, acting in a way that is fair and responsible to those who are being housed as well as to those who house them.

It remains my view that although the principle of the Bill and its measures are very welcome, they do not go far enough in dealing with the fundamental challenges of an overweighted private sector. There needs to be a long-term plan for housing that rebalances the housing tenure mix—a plan to boost home ownership and expand affordable rented housing substantially; one that unblocks the financial and regulatory constraints on affordable home ownership and professional renting, and one that builds more homes. I continue to work cross-party and cross-industry, inside and outside of this place on those priorities, as I have done for many years and as is reflected in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Given my long-term campaigning for housing, I was pleased to stand on a manifesto to build 1 million homes this Parliament, work towards 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s, and scrap section 21 evictions. We have done well on the first, the second is a work in progress and the third manifesto commitment is why we

are here today. I know at first hand the personal commitment that the Secretary of State and the Housing Minister bring to this matter, and how hard their commitment to it is.

This is a vital piece of legislation, because it seeks to provide greater security and stability for renters. This matters—and it should matter to everyone on the Conservative Benches—because housing instability destroys wealth creation, damages life chances, restricts educational prospects and harms health. I see this in my constituency inbox, as I am sure do all Members. In my MP surgery, I had a mother who had spent hundreds of pounds of her own money over many years building a comfortable home for her and her disabled daughter, only for them to be turfed out by their landlord with nowhere to go. Recently, I had to discuss with Ukrainian refugees how someone had complained to their landlord about the heating not working, only for them to find themselves served with a section 21 eviction notice. How do you begin to explain that that is just how things work in our country? They should not work like that; this needs to change.

That is why this reform is so important, but we cannot allow any delay, and that includes the proposed delay because, supposedly, repossession is taking too long. That is nonsense. There is already clear court guidance to deal with repossession claims in a timely manner, as set out in civil procedure rule 55.5, which states that the hearing must take place between four and eight weeks from the claim. Although there have been some spikes in court hearings over the covid pandemic, the timeliness of possession claims has remarkably improved. The latest available figures from the Ministry of Justice show that the average time between claims and orders is now back to under eight weeks. The average time between claims and warrants is the same as it was in December 2019, when the Conservative commitment was made to the nation. The repossession figures have collapsed from the post-covid high of 69 weeks, and are back on track to pre-covid levels. For landlords, every single median metric—be that for orders, warrants or possessions—has dramatically improved on the latest Government data.

Therefore, this landmark section 21 reform should not be delayed on the basis that court improvements are required. That was a concern of our Select Committee, and I think it has now been met in part by the improved data. Any change to the Bill that delays the implementation of these vital reforms cannot be supported. This issue affects millions of people in our country. That is why renters reform—specifically the abolition of section 21—was in the 2019 manifesto, on which all of us on the Conservative Benches stood. It was a manifesto that put the Conservatives on the side of the people, and a manifesto that secured such a huge majority. It would be a grave mistake not to honour that commitment, or to stifle it by delay.

To conclude, the Renters (Reform) Bill will provide security and stability to millions of renters across the country. It should be passed by Parliament without any further delay, but we must also do more to continue to unlock home ownership and other housing to deliver the homes and the housing stability that our nation needs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

6.53 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): First, I put on record that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Having considered the White Paper and then the Bill, the Select Committee welcomes in principle the proposal from the Government to abolish section 21. We heard evidence in a number of sessions from organisations such as Shelter, looking at the interests of tenants, and from the National Residential Landlords Association, and they all accepted that this was the right way to go and engaged constructively with the Select Committee on that.

People's homes can be taken away from them just like that when they have paid their rent and observed their tenancy conditions, and in principle that simply cannot be right. When a home is taken away, people have to move somewhere else, and their children have to uproot themselves from their school and be taken to another school. Members of the family who work may have to find another job somewhere else, because their home has moved and they can no longer get to their place of employment. That simply is not right in this day and age.

We recognise as a Committee—I made this point in an intervention—that there will be added work for the justice system, because evictions will now require a decision from the courts and more tenants may feel empowered to go to the courts. I am really disappointed that the Secretary of State is not going to indicate when he thinks the reforms to the court system will be in place to allow the legislation to be enacted. I think we need assurances today about when that will be. That cannot be an excuse for delaying something that has already been delayed for far too long.

I want to point out one or two other issues. I welcome the Secretary of State's welcome for the work that the Select Committee has done, even though his response was a little late; I accept his apology for that. We said very clearly in our report that enforcement by local authorities will be absolutely key in making these changes work. There has to be proper funding for local authorities, as the Local Government Association has said today, to enable that work to be carried out properly. We want assurances from the Secretary of State on that as well.

One of the really good ideas is the property portal, so that tenants and all of us know who the landlords are. We have suggested some changes and some improvements, on which I think the Secretary of State will come back to us, to make sure that the property portal is comprehensive. It should cover things such as when the property last had a gas safety certificate and when the electrical systems in the house were properly inspected, and information of that kind, including whether it complies with the decent homes standard. All those things are important, and tenants should be able to access that quickly. The registers should be updated and digitised, which we are encouraging the Secretary of State to do. We hope he will come back positively on that.

The cost for tenants is important. We welcome the Secretary of State's saying that rent increases cannot take place more than once a year, but we have concerns about the overload on the tribunal system and the way that those arguments will be played out, often with the

landlords having a great advantage. We are not quite sure why the Secretary of State is saying that a tenancy agreement could not have a yearly update of rents in line with inflation, with no need for argument. That is actually the case in many rent agreements now. While it has been difficult in the last couple of years with hyperinflation, historically—with inflation at about 2%—that has not been an issue and it gives some certainty to tenants. We are not sure, and we have not had an explanation, why the Government have ruled that out completely.

Coming back to the point about tenants on benefits, why can we not have a ban on landlords automatically prohibiting tenants on benefits from renting? Surely the Secretary of State should do that, and should indicate very quickly that he is prepared to accept that as an amendment to the Bill.

Munira Wilson: I strongly support the point that the hon. Gentleman has just made about the importance of the Government outlawing these blanket bans on renting in the private sector by those who are in receipt of benefits. I have been seeing a double whammy in that, in a constituency such as mine in Twickenham, rents have gone up by over 12% in the past year and, as he said, local housing allowance has not gone up, so people are evicted and banned from renting if they are in receipt of benefits when they try to find a new place. I pay tribute to the work of Citizens Advice Richmond, which has been running a campaign on that. We need to see the ban on such practice in place soon.

Mr Betts: I completely agree with those points, and I hope the Secretary of State responds positively to them. I think the situation is of real concern, and there is no reason why the ban cannot be enacted.

I have already made the point about local housing allowance. It is not part of the Secretary of State's Department, but it is part of Government policy. It is always going to be a challenge for tenants to pay their rent in the private rented sector given the rise in rents recently, but people on the lowest incomes and on benefits are now being excluded from most properties because they simply cannot afford it, because their local housing allowance has been frozen. The LHA needs to be lifted. Even if the Secretary of State cannot say so today, I hope he is encouraging those behind the scenes who can make the changes to make them in a proper and timely way.

I have a couple of other points. Student housing is different. The difference in student housing has been recognised where it is purpose-built student housing in that it will be exempt from the ban on periodic tenancies. That is entirely sensible. Recently, we have seen some real pressures on student accommodation in some university cities. Last year, Manchester students were actually being encouraged to live in Liverpool, because there was not enough housing in Manchester for them. That is just one of a number of examples in relation to protecting the student market, including non-purpose-built accommodation.

Michael Gove: Briefly, I wish to declare my interest. As the parent of a daughter who is currently at Manchester University, I know exactly what the hon. Gentleman means. We will be doing everything we can.

Mr Betts: I recognise that the Secretary of State has responded to the Committee's report, and while not allowing a complete reversal to periodic tenancies for non-purpose built student accommodation, landlords will have the right to terminate the tenancy in line with the university year—I think that is the basis of the proposal he is suggesting. That might well be a good compromise to take things forward, and I am sure the details of that will be tested further in Committee.

On the proposals for the ombudsman, the suggestion in an intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) about having one housing ombudsman, and incorporating the private sector role into the social housing ombudsman role, is very sensible. Why do we need two separate schemes for letting agents? Why can we not have just one ombudsman covering the whole of that area? At least everyone could understand it, rather than having to think, "Which bit do I go to in order to get this grievance raised?" I hope the Secretary of State will reflect on that point, which was simply made, to ensure that the process of redressing grievances works better.

Members of the Committee welcome the basic principle of the changes proposed by the Secretary of State, and we want them to be implemented as quickly as possible. We hope he will continue to listen to those recommendations that he has not yet indicated a willingness to accept.

7.1 pm

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Everybody agrees that people deserve to live in rented homes that are safe, warm, free from damp and mould, and in which they can feel secure. Nobody doubts that intention, or the fact that rogue landlords should be clamped down on and be made responsible. However, rogue landlords are the minority—the Secretary of State has said that on the Floor of the House—yet despite that, the Government seem to be tarring every landlord with the same brush with the Bill. The ironic fact is that there is already a plethora of legislation that allows local authorities to clamp down on every housing issue, including the scourge of the rogue landlord. One issue is that councils themselves are often the rogues, citing resources as an excuse for inaction, and with private landlords they already take action, or at least have the powers to take action if they so wish.

Without wishing to pinch the TV advertising slogan, this Bill does not do what it says on the tin. It should be renamed the "rogue landlord and nightmare tenants Bill", because all it does is force good landlords to take action that they would not normally take. To highlight what I mean, this is what has happened in the past. The Government forced landlords to put deposits into a Government-approved scheme, which landlords did. Any landlord who has tried to get money back from that scheme when tenants have caused damage will know that it is nigh-on impossible. So instead of putting money into deposit schemes, many landlords now do not take deposits. Instead, they have increased rents in order to cover the cost.

The Government do not treat private landlords as sole traders, but instead treat the whole income from rents as taxable, whether someone has a mortgage on the property or not. The result of that is increased rents. The Government stopped paying landlords directly when

tenants on benefits are in arrears, instead saying that the contract is with the tenant and not the Government. As a result, good landlords are now forced to take rent in advance—in the old days they used to take it in arrears as those tenants on benefits were paid by universal credit—and they have increased the rents because of the higher risk. Many, many landlords do not take people on benefits as a result of that. The Government say that they will legislate to make it illegal for landlords to discriminate against those on benefits, but when landlords have between 20 and 50 applicants for each house, all the legislation in the world will not make a ha'porth of difference, because the landlord will always take the most risk-free option.

One key component of the Bill is the removal of section 21 "no fault" evictions—because of the time limit I have had to strip loads out of this speech, Madam Deputy Speaker. Leaders Romans Group is one of the UK's largest property maintenance companies. Indeed, it has a landlord client base of more than 65,000. It took a sample survey from those landlords and found that section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 is rarely used, rarely overused, and even more rarely misused. Of all those who responded to the survey, 80% had never used section 21. Of those who had, a significant majority—over 60%—did so because the tenant was in breach of the lease. The English Housing Survey 2021-22 found that only 6% of tenancies ended at the landlord's volition. Both figures demonstrate the fact that the vast majority of landlords do not evict tenants on a whim. To end no-fault evictions through the abolition of section 21 is extreme, unnecessary and damaging to both landlords and tenants.

Let me give a couple of examples about using section 8 evictions to replace section 21. Ground eight is currently the most heavily relied on ground for landlords trying to gain repossession, and it currently provides a two-week notice period. It applies where the tenant is two months in rent arrears at the date of the section 8 notice and the date of the possession hearing. In the Bill, the notice period has been extended to four weeks. Also, any outstanding universal credit payments that the tenant is due to receive are not to be included when calculating the arrears, if the universal credit payment would reduce arrears below the two-month threshold. The Government cannot say to landlords on one hand that the contract for UC is between the landlord and the tenant, but in the Bill say that the landlord has to take off the pending UC payments for rent. It is a nonsense.

I am short of time, so I will briefly mention expanding the powers for antisocial behaviour under section 8 of the Housing Act 1988. It is unlikely to change the effect of ground 14, which—I think this question was asked earlier—is not mandatory but discretionary. That means that the judge has to consider whether it is reasonable to make a possession order, even if a tenant is guilty of the alleged conduct. It is very unlikely that any court would consider some trivial conduct to justify a possession order.

As has been mentioned several times, the real issue is the inaction in building more houses for people to live in—that is not just this Government but successive Governments. The market will not change until a Government grasp the nettle and literally put spades in the ground, as Macmillan did in the 1950s. There is a reason why we have the Homes for Ukraine scheme: it is because we do not have any houses to put people in.

There is a reason why over 100,000 young men are staying in hotels in this country: it is because we have no homes to put them in. The Bill will do absolutely nothing to improve the rental market. It will drive more landlords from the system. The Secretary of State said earlier that the number of landlords in this country has stayed static since 2016, but I would like to know exactly where he gets that information from as it is not the information coming from the market.

Mr Fysh: Is my hon. Friend aware that just five days ago Jones Lang LaSalle, one of the biggest property consultants in the world, published a report that analysed Rightmove evidence of rental market availability? It shows that in the south-east and south-west of England, rental availability is down by 32% on 2019. Is that caused by some of the things my hon. Friend has been talking about?

Craig Whittaker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a problem right throughout the country, not just the south-east. It is happening in the north in Calder Valley—wherever people are, there is an absolute shortage of homes, whether socially or privately rented. The Bill will do nothing to improve the rental market. It will drive more landlords from the system, and because of those shortages of homes to rent, where dozens of people apply for any homes that are available, the Bill will also do nothing to curb the rogue landlord element.

7.9 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is genuinely hard to overstate the scale of the housing crisis that we are in, in 2023. Every element of this crisis interacts with every other element, and they all feed off each other, driven—I agree with the right hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) on this one point—by the failure to build enough homes, as well as: the decline in home ownership, particularly among the young; the shrinking of the social rented sector; the growth of the private rented sector, especially, as has been pointed out, given the many different housing markets within the private sector; the growth of the private rented sector for those who are least able to afford that; the growth of homelessness; the pressures of housing costs, driven particularly by the shortfall between the housing element of the social security budget and actual housing costs; the collapse in legal aid and the advice sector; and the pressures on local authorities across the board. That has led to a perfect storm, at the sharp end of which is homelessness.

It is a relief to have this Bill with at least the promise that section 21 will end, because the section 21 powers are used for the most vulnerable and poorest and drive people directly into the homelessness sector. As an MP whose borough has the largest proportion in the private rented sector anywhere in the country, I feel strongly about that. It is profoundly worrying to hear that the Government have backtracked four years after they first promised to abolish section 21. The caveat we now have before us will mean in effect that there will be no progress on protecting tenants over the coming years.

It will be years before those powers are brought into effect, because one of the other elements of this omni-crisis is the shambles that is the courts system. We know that the Ministry of Justice took the single largest proportion of all spending cuts in the post-2010 austerity budget,

and it is struggling to cope with the current system. The sector has no plans and no provision to make the changes that the Secretary of State is relying on as a preliminary for abolishing section 21. Every day that goes by means that more people—many highly vulnerable—will face eviction.

On average, 290 London renters a week have faced no-fault evictions since the Government promised to bring an end to them in 2019. Citizens Advice said that it has helped 10,600 households with section 21 cases since this Bill had its First Reading. A six-month delay would mean almost 15,000 more Londoners facing no-fault evictions, and a third of all no-fault evictions in England in recent years have been in the capital. It is London—the most expensive place and the place with the greatest homelessness crisis—that will bear the heaviest burden as a result of further delays by the Secretary of State.

At the heart of all this is the tenants themselves. For many people, insecure tenancies are a nuisance—often an expensive one—that keep them in a state of permanent instability. High levels of population turnover are not good for strong communities. They are linked to low levels of participation at every level of civic society, and they place a particular strain on public services such as GPs and schools. For the most vulnerable, the private sector is a living nightmare, damaging their physical and mental health. All too often, insecurity, unaffordability and poor standards of accommodation come as a single package, placing the greatest strain on those who can cope with it least.

My casework—like that of many other Members, I am sure—is full of examples like these. One constituent wrote to me:

“We have been issued with a section 21 eviction letter by the landlord. I suffer from severe depression and recently had a cornea eye transplant and am still undergoing treatments. My son has autism, asthma, is non-verbal with severe sensory needs and also struggles with change, and we have both suffered serious mental health breakdowns due to our current living conditions.” These constituents have to wait until the court issues a bailiff warrant for them to be moved into alternative accommodation, but due to the high level of backlog that the courts are experiencing, that will not be any time soon. As she writes:

“This whole process has been severely detrimental to my mental health... My concern is that our current property isn't safe as the kitchen ceiling is about to collapse in on us”.

Another constituent wrote:

“This miscreant of a landlord sent me a section 21 notice for possession of my apartment. I have been a tenant there in good standing for three years. Rent is always paid on the due date. Rent is £850 for a tiny room...with a shared toilet and shower with 17 other tenants. The landlord informs me today that he wants to raise the rent to £1,516...an 80% rent increase out of the clear blue sky!”

A third constituent wrote:

“Today my wife and I were served with a no-fault eviction...principally for refusing to agree to an almost 20% rent increase. This was particularly galling, because in February we had already had an increase of almost 10%. We now have just eight weeks to find a place to live, but as you...know, there is a dearth of properties...not just in this area but other parts of London.”

They think it highly unlikely they will be able to find somewhere to live. They continue:

“I am utterly disheartened that we live in a country where this is possible. It is nothing short of an outrage.”

[*Ms Karen Buck*]

There is much in this Bill that is good. There are elements promised for this Bill that are not here and that we will want to press on, and there are a number of concerns we will want to press on in Committee to probe the Government. The central point is this: tenant insecurity is extremely damaging. It is bad for mental and physical health, it is expensive and it places pressure on local authorities. The longer that measures are delayed, the worse it will be. The Government have broken their promise, and we will be holding them to account for that failure.

7.16 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): This is without doubt a significant Bill, which shows that the Conservative Government are serious about delivering our manifesto commitments and delivering for the British people. In my constituency, tackling homelessness and rough sleeping is a key priority. To make in-roads, we must reform the private rental market. Many of my constituents and people across the country are trapped in high rental spirals, with little or no other viable options available to them. On that basis, the Bill's proposal to enable tenants to appeal excessive market rents designed to force out tenants could be an important step, but we need to ensure we see more detail on how that would work in practice.

On top of that, and more broadly, we must go back to these proposals and make sure that they do not let up on the delivery of more affordable housing and social housing. The Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) has heard me say that time and again. I believe there is a consensus across the House on that point. As the Bill progresses, I will be keeping a strong look-out for the appropriate protections for renters, but we cannot forget that without landlords, we would not have a rental market at all. That is why we need to strike the right balance between assurances for landlords and protections for renters. The tendency to vilify landlords is not just unhelpful to our public discourse; it is unhelpful to how we are developing legislation. We must make sure that we look after landlords in this process; they form a critical part of the housing ecosystem, and scaring them off would set us back even further, so we must tread carefully.

Through my role as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for housing market and housing delivery, and from meeting landlords and tenants in my constituency, I have engaged with a huge range of stakeholders, including professional landlords such as Grainger and charities such as Shelter. Through those discussions, I am aware of the sticking points that we need to resolve as we progress this Bill through its remaining stages.

To get into just one of the details—I know we are pushed for time—Grainger and others in the industry favour the idea of introducing the ability for landlords to request a six-month minimum tenancy length. Once that period is over, renters could issue a two-month notice. Responsible landlords such as Grainger—and many others; in fact, the vast majority of them—want to build communities and have lasting bonds with the people they house, which is an often forgotten point in these debates. Conversely, charities that I have been

talking to that fight for the side of tenants and renters, such as Shelter, want to see a longer protected period for tenants, with a focus on open-ended tendencies. They want to see the protected period lengthened from six months to two years to give renters more certainty and security. In the light of proposals to introduce comprehensive possession grounds for landlords, we need to be careful that we find a compromise between the two positions.

The reforms proposed in the Bill are promising, and I think we can all accept that they are a step in the right direction. However, there is more work to be done in finding the right balance between the needs of renters and landlords and successfully integrating the rental market with our levelling-up plans and the need to deliver more affordable housing across our country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Feryal Clark—not here. That is a shock.

7.20 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I join colleagues across the House in welcoming this long-overdue Bill and share their dismay at the delay in implementing a ban on no-fault evictions. Renters have been left with soaring rents and disrepairs, and are at the complete mercy of landlords, powerless under the current system of no-fault evictions to demand fair rents and humane living conditions.

This is a massive housing emergency. Across the country, renters of all ages and backgrounds—from students to families, young couples and single retirees—are struggling to pay their rent, let alone save for a deposit to buy. Only half of private renters have any savings in their name. With a desperate lack of social housing, Liverpool alone has more than 15,000 applicants on the council's housing register and almost 1,000 households in temporary accommodation. The frontline housing options and homelessness service is seeing nearly 400 new approaches a month. Councils are relying on the private rented sector as the only way to ease the pressures on the system, and renters are left with no viable options.

An entire generation have been betrayed by the Tories, with 13 years of austerity and rising rents, frozen wages and diminishing opportunities. On top of that, they have faced unprecedented challenges caused by the financial crash, recessions, the pandemic and, now, the cost of living crisis. Thirteen years of Tory attacks on workers' and tenants' rights have left renters facing soaring insecurity and plummeting conditions. We urgently need the Bill to be passed into law to begin to redress some of the worst impacts of the deregulation.

Nearly five years since the Government proposed to outlaw no-fault evictions and give renters desperately needed protection from exploitative landlords, some 70,000 households have been threatened with homelessness by section 21 notices. Homelessness has skyrocketed during the last year, with the number of households in England who became homeless or were at risk of homelessness up 7% in the year to March. Each day that we delay, 172 families are handed a no-fault eviction notice. We cannot wait for improvements in the courts; renters need protection now.

In my constituency, as across the country, we have increasingly seen private landlords using no-fault evictions to turf out tenants on fixed-term contracts in order to

hike up rents in line with soaring market rates. Not content with waiting out one-year or two-year-long contracts to raise rents and bolster profits, landlords are taking advantage of the cost of living crisis to line their pockets while tenants are turfed out with nowhere to go. Citizens Advice has found that a shocking 46% of renters who complain about their conditions receive a section 21 notice within six months. Research by Shelter supports that, with its findings showing that private renters in England who complain about poor conditions are 2.5 times more likely to be handed an eviction notice.

Ending pernicious section 21 evictions is a major step in rebalancing power in favour of tenants, but there are a number of areas where we need to go further to ensure that the Bill's measures have their intended consequences, as called for by the Renters Reform Coalition of the 20 leading housing organisations. First, we must increase the notice period from two months to at least four months: a move that will drastically reduce the number of people made homeless as a result of evictions. We must also protect renters from eviction for the first two full years of tenancy, not the six months proposed. We must introduce strong safeguards to prevent abuse of the new grounds for eviction, including a financial incentive for tenants to prevent abuse, and a one-year ban on re-letting a property after invoking new landlord circumstances on the grounds for eviction. Courts must be given maximum discretion to identify reasons why an eviction should not take place, and a cap on in-tenancy rent increases in line with inflation and wage growth must be introduced to prevent unaffordable rent increases being used as a way to evict tenants via the back door. Lastly, we need action to raise local housing allowance in line with inflation to prevent renters on benefits from being penalised by rising rents, and local authorities must be given extra financial support to take action on rogue landlords.

Everyone deserves a safe and secure home. The Government must bring the Bill into law immediately, with the additional safeguards that Members have outlined, to deliver desperately needed robust legislation that protects renters.

7.26 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am pleased to rise to speak on Second Reading of a Bill that fulfils a manifesto promise and introduces a number of measures ensuring that renters get a fairer deal and more protections while maintaining landlords' essential control over their properties. Acknowledging that there are both good landlords and tenants—there are problematic ones as well—we must strike a careful balance. Therefore, as well as abolishing section 21 evictions and moving to a simpler structure where tenancies are periodic to empower renters and provide them with more certainty, the Bill introduces reforms to ensure that repossessions where tenants are at fault are easier, such as in cases of repeated, frequent arrears or antisocial behaviour.

The majority of landlord-tenant relationships work well, but, where they break down, early and effective dispute resolution is crucial. The new private rented sector ombudsman will be able to provide impartial and binding resolution to issues. However, it is not a full replacement for the court system. Therefore, His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service must be ready for the changes. I welcome that some of that has already been

raised, indicating that there will be: more digitising of the court process to make it simpler and easier for landlords to use; prioritising of certain cases, such as those including antisocial behaviour, which can be a significant issue for landlords and tenants alike in my constituency; and the provision of early legal advice and better signposting for tenants, including to help them find a housing solution that meets their needs. I urge the Minister to work at pace with the Justice Secretary so that we can bring forward these measures as soon as possible.

My constituents in Cheadle are animal lovers, so I welcome that the Bill will give tenants the right to request having a pet in their property. Landlords will be required to consider those requests and unable to refuse them unreasonably.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important point. The people of Southend West are great animal lovers, and many have written to me to say that they have not been allowed to have a pet in a private rented property—what a terrible thing that is for their mental health. In Southend, I have met the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and been told heartbreaking tales of people having to give up their pets. Like her, I welcome the provisions in the Bill such that landlords cannot unreasonably refuse a request for a pet, but, likewise, landlords can demand that the tenant takes out insurance against any damage that a pet may do—a good balancing act. Does she agree that, given how important pets are to our physical and mental health, those provisions are to be much welcomed?

Mary Robinson: I certainly agree, and my hon. Friend has pre-empted many of my comments. It is heartbreaking for many people to part with their pets in order to have a roof over their heads. However, as we know, pets can sometimes cause damage and deterioration to a property, so it is important that landlords can insist on pet insurance to cover any damage caused as a result. However, for clarity, I would be grateful if the Minister could clear up a query from a constituent who expressed concerns to me about allowing pets in shared properties. In those circumstances, what will constitute a reasonable refusal—for instance, what if another resident with allergies or difficulties with animals complains? Will the Minister make sure that acceptable reasons for giving that refusal are made clear?

As the Secretary of State mentioned, the proposals have been examined in Committees. As a member of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, I have had the opportunity to look closely into reform of the private rented sector, examining the Government's proposals as set out in the White Paper, "A fairer private rented sector". We heard from a wide range of stakeholders with views across the spectrum. The Committee found that there was considerable support for the proposal of introducing an ombudsman for the sector. Further, we heard evidence that many rogue landlords are not intentionally malicious but unaware of their obligations. We heard that supporters of the Bill hope it will be an effective place for resolution. Equally, there were concerns from landlords that it might create additional bureaucracy, and concerns from tenant groups that it may take away the ability to go to court. Reassurance about the ease of use of the dispute mechanism would be welcome.

[*Mary Robinson*]

Getting the balance right is crucial. Over the summer I met tenants, landlords and letting agents, such as Cheadle-based Stuarts Homes, which facilitates tenants and landlords on a daily basis. I am grateful to all my local residents, tenants and businesses for giving me their views. As with any legislation or policy, we must consider any unintended consequences and seek to balance the protection of tenants with the rights of landlords. I heard about potential issues with the debt respite scheme, also known as “breathing space”. It was introduced in 2021 to help those experiencing debt, and provides individuals with a 60-day period in which interest and charges on their debts are frozen and enforcement action from creditors is paused. That is paired with a requirement to seek professional support to create a repayment plan. The scheme will have come as a relief to many. However, I have listened to concerns that some tenants have misused it to prevent evictions in cases of long-standing non-payment of rent. The stress of non-payment of rent—sometimes for months on end—affects landlords, who are unable to take possession of their property and are owed thousands of pounds in rent, which they fear they will never recoup.

Meanwhile, I have constituents in Cheadle who are landlords operating student lets. They have expressed concerns about the abolition of fixed-term lets. I was told that it may prevent landlords from securing tenants ahead of time for the next academic year, thereby taking away certainty and security for both landlords and students, who want to know their housing situation is sorted ahead of time. I was given an example by a constituent of where rental agreements are shared and if a student leaves, the others are—in theory—liable for the extra share of rent. However, in practice, the student leaving finds a suitable replacement, the lease is transferred and the departing resident gets their deposit back. As such, my constituent feels that a move to rolling tenancies, as the Bill proposes, would be unsuitable for student lets. I am reassured that that is being considered again.

We also heard during sessions of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee that the changes could negatively impact the rental market, making it unattractive for landlords to let to students. I understand that the Secretary of State has plans to introduce a new ground for possession, which will facilitate short-term student tenancies, but the Committee—and my constituents—recommend giving consideration to retaining fixed terms for the student rental market. Although I am pleased that the Government recognise the unique position of student accommodation in the rental market, I ask them to look at doing that.

The Bill makes some much-needed changes, but I ask the Government to listen to the outstanding concerns raised by those directly affected—the tenants and the landlords. We must ensure that we do not create unintended negative consequences or further problems that negate the good work of the Bill. In closing, I reiterate my overall support for these measures, and I look forward to following the Bill as it moves through the legislative process.

7.34 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Almost 40% of my constituents are private renters, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to reflect their concerns. Of those,

many are students—I think I have the largest number of students of any Member in the country—and I want to raise their concerns as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for students.

I was one of a cross-party group of 60 parliamentarians who wrote recently to the Secretary of State urging him to bring forward this legislation, so I am delighted that we have it. I did so primarily because of its promise to fulfil the Government’s pledge to end no-fault section 21 evictions, so it is a bitter disappointment that the Government appear to have frustrated the hopes of tenants by kicking the abolition of section 21 notices down the road to some potentially distant future, after further changes to the courts system—something that I saw that the National Residential Landlords Association has celebrated in a statement today, as a result of its “extensive lobbying”. I hope that the Government will think again, or at least give us an assurance this evening of the date when they plan to fulfil the ambition for no-fault evictions.

I hope the Government will go further in delivering the promised new deal for private renters in other areas, because I share the concern of the Renters Reform Coalition that the Bill needs amending to ensure that the proposed “landlord circumstances” grounds for eviction do not become the new section 21. The tenant should be given four months’ notice rather than two. There should be a one-year ban on re-letting after invoking the new landlord circumstances, rather than the proposed three months. We need stronger mechanisms than those proposed to stop unaffordable rent increases—of which we have heard examples already this evening—pricing tenants out and becoming the new section 21. We need to ensure that tenants can be confident in raising issues and making complaints without fear of retaliation. I hope that those issues will be considered seriously in Committee.

I want to raise the concerns of student renters. There is an exemption for purpose-built student accommodation, but many students live in the parts of the private rented sector that are covered by the Bill—around 45% of them, or 600,000 across England and Wales. Their voices have not been fully heard, which our all-party group has been trying to address. In May, we held a roundtable with student representatives from most of our major cities and many of our smaller towns. They agreed that there were many positive elements to the Bill, but raised issues that needed further clarification if it is to succeed for all renters.

I see that in his response to the Select Committee, the Secretary of State accepted the argument of landlords that

“the student market is cyclical and...landlords must be able to guarantee possession each year for a new set of tenants”.

He went on to state that

“we will introduce a new ground for possession to facilitate this.”

I understand that case, and it was reflected in some of the student voices that we heard, but we need to take care about how we do it because there is an underlying false assumption in the discourse around the issue that all students fit a traditional stereotype: on three-year undergraduate courses, wanting a 10-month contract and leaving their university town when they finish their studies. However, students are not homogeneous. Undergraduates and postgraduates have different

requirements; there are 30-week programmes and 52-week programmes; some courses start at different times of the year and have a different cycle. There are mature and part-time students, students with families, estranged students, international students, graduate apprentices, those who stay on to study or work during vacation while their friends do not, and those who want to make their university house a permanent home.

Many students live in mixed households, with recent graduates or other non-students. It simply would not work to have people in a mixed household on a shared tenancy with different rights. A grounds for possession clause might protect the market, but a one-size-fits-all approach will not address the fact that not all students want properties that are cyclical with the standard undergraduate year. So we need a clear definition of a student and how grounds for possession will be implemented. I would welcome some acknowledgement from the Minister, in winding up this evening, that the Government have given consideration to those complexities in their proposals in relation to students.

We also have to recognise that the student market differs greatly across the country. Large cities are different from smaller towns, and urban and rural-based universities are different again. The Higher Education Policy Institute's study of the Scottish experience highlighted the risk in tourist areas, or in other areas with low supply and high rents, that not exempting students will encourage landlords to move out of student accommodation. Student representatives expressed concern to us about being priced out in some areas by young professionals. On the other hand, there are worries that exempting students in some areas will risk them becoming second class renters, attracting less scrupulous landlords into student accommodation because they are relatively unprotected tenants.

Student renters face many of the same issues as other renters and they deserve the same broad protections. They face specific issues, too. The raised with us the growing pressure they are under to view and sign tenancy agreements for a property earlier and earlier each year—often in this term, early in the academic session, before friendship groups are formed—leaving them locked into unwanted contracts. The Bill does not address that, but students felt that it should. There are other questions that need addressing if we are to exempt students. What happens if a renter's student status changes during the tenancy? How will the Bill address the issue of joint tenancies?

To conclude, I simply say to the Minister that we should not rush to exempt students from the protections in the Bill relating to no-fault evictions and keep them uniquely locked into fixed-term tenancies without careful consideration of the impact on all types of students in all parts of England and Wales. Even then, we need to ensure they continue enjoy the protections in the Bill. I hope the Minister will agree to meet the all-party parliamentary group for students, and student representatives, to hear our concerns.

7.41 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I must declare that I own half of a rental property with my wife and should therefore refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I want to start by talking about one of my favourite subjects in this place. I have often spoken in the House about the impact of second homes in my constituency. While they bring many economic benefits, we must also face the fact that quite often they turbocharge the market, pushing up prices and making home ownership simply a dream for many local people. It is no big secret that North Norfolk has the highest proportion of second homes in the country outside London. In addition, one in five properties are private rentals. However, with an increasing number of holiday lets and second homes for many local people, the availability of secure, long-term rentals is diminishing year on year. That is particularly worrying in a constituency such as mine.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, whose area I know well because—I declare an interest—I farm in his constituency. I also have rental properties. What he is saying is absolutely correct. The Bill will have a disastrous effect on areas such as his and mine, reducing the number of rental properties and therefore increasing the price of rent. For youngsters, that is really serious.

Duncan Baker: I thank my hon. Friend for intervening. I do not agree at all, actually. In constituencies like mine, people have a real problem with the security of rental property. If they are evicted, it is virtually impossible for them to find somewhere else to rent in a short space of time at the moment. I deal with queries about that all the time, but I will come on to that in just a moment.

It is worrying that for so many who are looking to settle down in a family home of their own, renting is becoming the only option due to rising house prices. For example, on Friday I bumped into a local estate agent in one of my biggest towns, North Walsham. He told me he has 25 applicants for every rental property that comes on to the market. The demand is just off the scale. Clearly, that is a really huge problem. There is simply not enough rental market security when demand is rising as it is.

Now, clearly I am a Conservative and I am not against people wanting to purchase property in Norfolk as a second home. If one works hard in life, one should have the choice to spend one's finances as one wishes. But I also believe that when the market begins to fail, intervention is sometimes necessary and that is where we are at the moment. Many second homes, for instance, are left vacant for large parts of the year, reducing the property pool and once again reducing the availability of homes for residents to rent. Although holiday lets and vacant second homes are not the focus of my speech today, following conversations I have had with many of my constituents, especially Jane Platt, whom I met when she came all the way from North Norfolk to Parliament back in March, I know how unsettled and insecure tenants can feel in the sector as it currently stands. That fear is exacerbated in areas such as North Norfolk, because if a landlord decides to serve an eviction notice, given everything I have just said, there would simply be so little choice available for renters who need to find a new home quickly. Indeed, sadly, just in the four years I have been in this place, I have tried to help many desperate families find a suitable home to rent. That is at the pinnacle of why I support the Bill.

[*Duncan Baker*]

The Government are trying to help. Many initiatives have come forward; I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for a short period of time. Doubling council tax on second homes, planning changes for short-term rentals and now this Bill show that the Government are committed to fulfilling their manifesto commitment to introduce reforms that will provide families across the UK with that extra reassurance that they will be able to settle into a family home and be free from, in certain cases, unfair evictions and, in very limited circumstances, landlords who do not act in a correct way. Many landlords and tenants are good, honest and decent people; they are the norm. The private landlord is, in my view, the answer to the rental crisis we face, but only if they are incentivised properly, for example with tax reforms. I gently suggest that in some regards we could go further with some of the Government's proposals to ensure that good and decent tenants feel secure in the private rental sector and feel they can put down roots. It might not be a big issue for some Members, but as others have said, enabling someone to have a pet in their home, as I allow, is certainly right in the 21st century when so many people treat a family pet as a part of their family.

There is large support across the board for the Government's current proposals, and I am not suggesting that they are materially changed. However, I believe there are some valid conversations to be had around increasing notice periods from two to four months to give people time to find a new home. I have said it before, but in my constituency and in many others—for instance, in the south-west—I doubt anyone could find another rental property in two months, such is the enormous shortage. In addition, I would potentially improve the protected period at the start of the tenancy from six months to at least a year, as well as making all grounds discretionary rather than mandatory so that a court can take into account a tenant's circumstances before granting possession. Above all—I have said this to various Ministers before—why can we not incentivise long-term landlords to return to the market by offering mortgage interest relief on long-term tenancies? In a constituency such as mine, so many people offer short-term rentals in their holiday cottages and on Airbnb, but if we could switch those people to offering long-term tenancies on their properties by giving them mortgage interest relief, it would fundamentally change the situation overnight and give more renters market security. It would seriously improve the amount of rental stock we have available.

I appreciate the need to safeguard landlords from antisocial tenants and to allow them to get their properties back when needed; we have heard that this evening. However, the tightening of some of the Government's proposals would not cause an exodus of landlords from the sector or prevent them doing what they wish with their asset. As I said before, I own a part-share and I do not have any fear at all. When a landlord has a good relationship with their tenant, that is how it works—operating good relationships. Generally, people who are trying to rent are decent people. Creating a fairer, more secure and thriving rental sector is achievable, and this Bill is the first step.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Just for the sake of clarity, let me say that I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Norfolk (*Duncan Baker*). He took the correct allotted time. There seems to be a mistake with the clock, but the hon. Gentleman has done the honourable thing, and I thank him very much for that.

7.49 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Let me first draw Members' attention to my own entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am also half a residential landlord.

The Bill has taken far too long to reach this stage. It is more than four years since the Government's manifesto pledge, and now, in the dying months of the current Parliament, the Bill has only just reached Second Reading. Broadly, however, my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I support it, and will vote for it this evening. Any legislation that paves the way towards a fairer situation for both renters and landlords must be welcome. Most important is the end of no-fault evictions, and I shall say more about that shortly. We also welcome clauses that will allow renters to keep pets in their homes, and the creation of a housing ombudsman, which will enable decisions to be made more quickly and cheaply for tenants and landlords.

Security for both tenants and landlords is vital, and it is essential that in providing that security for tenants, we do not inadvertently cause an exodus of landlords from the rental market. The Country Land and Business Association has found that 44% of landlords plan to sell or change the use of their rental properties in the next two years, which is cause for concern because at the same time we are seeing an increase in the number of people entering the private rental market. Rightmove estimates that for every property advertised for rent there are 24 applicants, whereas there were just eight in 2019. We need to ensure that we are incentivising landlords to stay in the market and to give renters security once they manage to become that one person in 24 to secure a property to rent.

The length of rental tenancies is an important element in that regard. In its current form, the Bill introduces rolling tenancies without specified end dates. That provides considerable security for tenants, but the six-month protected period is potentially too short. Meanwhile, 43% of landlords do not have a portfolio of properties; they have just one, so the risk of empty months is significant for them. Providing longer-term tenure might alleviate that risk and remove an incentive for landlords to exit the market. The Liberal Democrats' proposal is to extend the default tenancy from one to three years, and, during that three-year period, only to allow rents to increase by the rate of inflation. That would give both renters and landlords greater stability.

As I mentioned earlier, the Liberal Democrats welcome the banning of section 21 or no-fault evictions. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House have had an enormous amount of casework featuring, for many renters, a sudden and drastic upheaval in their everyday life caused by a section 21 eviction. Such evictions leave people stressed about their security of tenure and worried

about not having somewhere to call their home, and can pull the rug from under their feet. They can require people to move to a new area, forcing them to find new schools for their children or new jobs for themselves and try to settle into new communities. That is particularly significant at present, because more families than ever are living in private rented accommodation, and, according to the Renters Reform Coalition, 1.8 million renter households include children.

The Government's commitment to abolish those types of eviction and legislate for landlords to be able to evict only in "reasonable circumstances" is therefore a welcome step towards ensuring that renters' rights are protected in law. It will also ensure that tenants living in properties suffering from disrepair or even infestation can report such issues to their landlords without the fear of a "revenge eviction". It should drive up standards, particularly if coupled with longer tenancies. As always, however, there is a balance to be struck between providing security for tenants and ensuring that the legislation does not cause an exodus of landlords from the sector. It remains important for landlords to be able to remove tenants who are genuinely damaging their property or the surrounding community, but I hope that the Minister will make the definition of what will enable that to happen absolutely clear. It is also important to guard against landlords being able to use flimsy excuses to evict tenants, allowing section 21 evictions to continue in all but name.

I hope that the Minister will elaborate on the reform of the legal system that will be necessary to allow landlords to evict when there is non-payment of rent, unreasonable damage to property or clearly defined antisocial behaviour, or a genuine change in a landlord's circumstances. A prompt and fair court process is obviously essential to retaining landlord confidence in a reformed system, but delays in that process should not be used as a mechanism to kick this important legislation into the long grass.

The quality of rental housing must also be considered. Black mould, damp, faulty boilers—I am sure we are all aware of the difficult conditions that some rental properties are left in. I say "some" with great seriousness, because not all private landlords leave their properties in disrepair, but we must make the Bill robust enough to challenge those who do. The Government have previously promised to introduce legislation at the earliest opportunity to apply the decent homes standard to the private rented sector. I find it concerning that that legislation has not been introduced, and the Government have instead announced that they will delay the requirements that will force private landlords to meet energy performance certificate standards.

I understand the cautious approach in ensuring stability of supply in the private rented sector, but responsible landlords should not balk at taking measures over a reasonable timescale that will enhance the value of their asset. I also understand the concern about the usefulness of the EPC, but it should be possible to revisit that and phase in a more effective measure of energy efficiency rather than abandoning it altogether, providing certainty and a fixed timetable that landlords should be able to work to. Without such measures, the Bill risks offering rogue landlords an easy escape route when it comes to improving the quality of the properties.

The Bill is better late than never, but I urge the Government to revisit the issue of length of tenancy, to clarify the circumstances in which, and the legal process through which, a landlord would legitimately be able to evict a problematic tenant or sell the property, and to consider including a decent homes standard so that those renting privately can be sure of a safe and warm home for themselves and their families.

Let me end by calling for a rapid increase in the building of social housing, because a shortage of supply is behind all these issues in the private rented sector, and it leaves far too much power in the hands of landlords.

7.56 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I have no financial interest in the Bill. I am not a landlord, have never been one, and have no desire to be one. It sounds like a very stressful job. However, I do declare a personal interest, because I am the father of young people in their 20s and 30s, and I am increasingly worried about their lack of opportunities to buy their own home, or indeed rent a home. My generation was fortunate in experiencing full employment, a buoyant housing and rental market, and low levels of net migration. I was able to buy my first house—although it was a bit of a struggle—for £25,000.

The opportunities for young people are so difficult now, and I think they should be at the forefront of our thoughts. They are overwhelmingly reliant on the rental sector for accommodation. The housing crunch means that they have to rent for a larger proportion of their lives, and the Government benchmark for an "unaffordable" level of rent is 30% of income. As of last year, four in 10 under-30s in England, Scotland and Wales are now paying rents that the Government consider "unaffordable". The crisis is driven by a massive shortage of supply. Policies such as Help to Buy only help to increase demand, while doing nothing when it comes to supply. Only massive, comprehensive planning reform can solve this problem. We have to build many more houses, and we have to free up the rented sector.

We need a public-spirited mentality. Many older people have worked hard and have purchased their homes, but they are undermining the ability of younger people to do the same by objecting to new housing proposals—and, of course, when they object, they are also objecting to the ability of their own children and grandchildren to get on to the housing market. Much opposition to new housing is due to the fact that it is often poorly built, and developments lack the upscaling in infrastructure that is needed to support it. We need to adopt a holistic approach. The housing shortage means that first-time buyers have little to choose from, and delays them from getting on to the property ladder. Young people's wages have not kept up with the rising cost of living and housing. They are forced to spend more and more of their money on rent, leaving less room for savings, paying off debt, and spending money which will flow into the general economy. Rent increases are outpacing wage growth in most of the UK.

I know that many Members, and rental reformers, have argued in favour of getting rid of no-fault evictions to help give renters security, but I believe the reality is the opposite. Banning no-fault evictions will make the rental market even more stagnant, and will lead to its

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drying up further. I urge the Government, if the Bill becomes law—as I am sure it will, with Labour support—to allow a cooling-off period so that over the next year, more and more landlords do not just get out of the sector altogether. Apart from adding to the burden of landlords, we do not want to see what happened when Ireland did this. The regulatory burden on landlords there was such that the rental sector shrank massively and Governments have paid the price in terms of popularity. The number of available properties for rent in Ireland has shrunk to a record low. A temporary eviction ban there ended at the end of March this year and did nothing to alleviate the shortage.

No-fault evictions are in some sense a legal fiction. Evicting a tenant for fault is a complex process and the burden is on the landlord to prove a breach of tenancy, arrears of rent, nuisance or antisocial behaviour, criminal activity or substantial disrepair. Depending on the tenancy, the notice period could be as short as two weeks or as long as several months. Notice procedures are highly regulated and must observe the prescribed format. Failure to observe this down to the letter of the law can render a notice invalid, delaying eviction. If the premises are not vacated, it is up to the landlord to initiate costly legal proceedings.

Let us look at what happened in the past. In 1952, under Harold Macmillan as Housing Minister, more than 270,000 new dwellings were completed. In 2019, the year before the pandemic, just 213,000 new dwellings were built. In the statistical year ending March 2019, 612,000 people came to live in the UK, with 385,000 emigrating from the UK. That is a net migration figure of 227,000 people, on top of the housing shortage that already existed. The post-covid statistics are even worse. The Office for National Statistics estimates that net migration to the UK in 2022 was 606,000. The same year, energy performance certificate data suggests that just 252,000 homes were built. The number of people we are letting into the country is 2.4 times the number of new dwellings we are building. This is a crisis and it needs to be addressed.

This does not take into account the fact that even without these newcomers there is already a squeeze on housing. We welcome the fact that we had 174,000 Ukrainians coming here, and perhaps we have not done enough but we have also welcomed people from Afghanistan. No one is claiming that we should not have taken in these refugees in genuine need, but we need to be realistic. If we are letting in these people in need, we need to severely curtail other migration—not just illegal migration but legal immigration—in order to stay afloat and give our own young people a chance to buy and rent houses. Younger and less well-off people are being left to shoulder the burden.

House builders face complex and lengthy planning processes that slow down development, and I cannot agree with the Government on removing housing targets. We need to reimpose housing targets on local authorities and we need a massive house building drive. We need to give many more people the opportunity to rent and we need to control net migration. For all these reasons, I cannot support the Bill tonight.

8.3 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Today's Second Reading of the Renters (Reform) Bill is long overdue but, as many have already said, it unfortunately does not go far enough in many areas. Since the Government first promised to end section 21 no-fault evictions, 70,000 households have been evicted or threatened with homelessness. Everybody deserves to have a safe, decent and affordable home, but sadly, on the Tories' watch, mortgage bills and rents are soaring, fewer people can buy their own home and over 1 million people are still stuck on social housing waiting lists.

My constituency is one of the youngest in the country and has a higher number of private and social renters than the national average. Average house prices are more than £675,000, which is around 15 times the average annual salary, making it much harder for many to get on to the housing ladder. All too often, that leaves them trapped in the private rented sector. The Renters Reform Coalition has rightly asserted that:

“The private rented sector in England is characterised by poor standards, a lack of affordability, discrimination and”—

most importantly—

“insecurity.”

I regularly receive correspondence from constituents complaining about the poor living standards and eye-watering rents that they are facing. That is why I asked the Secretary of State earlier why he would not bring forward provisions in the Bill to address the issues around decent standards. Renters have never been so exposed or so desperately in need of Government action to establish a fairer, more secure and more affordable private rented sector.

In London, private rents rose by over 6% in the year to this September, which is the highest for over a decade. The average rent in London is the equivalent of 40% of the average household income, compared with just 26% across England. The lack of protections for renters is playing a huge role in these trends. That is why reform of this sector is vital, but more needs to be done to protect renters and to ensure that they can live in a home that is safe, decent and affordable.

The Bill as it stands does nothing to address the cost of renting, which has skyrocketed. It contains no requirements for privately rented homes to meet the decent homes standard or provisions to increase councils' investigative and enforcement powers. The Bill will eventually remove section 21 no-fault evictions, but it still has many issues. Renters will be protected from eviction only for the first six months of their tenancy, rather than the two years that many across the sector have been calling for. They will be entitled to receive only two months' notice of an eviction rather than four months, which would give them more security, and landlords will be banned from reletting a property after evicting tenants on new grounds for only three months rather than for a year. While the Bill strengthens the law to ensure that landlords can increase rents only once a year, the mechanism for tenants to contest increases that are too high is not strong enough. We need to see a cap on tenancy rent increases at either the lowest end of inflation or wage growth.

I also want to touch on pets in private rented homes. This is an issue I have been working on with Battersea Dogs and Cats Home in my constituency, and an issue

that many of my constituents have been writing to me about. It is something that they care about. For many people, their pets bring them physical, mental and social health benefits as they are an integral part of many family units. It is vital that we ensure that clauses 7 and 8 are protected in the Bill, so that tenants have a legal right to request a pet in the property and the landlord must consider that request and not refuse it unnecessarily.

This Bill alone will not solve the housing crisis in the private rented sector, and the Government must look at wholesale reform of the sector. Labour has committed, once in government, to increasing the affordable housing supply, and the Mayor of London has already invested over £3 billion in building genuinely affordable homes. There is so much more that the Government can do. They could look at unfreezing the local housing allowance and restoring the link between the LHA and rising rents. It has been frozen for too many years and it is totally out of step with the cost of renting for many in this sector. Shelter has shown that low-income renters are being forced to find, on average, an additional £648 for a one-bedroom property, which is virtually impossible for many.

This Bill only scratches the surface on fixing the housing emergency created by the Conservatives. To protect our constituents, more needs to be done in every way to ensure that everybody has a safe, decent and affordable home to live in. This is the level of ambition that we need, but unfortunately it has been missing from this Government.

8.9 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Looking at the housing market, we know that the problem is when people feel insecure. Generally speaking, those who own their own home or who are in council housing feel secure, but the private rented sector, because it is focused on very short-term lets, causes a problem. A one-year tenancy is not a problem for a mobile young man, but if he has a family, with children at school and work in the locality, and if he is unlucky enough to have gone from one private landlord to another, over half a dozen years, before being evicted, it will have a major effect on the family's life chances. The kids might not be able to go to school, they might have a longer bus ride, and sometimes their exams might be affected. Sometimes parents have to change jobs.

It is laudable for the Government to try to lengthen tenancies in order to provide a little more security for those in the private rented sector, but I am not sure whether the formula in this Bill will actually do that. Like some of my colleagues, I am somewhat sceptical. There is quite a lot of room to improve the Bill.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) said, the Bill would probably be more effective if landlords were incentivised to keep tenants for longer by being able to claim their mortgage interest against tax. We would then end up with a market that is much more logical and better for tenants who want a long-term, secure tenancy. In other words, a fiscal intervention would be more likely to succeed than many of the interventions the Government are currently suggesting.

Of course, as many Members have said, one solution is to build more houses—more for people to buy and more for council housing. It is bizarre that some local authorities have got into trouble buying shopping centres and PV farms when, actually, the money would have been much better spent on providing people with a decent home. We all know that our local authorities spend a lot of money on putting people in temporary accommodation, with possibly only a microwave to heat their food. Investment in homes, which is good for people's mental wellbeing and their children's upbringing, should be the priority of any Government, rather than being a question of right or left. As a Government, we ought to focus more on building than on messing about with managing the housing market.

I am concerned that some things in the Bill may well put off private landlords. I sometimes feel that private landlords have a thankless task. They tend to get kicked by everybody, even though they are trying to do the right thing. Fundamentally, if we make it more difficult for landlords to get their property, they will think twice before renting it out. We have to be extremely careful when we legislate in this area, because the consequence of making it more difficult for private owners is that we may well end up with more people being evicted and more people falling on the council for a home.

The Secretary of State introduced the Bill with his usual panache, but I was amazed that two large areas have not really been included. First, the Bill will not work for student accommodation and, in fact, could have very perverse incentives. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is an expert in this sector, and he made some interesting observations. He asked what would happen, if we had this system and tried to introduce a separate system for students, where a student lives with somebody who is in work. There are all sorts of difficulties that the Bill will have to iron out.

It is vital that those who have invested in property near our universities—our universities seem to be property companies, as far as I can see—have the certainty of one year moving on when another year comes in, in good time, so that people can sort out their accommodation. We really should tell people what we are doing when we introduce a Bill, rather than waiting for what might come out during the Bill's passage.

My other concern is about moving from section 21, which is clearly a blunt instrument, to the courts. We currently have a major backlog in our courts, on which I think they are making some progress, but the Bill will inevitably slow down the process for landlords. The Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), suggested that perhaps there ought to be property courts to fast-track the complaints. There are all sorts of issues.

Throughout most of my parliamentary career, when people have come to my surgery to say that they are going to court, I have tended to say, "Don't do it." In this instance the Government are trying to get people to go into the legal system, and I worry that it will take longer. I worry whether this is the right solution for either tenants or property owners. Have the Government done a proper assessment? Are we confident that the system will work? The Bill has been introduced on a promise that it will be sorted out, but the courts are the

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responsibility of another Department, not the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I worry about that.

This Bill is not fully formed, but I think it could be improved. It is one of those Bills for which Committee consideration will be vital. I will support the Government tonight, but I will be looking very carefully at how the Bill is improved as it goes through this House.

8.16 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): For my constituents in Liverpool, West Derby, and for millions across the country, the private rented sector is the only housing option available because of the disastrous turning away from the post-war mass council house provision. Those long-term political decisions have led us to our current crisis.

The private rented sector has utterly failed to provide homes that are decent, affordable and allow people to live in safety, security and dignity. More than one in 10 privately rented homes contains a category 1 hazard that could kill or seriously maim, and tenants who raise complaints are two and a half times more likely to be handed an eviction notice, which often leads to a forced move that is disruptive to the family and to children's education.

Local authorities have had their resources and capabilities decimated under the Government's austerity programme. This morning alone, three families in West Derby have contacted my office after being given an eviction notice by a private landlord, with housing provision scant in Liverpool.

I have previously raised in the House the case of my constituent with asthma whose landlord left him in a damp property with no gas supply in the middle of winter. I have raised the cases of constituents, including children, who were hospitalised and suffered serious health impacts as a result of disrepair in privately rented homes, and cases of families living in fear of bailiffs, having been served a section 21 notice by their landlord after complaining about terrible conditions in their home. One constituent said, "Section 21 takes the humanity out of the situation and that's precisely the problem—we are humans and our lives are being carelessly destroyed!"

Since I raised these cases a year and a half ago, my constituents have seen no changes to the law, so we finally welcome the Second Reading of the *Renters (Reform) Bill*, which we hope might at least bring an end to the nightmare of section 21 no-fault evictions. The delays to the Bill have been shameful. Nearly a quarter of a million private renters have been served with no-fault eviction notices since the Government first pledged to ban them in April 2019. During the delay between First Reading and Second Reading alone, Citizens Advice has had to help more than 10,500 people with section 21 evictions.

The Secretary of State has now said:

"Implementation of the reforms in this bill won't proceed until further improvements are in place and HMCTS is fully prepared for these changes."

How long will that take? Can the Secretary of State explain how this commitment will be reflected in legislation?

My constituents and hundreds of thousands of others have zero faith that they will ever see a ban on section 21 evictions under this Government, because they have seen 13 years of the Government's complete destruction of the justice system, which has caused so much damage to those seeking justice in so many sections of society, including housing. I sit on the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. From the Secretary of State's response to the Committee's report, it feels as if the ideological destruction of the justice system by his Government is now being used as a cover to bow down to the lobbying from landlords—many of them seem to be on his Back Benches—and to kick the ban of section 21 into the long grass.

Added to that are the concerns of tenants, unions and charities, who welcome the ban on section 21 evictions but are concerned that the Bill will replace section 21 with potential loopholes for landlords to evict tenants under other terms that are unfair or extremely vaguely defined. They are also concerned that landlords will continue to be able, in effect, to evict tenants by raising rents to unsustainable levels. I hope that the Secretary of State will address those fears and loopholes when the Bill is in Committee.

This Bill should be an opportunity to empower tenants and hardwire social justice into the system. So many people are looking to the Bill to rebalance the scales of justice, which are weighted so heavily against tenants and so in favour of profit. Any delay in bringing in a no-loopholes ban on section 21 evictions really is unforgivable. A nation awaits.

8.20 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my declaration on the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have been a landlord for 20-plus years. I should also note that I have been a tenant, too.

A wise man once said:

"The first lesson of economics is scarcity: there is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it."

He also said:

"The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics."

Whenever this is the case, there are disastrous consequences. We see this every time Labour is elected. Who among us will ever forget the note that Labour left us in 2010? It said:

"I'm afraid there is no money. Kind regards—and good luck!"

As Conservatives, we understand the importance of sound economics and trying not to interfere with the market, yet I am concerned that this Bill may be guilty of just that. The Bill could well result in fewer properties to rent, and in sky-high rents.

I thank the Secretary of State for meeting me in Edlington in my constituency. I showed him at first hand the problems that landlords and constituents are facing as a result of the decades of neglect that the area has faced under Doncaster's Labour-controlled council. I am still hopeful that levelling-up funding will help to transform this part of my constituency. I have written a plan for Edlington, which I know my right hon. Friend has read. On a positive note, he will be pleased to know that his visit has bucked up all the stakeholders: they are now beginning to address issues that I have raised. My constituents are very grateful, as am I.

I also thank the Secretary of State for his recent letter to me, in which he announced changes that he has made to the Bill. They were needed. That proves that the Secretary of State is willing to listen, but there remain many issues that need addressing. The simple fact of the matter is that the more bureaucratic and difficult we make renting for landlords, the more incentive they will have to sell up and reduce the number of properties on the market to let. With fewer properties for rent, scarcity means that rents will increase. Is that what tenants want? We should be helping landlords and tenants equally, not one over the other. Savills has carried out research on the issue, and tens of thousands of landlords are doing just that: selling up. More are expected to follow.

There are those who say, “So what if the landlord sells? What is all the worry? The house is going nowhere. If it is sold, an owner-occupier or another landlord will buy it.” They are right—and if an owner occupier does buy it, that is fine. But if good landlords cannot make a property pay, they may just sell to an unscrupulous landlord who will make it pay. Is that what we seek to do: to make the property market so costly and so bureaucratic that only the cowboy landlords can make it pay? I do hope not.

By bringing this Bill forward, the Government will inadvertently increase the rents that many of my constituents are paying. No doubt that will reduce the quality of the properties, too. That cannot be right. Trying to protect any increases in rent by allowing only annual increases will no doubt result in landlords putting up the rent each year. It makes sense: that is what happens when the market is interfered with. Yet, prior to the scheme coming into effect, many landlords have allowed good tenants to pay rent at the same rate, year on year.

Rolling tenancies give neither the landlord nor the tenant any security. To allow notice to be given from day one is, I am afraid, nothing short of ludicrous. I am not sure whether the Secretary of State has ever had to try and find new tenants. Tidying up a property after the last tenant absconded is a job in itself, and then there is advertising the property, dealing with scores of viewings and dealing with agreements, deposit schemes and so on. To go through all that and then allow a tenant to give notice on day one and leave after two months is, as I say, ludicrous.

I can understand the attraction of an ombudsman and a database, but we must be realistic: this will only add costs. Either that will be another reason for a landlord to quit the sector, or it will increase the tenant's rent. Tenants should see that these proposals will end up costing them hundreds of pounds every month.

I am sure the Government's intentions are honourable, but the fact remains that although the Bill may initially look favourable to many, it simply is not. We should be careful not to follow the socialist path. Many socialist policies look good for politicians; that is why they win elections, but that failure to understand the market and basic economics is why they always end up bankrupting the country. Conservative Members understand economics and want to do the right thing for the right reason, no matter how it looks. That is the reason I am a Conservative.

I ask the Government again to listen to the industry and to meet me once more. Let us not do what that wise man Thomas Sowell said of politicians, and disregard

the first lesson of economics. The outcome will always be worst for those who can least afford it, which will be many of my constituents.

8.26 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The housing system is rigged against renters. In Britain today, on average, private renters spend about a third of their incomes on rent—on properties that are disproportionately in shoddy conditions, where problems such as damp and mould are rife—and things are getting worse. Rents have soared to record highs and have gone up 33% outside London in the past four years. Homes in England are, on average, not only the smallest in Europe, but in the worst condition and among the least affordable.

The rights that renters have to live in these often overpriced, overcrowded and unsafe homes are pathetically weak. With a no-fault eviction notice handed to a private renter every three minutes, many renters are forced into homelessness. Research shows that renters are so worried about the risk of being evicted that they often do not ask their landlord for vital repairs or challenge grossly unfair rent hikes.

In my constituency, I recently had a case that highlighted the need for stronger renters' rights and the abolition of no-fault evictions. Having lived in her home for 15 years, Mandy and her two sons were issued with a no-fault eviction, giving them just two months to find a new home. As Mandy said,

“the threat of eviction is so stressful. The thought of having to move my family into temporary accommodation away from our community has kept me up at night.”

This was particularly difficult for one of her young sons, who is disabled and has complex needs. With the family on the brink of homelessness and bailiffs turning up, the community tenants union ACORN stepped in and supported Mandy and her family, which allowed more time to find a new home. I am pleased to say that, with the eviction delayed, they found a new home, but not everyone is so lucky.

That is why no-fault evictions need to be banned. Although on paper that is what the Bill says it will do, I share colleagues' concerns. Not only is the Bill filled with loopholes, giving unscrupulous landlords opportunities to get round the scrapping of no-fault evictions, but today it was revealed that the Government will indefinitely delay introducing the ban, promising that it will come into effect only after court reforms have been implemented—and who knows when that will happen? Of course, this delay has been welcomed by the landlord lobby—and no doubt by many landlords on the Government Benches.

The Government promised a new deal for private renters, with quality, affordability and fairness at its heart, but this Bill is far too little, far too late. Renters do not just need a real, watertight ban on no-fault evictions; they need rent caps and an end to ever soaring rent rises. They need an end to the Thatcherite right to buy and the privatisation of council homes, which has seen two thirds of council homes sold off and almost half being bought up by private landlords, only to be leased out again at far higher rents. Renters also need a Government-led council house building programme to build hundreds of thousands of high-quality new homes—owned by the council, obviously—every year. Ultimately,

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we need a Government who shift the balance away from bad landlords and big property developers, in favour of renters and working-class communities.

8.30 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): We have a mandate from the British people to deliver this Bill, and I know that passing it into law will be warmly welcomed by renters in the 4.6 million households who are renting nationwide. Support and fairness is what this Bill delivers, to both renters and landlords alike.

Last year, the English housing survey identified that 23% of privately rented properties do not meet the decent homes standard. The consequences of unsafe rental properties cost the NHS £340 million each year. I am sure that we can agree that this is an unnecessary cost, but it is made up of thousands upon thousands of individual stories of miserable living conditions.

From day one in this job—and sadly, week in and week out—much of my casework has involved poor housing conditions. Resolving these issues gives my caseworking team, Diana, Mollie and me, enormous satisfaction, but it is distressing to hear of the health impacts on vulnerable constituents. That was brought to the fore for all of us with the news at the beginning of the year of the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in Rochdale from respiratory issues caused by exposure to mould. I hope that we can all agree across the House that no family should suffer the loss of a child in that way. Fear of eviction should not be a reason for not asking for repairs to be done.

Since assured shorthold tenancies were introduced, renters have been offered no long-term security of tenure, and private landlords have been able to repossess their properties without any establishment of wrongdoing by the tenants. However, that is not to say that many landlords do not do an excellent job in delivering good-quality housing and support to their tenants, while exercising their rights properly and with good intention. The goal is to increase their number and for more landlords to follow their example.

A large number of my constituents in Guildford have written to me in support of the Bill, for many reasons, including the provisions that will give tenants the right to request a pet in their property and enable landlords to require pet insurance to cover any damages. My constituents think that is a great idea. As a pet owner, I wholly agree with them.

I have also been considering the issue of tenancy length, with students in Guildford in mind. There are some fundamentals that we need to get right. Landlords need full access to their properties after term finishes in the summer, to prepare them for their next tenants in the autumn. I am pleased that the Secretary of State gave reassurances on student lets in his opening speech.

Between 2010 and 2020, the Conservative Government reduced the number of non-decent private rental homes by 16%. The Secretary of State thinks we can go further, and so do I.

8.33 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I see the impacts of the lack of regulation in the private rented sector in my constituency every single week.

In Dulwich and West Norwood, rents have been spiralling for many years, and all too often the quality of accommodation falls way below what any tenant should be able to expect.

I have in my constituency a landlord who owns 90 homes in a development called Dorchester Court. The landlord is on the *Sunday Times* rich list. Their properties are in an absolutely dire state. Wooden props support the window frames. Plastic sheeting acts as an ineffective shield against moisture penetrating the walls. The heating is unreliable in the winter. The water pipes are made from lead, which contaminates the water supply to a level that is not safe for human health. The council has been trying for a number of years to take enforcement action against this landlord, but it has been waiting many months for a court date. In the meantime, the same landlord has used section 21 eviction notices—in a way that, in my experience, is entirely common—simply to ratchet up rents. Tenants are served with a section 21 notice terminating the tenancy, alongside an offer of a new tenancy at a higher level—often a significantly higher level—of rent. If any Member doubts the need for additional regulation of the private rented sector, they should visit Dorchester Court in my constituency, and, in five minutes, they will see how the regulatory framework is failing tenants across the country.

Section 8 allows for landlords to get their property back when they have a legitimate reason to do so. Section 21 is a pernicious, destabilising force in the housing rental market and there is no place for it. The consequences of section 21 are more than simply contractual. They are found in poor mental health and anxiety, in increasing homelessness and financial hardship, in children living in accommodation that no child should have to live in, and in children having to worry about the anxiety that their parents are experiencing because of the possibility of losing their home at any time. It is very disappointing that the Government are delaying the ban on section 21 evictions by allowing a loophole in this legislation. I sincerely hope that, in Committee, they will reconsider their position.

I turn now to an amendment to the Bill that I plan to table. Earlier this year, my constituents lost their son, a first year university student, to suicide—a devastating loss for any parent to bear. Their son had signed a tenancy for his second-year accommodation and his parents had signed a guarantor agreement. After their son's death, they discovered that the guarantor agreement applied even in the event of his death, and the letting agent began pursuing them for the rent. It was rent for a tenancy that had not yet started and a tenancy that he would never take up. This is a shockingly punitive act against parents who were already suffering the worst possible loss.

In extensive correspondence with the letting agent on my constituents' behalf, it refused to budge, simply stating that the rent was a contractual obligation and, although it was unfortunate, my constituents were bound to its terms. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me to discuss the issues raised by this case. She has explained that the Bill will enable any tenant to terminate a tenancy with two months' notice, but two months' rent is a financial penalty that no bereaved guarantor should have to pay. This type of clause is not in every guarantor agreement, and it is not necessary. Insurance policies can cover loss of rent in the event of the death

of a tenant. I ask the Government to reconsider their position and, in Committee, to accept my amendment, which would straightforwardly outlaw the pursuit of guarantors for rent owed by a deceased tenant and stop any other family having to suffer this egregious additional pain, anxiety and hardship at a time of great sadness and vulnerability.

8.38 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Listening to this debate, I am surprised that we are being accused of dither and delay when 13 years of Labour government never produced a Bill such as this. However, that is for Labour Members to discuss and to wrestle with on their own terms.

I welcome the Bill and support its sentiment, but, as with all pieces of legislation that pass through this place, the devil is in the detail. The Minister and the Secretary of State have a trifecta on their hands. They must reassure Members in this place and in the House of Lords; reassure tenants; and reassure landlords, because, at the moment, I am not entirely sure that we are there. Just as not all tenants are bad tenants, not all landlords are bad landlords. We must make sure that what we provide in the Bill today, in Committee and on Third Reading will reassure both tenants and landlords and take them with us. As many Members have said, it is a balancing act of ensuring the rights of property ownership along with the rights of good, firm tenancies.

I have three areas on which to focus my remarks. The first is the removal of fixed terms—following the brilliant speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), I shall also mention the unforeseen consequences, which she talked about. Perhaps I can give an example. My constituency has one of the largest second home and Airbnb markets in the country. Under the Government's proposal that tenants will be able to hand back a tenancy with a minimum of two months' notice, someone could come down, pretend that they are going to rent a house on the long-term rental market, go there for June, July and August, and then hand back the tenancy. With this clause, we would completely obliterate the long-term rental market because people would take advantage of it as a short-term letting market and then hand the property back.

The disparity in prices between the short-term let market and the long-term let market is unbelievably significant in south Devon. I hope that the Minister can reassure me on that point, because that is exactly what people will do. They will rent a house on the pretence that they will stay in it for a significant period, they will be there for the summer, and then they will give it back. That is what the clause allows. We have to ensure that the unforeseen consequences are addressed.

Unless the Minister can give me some reassurance, I worry deeply about what the long-term rental market will look like. At the moment, across south Devon only 70 homes are available for people to rent. We do not demonise landlords without risk. We need to incentivise people to put their houses into the long-term rental market so that they can provide that social value. That is exactly why the Country Land and Business Association has said that it thinks that the rural private housing sector is set to shrink, with 44% of landlords either selling their property or changing its usage class.

My second point is about court reform. I am distinctly uneasy about voting for a Bill that does not come with enforcement and arbitration measures. We have been here before. It is all very well to give a brilliant speech in this place, and clip it and put it on YouTube or Instagram, but if we do not address the legal mechanisms that are needed to enforce the measures, we do our constituents a disservice. It is part of the process in this place, and it worries me that the Government are suggesting that we vote blindly on a piece of legislation that does not have that enforcement mechanism in it.

As I have said, the devil is in the detail, so perhaps the Minister could tell us what the timeline will be for the full creation of the court system or arbitration system. How quickly will we see judgments come along? How will we look to expand the wording on antisocial behaviour, and what will the actual terminology be? When considering a Bill a few years ago, we had a very vague term for the acceptable level of noise. The people who had to enforce that were the police.

If we do not have specifics in our laws they end up being interpreted, sometimes for the better but more often for the worse. Again, I ask the Government to be clear about their laws and language, so that we can ensure that the Bill is drafted in the right way to help both tenants and landlords. I do not feel that this is particularly party political, or that many people from across the House would disagree with those points; it is about having good law and good legislation, and we are all part of that system.

My third point is about the social value of landlords. Both the shadow Minister and the Secretary of State made exactly the same point: they expressed the value of landlords in the housing mix. We have to remember that, because without landlords out there providing houses, our housing market would be a lot worse off. We therefore also have to ensure that under the rights of property ownership, which this place has protected over the years in many different forms, we are clear about the grounds for eviction. I do not think that it is controversial to ask for evictions on the basis of a breach of contract, persistent late payment or damage to property. We have to be clear about those things.

No Member who has spoken in the debate, which has been broadly co-operative, wants people to be homeless or to live in bad housing, but we have to be absolutely clear about what we are asking of tenants and landlords. We have to provide reassurance and ensure that we are incentivising the long-term rental market. By the way, we could also look at reinstituting section 24 mortgage rate relief, but that may be a debate for another time. We have to ensure that we are not pushing houses back into short-term lets, that we are creating a transparent legal system, and that we are looking after the value of tenants and landlords in equal measure. As I said at the beginning, this framework is welcome, but unfortunately there is more work to be done.

8.44 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), I begin by informing the House that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I am also a parliamentary ambassador for PricedOut, the campaign for affordable housing.

[*Andrew Western*]

Let us give credit where it is due: the Government deserve praise for bringing the Bill forward at last. It has the potential to be transformational, bringing renters much needed additional security. However, if, as the Government statement on Friday seemed to suggest, Ministers are planning to delay indefinitely introducing the ban on section 21 evictions, the Bill will be a huge missed opportunity. Regardless of that issue, if the Bill is to reach its full potential, it must be strengthened significantly and its many outstanding loopholes must be firmly closed.

One such area of concern is notice periods. As we have heard, the Bill retains a two-month notice period when tenants receive an eviction notice on the grounds of landlord need. But with rents at their highest levels since records began and housing in chronically short supply, it is, as Shelter has argued, almost impossible for many tenants to find a suitable property to move into in just eight short weeks.

We must also remember in this debate that, according to the charity Crisis, the loss of a private tenancy is the leading cause of homelessness in the UK. Short notice periods—along, of course, with no-fault evictions—contribute to that, resulting in a disastrous situation for the individual involved and huge expense for the taxpayer. I hope to hear from the Minister why she believes that two months is enough time for tenants to relocate in such a difficult housing market.

I turn to fault-based evictions. I have significant concerns, which I hope can be addressed during the passage of the Bill. One is ground 14, which, as it stands, proposes widening the definition of antisocial behaviour to cover any behaviour capable of causing nuisance or annoyance. Mr Deputy Speaker, every Member of this House has the capability to cause nuisance or annoyance—and many of us do it frequently in this Chamber. How on earth could we stop a rogue landlord from exploiting such an extremely broad definition? They could make a false claim about a tenant's capacity to cause antisocial behaviour and evict them simply to hike up the rent.

Protections must be built into the system to avoid section 21 evictions through the back door. What safeguards are in place specifically to stop victims of domestic abuse from facing eviction on antisocial behaviour grounds? Do we really want those who suffer at the hands of their abusers to lose their homes as well? There is much work to be done in this area.

Another reason for fault-based evictions, of course, is rent arrears. Again, no one denies that such evictions can be reasonable in certain circumstances, but safeguards for the vulnerable are vital and a sensible balance is needed. Ground 8A means that someone needs to have been in two months' worth of rent arrears for just one day on three occasions to be liable for eviction. As we all know from our own casework, rent arrears can arise for a variety of reasons: unexpected bills, illness, redundancy. In a cost of living crisis, tenants could well find themselves falling foul of ground 8A through no fault of their own.

I will be interested to hear from the Minister what assessment the Government have made of the impact of making ground 8A evictions discretionary rather than mandatory, so that, as in Scotland, the case would come before a judge who could evaluate whether the eviction

was justified or a resolution between landlord and tenant could be found. That could help someone to stay in their home, protecting them from the devastation of homelessness.

The headline measure of the Bill should be the long-overdue ban on section 21, but delays in the court system will hold up that important measure for some time. None the less, other potentially positive steps include the proposed introduction of a private rented sector ombudsman and a property portal to which landlords must be signed up. Crucial to the effectiveness of those measures is the capacity of local authorities to enforce them. That is a significant concern given the cuts to local authority budgets since 2010 and the resultant hollowing-out of non-statutory services.

That is not the only area in which the capacity of local authorities is a significant worry. The Local Government Association has raised specific concerns about local authorities' ability to enforce compliance with the ban on landlords re-letting or remarketing their property within three months of using "landlord need" eviction grounds, as it appears in practice that that system would be wholly reliant on former tenants noticing that the property is back on the market after they have been evicted. Many landlords will surely chance their arm in that situation and put their property back on the market within the re-let period, so I encourage the Minister to consider whether that period should be longer, and what steps she might take to ensure that such a period is effectively monitored without tenants and former tenants having to put their head above the parapet and report a landlord who fails to comply with the law.

Notice periods, fault-based evictions, the use of ground 14, the rigidity of ground 8A—there is much work still to do on the Bill. I support it in principle, but I hope there is significant movement in Committee.

8.51 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Let me first refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and declare that I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for renters and rental reform and am supported by Generation Rent.

It is almost hard to believe that the words "ban on no-fault evictions" will not be in the next Tory party manifesto. Those words have been in Queen's Speeches. The Tories have promised, but they have not delivered. Now we know, of course, that that is because there was an almighty fight on the Conservative Benches—a fight that is still going on by the sounds of it. To all the dodgy landlords and vested interests watching this debate, I say that if they delay the Bill and its implementation further—as has been rumoured today—the result will be rental reform at the very core of the next general election campaign, and when Labour is in government, legislation might well go even further beyond what some of those vested interests want.

Enough about the politics; let us get down to the Bill itself. Central to this legislation is the abolition of section 21 no-fault evictions, which have been the blight of renters for many years. The aim is to provide safe homes that allow renters to establish roots in the community and start families—that is lacking at the moment. I am concerned, however, that the vastly expanded grounds

for eviction might undermine the very concept of the Bill. Under schedule 1, grounds 1 and 1A remain no-fault clauses. They are for the landlord moving themselves in or selling. To prevent potential abuse of those grounds, it is crucial that landlords provide unequivocal evidence of their intentions, including through solicitors, agents' letters or sworn statements to the court. After using those grounds, landlords should submit another statement within 16 weeks of possession, for example. Landlords who genuinely need to possess under those grounds have nothing to lose in making such legal declarations, and the clauses are useless without them.

There may be legitimate circumstances in which a ground is no longer relevant—someone might have been evicted but the landlord no longer wants to sell the property or have a family member move in, for example. Should that happen, reasonable compensation should be offered to the person who has been evicted. It is not fair to use the grounds and then say, “Whoopsie-daisy, I didn't realise that I couldn't sell.” There must be redress for the tenant who has been harmed.

Ground 6 allows for an eviction when the landlord is found to be at fault. Although I do not think that people who are unfit to be landlords should remain landlords, this ground penalises the tenants by discouraging them from co-operating with enforcement action. As such, we need either compensation for any no-fault eviction, or an administrative mechanism that keeps the tenant in the property but removes the landlord's day-to-day control for as long as that tenant wishes to remain.

Grounds 8 and 8A deal with tenants who are in arrears. While there are some protections for universal credit payments, there are no protections where the arrears are irregular under ground 8A. Arrears might be repeated but very short, and the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance has highlighted the risk that this poses to victims of domestic abuse. The courts need to have discretion; these clauses cannot be mandatory.

Lastly, ground 14 is one I have raised with the Minister. We need to ensure that antisocial behaviour is not an excuse for a section 21 eviction by the back door. Equally, the idea of a student eviction clause is very worrying; the National Union of Students does not support it, and I do not see how it could be practically enforced. I would want to see that idea fleshed out in Committee, or a pledge that it will be ditched.

I welcome the Government's inclusion of two methods of enforcement. The first is local government; the second, which is more encouraging, is the ombudsperson. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has agreed to look at merging the ombudspersons—we have too many at the moment—but we need to make sure that that ombudsperson has the authority to rectify matters in a timely manner, one that still allows people to go to the courts if they wish to pursue that method of redress.

It troubles me that the landlord's notice period has not been changed from two months. In my view, that notice period should be four months, and importantly, tenants should have the flexibility to move out during a notice period: if a tenant is given notice and moves out the next week, they should not be liable for two months' worth of rent. That seems wrong to me.

Turning to protection periods, tenants will have protection from eviction for the first six months of their tenancy. Currently, they have six months after they sign each new assured shorthold tenancy, meaning that long-term tenants might have fewer protections than they do at the moment. Renters need to be protected: one proposal is to give them two years' protection, which is a very good idea that we should explore in Committee.

On rent increases, we must ensure that we do not face a wave of economic evictions. Otherwise, what will happen is that the landlord will whack up the rent, and someone will have to move. The rental tribunal's decisions being tied to markets means that an increase will be considered valid if the final rent aligns with market rates in local areas. That is clearly unaffordable for the LHA rate, which is under 30%—I remind colleagues that in 2010, that rate was 50%. It has been decreased year after year, and we need to address that. The Bill is also in danger of failing to address the “no DSS” benefit discrimination and the rampant guarantor discrimination that happens all the time in the rental sector, as well as affordability checks, which are used as methods of economic discrimination. Those problems also need to be addressed in the Bill.

I am a fan of the theory behind the property portal, but I fear that it might end up being like the bad landlords list, which never really worked and was never enforced. I appreciate that there are fines for not registering a property, but those fines should be paid to the tenant, as is the case with the deposit protection schemes. That would encourage tenants to make sure that their landlord is registered—they would receive recompense if the landlord was not. We cannot have local authorities doing all the checking: they just do not have the resources at the moment. We need everyone to be able to support these reforms.

Mrs Elphicke: My co-chair of the APPG on this subject is making some very important points. Could he further develop the important principle of the tenant being compensated for some of the no-fault or other fines that he has mentioned?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I would love to, but we do not have much time. However, there needs to be some discussion about what compensation someone will be given if they are no-fault evicted: for example, should they be given two months' compensation, which could pay for a deposit and the first month's rent in their new property? If the landlord has not registered, and the tenant is then evicted because their landlord has failed to be a good landlord—which is, of course, one of the grounds—what compensation will that person receive, enabling them to move into new, decent accommodation? Their money is tied up in the deposit and in having paid the rent. There needs to be some serious thought about how we compensate tenants so that they can move on in the private rented sector. Some people have also said that the property portal might be a back-door way of getting rid of selective licencing, which would be a great mistake.

The real story of these reform methods is the work of tens of thousands of hard-working activists, advice workers, policy leaders and organisations up and down this country, many of them in the Renters Reform Coalition, to which I give much praise. We are close to significant reform, but we must be vigilant.

8.59 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Never a day goes by without a constituent, or more than one constituent, contacting me about problems they are having with their housing. In particular, my caseworkers and I have been startled in recent months by the number of people coming to us who have been served with section 21 notices. I will give just one example.

I was contacted just a few weeks ago by a family in my constituency who had been served both a section 21 notice and a section 13 notice of increasing the rent. The son in the family has epilepsy, asthma and autism, and he attends a local school where he has an education, health and care plan in place. The family cannot afford private rent, but with the social housing stock under so much pressure, they were terrified they would not find a home close enough to his school and to much-needed family support.

Many of my other constituents' stories reflect this one—families with disabled members who are distraught at losing their homes to landlords who are putting up the rents, making them beyond their reach. These are just some of the 70,000 households that have been unfairly evicted since the Government first promised that they would take forward this legislation. How many more of my constituents will be served a section 21 notice before this legislation not only gets on to the statute book, but becomes effective with the reforms to the justice system and the courts?

I have had so many constituents write to me asking us to press for this Bill to come forward, but I fear we will not have met their expectations and their hopes for the protection of tenants in the future, particularly in relation to section 21. There is no doubt that passing the Bill into law will be a vital step forward, but it needs to be effective as well. So the issues about the courts need to be resolved as a matter of urgency, and I hope that the Minister will address those in her closing comments.

I have some other serious reservations about how some of provisions will work in practice. Just on the issue of section 21 evictions, the new grounds for landlords to reclaim possession make it clear that they will be banned from re-letting their property only for three months after evicting a tenant. The kind of rent increases we are seeing today may well mean that repossession is still well worth it for a landlord, I am afraid. Furthermore, many of the families that come to me after receiving a section 21 notice are currently able to receive priority assistance from the council due to their risk of homelessness, but this Bill appears to remove the right to immediate help if families are served with a possession notice. In the absence of section 21, we desperately need this right to assistance to be reinstated as the Bill passes through its many stages.

Moving away from the specific issue of no-fault evictions, I am concerned about the Government's U-turn on the promise they made in the White Paper to introduce a requirement that privately rented homes meet the decent homes standard. There was some discussion of this in the opening statements, but I would like further assurance from the Minister in her closing remarks that the issue of decent standards, which are so much needed in private rented housing, will be urgently addressed and brought forward in this Bill.

Earlier this year, I heard from a constituent renting from a private landlord who was left without a cooker for three months of his tenancy, as well as having

ongoing issues with his boiler and with rising damp, all of which he had attempted to take up with his landlord. We of course took up these issues locally to try to resolve the problems. In fact, he left the property before they were resolved, leaving the problems for the next tenant, as I understand it. However, at my constituent's request, I wrote to the Department on 8 August to ask what was being done to stop private landlords from leaving families in homes that are not up to standard, so he was sufficiently concerned to see this as a policy issue, not just an issue for himself. Unless councils are given greater enforcement powers to tackle a wider range of standards breaches, and the resources to deal with those in practical terms, I am concerned that renters such as my constituent will not be protected from landlords who fail to fulfil their responsibilities.

My constituents have also been writing to me about pets, and it is positive that there will be a right to request to have a pet. I hope that during the passage of the Bill we can define the phrase "unreasonably refused", or I fear that too many renters will find it to be a right in name but not in practice.

The provisions in the Bill are desperately needed by my constituents and those of all hon. Members. I urge the Government to end the dithering and delay in enabling this Bill over the past five years. I also hope they will take the further steps that so many Members have identified and that are required to protect our constituents from homelessness and poor-quality housing.

9.6 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is about time. It is nearly five years since promises were first made to tenants facing soaring rents, huge energy bills, cold and damp homes, and limited rights. We are now on our 15th Housing Minister since 2010, and the Government are fast running out of time to make good on the promises in the Bill. Unforgivably late though it is, the Bill is important and provides a genuine opportunity to move towards the most basic goal of creating fairer, greener homes. It is clear that the market has become over-commodified and grossly distorted. We have a generation who will never be able to earn enough to have a mortgage, and cannot even afford their rents now. Key workers are being forced out of the places they work in, families uprooted, children forced to move schools, revenge evictions for those who complain—the list goes on.

More people are becoming homeless following rising evictions from the private rented sector. Annual Government figures released recently show a 23% increase in people at risk of homelessness because of a section 21 no-fault eviction. I welcome this delayed but essential Bill, not least because Brighton and Hove is one of the most expensive cities to rent in outside London, with a large proportion of renters being ripped off on a long-term basis with no end in sight. Recent analysis shows that in our city rents have jumped by 47% since 2011, and wages have risen by 35%. To put that another way, since 2011, renters in Brighton and Hove paid £530 million more to landlords than if housing costs had matched wages.

There are some good principles and useful changes in the Bill, such as measures on security of tenure, a new ombudsman and so on, but there are also glaring loopholes

and big omissions. In particular, the measures on rent increases are inadequate and rely on a resource-intensive and time-consuming appeals process that could see tenants worse off at the end of it, as the tribunal process includes a power to impose a higher rent than the one the tenant is appealing. At the very least that power needs to be removed. Indeed, Ministers need to go further and get to grips with the fact that many people simply cannot afford their rent as it stands.

Many of my constituents are paying massively more than 30% of their gross monthly income on housing costs. That is unsustainable and we need a conversation about a national system for rent controls with local flexibility. Such a system will need to be both bold and implemented gradually and fairly, introduced alongside a suite of policies to address the housing crisis, including a major increase in social house building and real support for community-led housing.

As well as tackling demand and sky-high rents, dealing with insecurity of tenure is vital, so it is right that the Bill contains measures for periodic tenancies, and to ban section 21 no-fault evictions, and that students in the general PRS are also included. As many have said, it is deeply concerning that last Friday the Government appeared to have kicked that part of the Bill down the road—who knows how long for?—by saying that they first need to fix the mess that they have made of the court delays. We need to know exactly when we can expect that part of the Bill to come back.

Even before last Friday's attack on the section 21 provision, there had been noises about a possible Government amendment to exclude students from the reforms. I remind the Secretary of State of his own White Paper, in which he says:

"It is important that students have the same opportunity to live in a secure home and challenge poor standards as others in the PRS."

Well, I agree with that.

As well as ensuring that students remain included, we need to firmly shut another glaring loophole in the no-fault eviction ban. In the Bill, if a landlord seeks to sell or to move in themselves, they can issue a no-fault eviction notice and the no-let period after they use that exemption is just three months. That is too short and could easily be abused. For example, a landlord could evict tenants by saying they want to move in and re-let just 12 weeks later. That no-let period should be nearer 12 months. Good landlords genuinely using these exemptions would have nothing to fear from that.

I welcome the proposals for the portal, although I would like to see far more issues covered on it. That portal has real potential to improve enforcement of energy-efficiency standards and to ensure warm and dry homes. I was dismayed when the Prime Minister announced last month that he would be scrapping the updated minimum energy efficiency standards for private rented homes under the pretext of saving people from expensive upgrades. It is not hard-pressed tenants and families who will be required to upgrade their homes, but the landlords who would no longer be allowed to rent out cold and inefficient homes.

Private renters live in some of the leakiest homes in the UK, with more than a quarter of households living in fuel poverty. As the Climate Change Committee has observed, these regulations would have cut energy bills

significantly—by around £325 a year on average at current prices. Ministers need to stop this false dichotomy between climate action on the one hand and costs on the other, and admit that, in cutting our emissions, we can also deliver warmer and more comfortable homes. The Government need to bring forward an amendment in Committee to require all privately rented homes to be energy performance certificate grade C by 2028 at the latest.

Finally, we know that the UK's inadequate housing stock is eroding not only people's budgets, but their health and wellbeing. The death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in 2020 as a result of prolonged exposure to mould in his home environment was a terrible tragedy and an utter scandal in the social housing sector. It is frankly shocking that the decent homes standard still does not apply to private rented homes, with the Government admitting that almost one in four of those homes in the private rented sector would not meet this most basic standard.

The vague commitment for jam tomorrow while children breathe in dangerous mould today is simply not good enough. It is not good enough for the mum in Brighton who emails to say that her daughter has been coughing for two months because of the leaky, unsafe, insecure flat that she is desperate to leave. It is not good enough for my constituents who are ill from long-term exposure to mould, living with walls that are dripping wet and a permanent cough, or those whose rented accommodation was so bad that it was recently filmed by the BBC for their "Rip Off Britain" feature. Again and again in my constituency casework I hear about landlords who blame tenants for the problems caused by structural issues that the landlords have themselves ignored, such as the landlords who kept one family's £1,730 deposit to pay for mould removal and redecoration. That is frankly outrageous.

Will Ministers give us a timeframe for decent homes legislation and confirm that it will be in the King's Speech next month? Will they explain how the Government can possibly justify failing to ensure that all landlords are compelled to act on health hazards, such as damp and mould, in a timely manner? Will they act with urgency to apply Awaab's law to the private rented sector?

9.13 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The rights of renters is one of the biggest issues in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton, where the average rent for a two-bedroom flat is £3,900 a month. That is nearly £47,000 a year. Having a safe, secure and affordable private rental property is vital for Londoners, but the current broken system leaves too many renters insecure and powerless if they have an unscrupulous landlord. For too long there has been a power imbalance in favour of landlords over tenants, which is abused by bad landlords, and the Government have done nothing to fix that.

This market failure affects teachers, nurses, doctors, police and prison officers that I have spoken to. They find it very hard to live in south-west London under the current rental market, which makes it hard to recruit into our public services. The effects of this market failure are spilling out into all parts of our life. I thank the London Renters Union, Generation Rent, Shelter, Crisis and the Renters Reform Coalition for their tireless campaigning work to stand up for renters. It is appalling

[*Fleur Anderson*]

that it has taken so long to bring in this Bill. Since the Government first announced that they would take this legislation forward, people in 70,000 households have been unfairly evicted and threatened with homelessness because of the Government's delays.

I welcome the measures in the Bill that I believe will make a real difference to renters and start to fix the broken system. I welcome: ending all fixed-term tenancies and replacing them with periodic open-ended tenancies; the creation of an ombudsman that all private landlords must join; the property portal database to better inform landlords and tenants; the duty to provide information to tenants; and the right to request a pet—the most British of rights. But what I want to see most of all is the end of section 21 no-fault evictions, which are used by bad landlords to kick out tenants who ask for repairs or to hike up rents unjustifiably. I was kicked out of my own accommodation by a landlord who said he was going to sell off the property. After huge upheaval, I drove past a couple of months later to see that he had rented it out to different tenants.

Recent research from Citizens Advice found that a shocking 46% of those who complain about their conditions receive a section 21 notice within six months. That reminded me of a family whose door I knocked on, who were moving out. They said, “Goodbye—we are moving out of the area.” Their father, who was clearing out the house with them, said he was absolutely furious. They were a policeman and a nurse, and they had to leave our area because they had complained about the poor state of repair of their house and had been served with a section 21.

I think of another family with children aged six, 12 and 15 who have spent the past four years in a flat that has been damaging to their health, suffering from structural damage, deep-rooted mould and a growing mouse infestation. They asked their landlord to carry out essential repairs and were served with a section 21 notice in return.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): One of my constituents was served with a section 21 no-fault eviction notice on their house: a single parent to two vulnerable children with additional needs whom she had adopted from care after being removed from a situation of domestic abuse. She could not afford to rent any other private property on her single income as she found them to be far too expensive. She has been left to join the council waiting list and been rendered homeless. Is that not exactly why we need to deal with this issue in the Bill?

Fleur Anderson: We absolutely do. I very much welcome that intervention. We all have so many stories and know so many families for whom the Bill and ending section 21 evictions would make an enormous difference. It would also make for a more level playing field for those good landlords who are doing the right thing. I am therefore appalled that the Secretary of State is potentially pulling the rug from under the Bill by saying that no-fault evictions can only be ended once the courts are reformed. That is Conservative failure in the justice system compounding Conservative failure in housing. Who loses out? It is hard-working, rent-paying British

people. I urge the Minister to give a clear timetable for putting those legal reforms in place so that the can is not just kicked down the road.

While I am pleased that the Bill sets out new stricter grounds for eviction, I remain concerned that it does not go far, or fast, enough. First, the Bill has taken too long; the Government must speed up its delivery. About 290 Londoners face no-fault evictions each week, so every six months of delay in the Bill will mean another 15,000 more Londoners will face no-fault evictions. We do not have time. Secondly, there should be a requirement that private rented homes meet the decent homes standard. I have been calling for a Minister for mould for a long time.

Thirdly, provision to increase councils' investigative and enforcement powers is necessary. There needs to be funding for that as well; otherwise, we are shifting the problem from national to local government, which will need to shift around its resources and take funding from other areas.

Fourthly, there are loopholes that must be closed. Otherwise, section 21 could just continue by another name. Unscrupulous landlords could game the system and exploit the new grounds to sell an occupied property, so it is vital that a high level of evidence is required to demonstrate the intention to sell or occupy a property. The change to discretionary grounds from “likely” to “capable” of causing antisocial behaviour is open to so many varying interpretations that it will lead to inconsistent, unfair application, so it will not be the game changer in getting rid of antisocial behaviour that it could be.

Finally, preventing homelessness by preserving the private renter's right to access to homelessness assistance from their council as soon as a possession notice is served would be an essential addition to the Bill.

The Bill is a first step that only scratches the surface of what is needed to fix the housing emergency that the Conservatives have created. Mortgage bills and rents are soaring, fewer people are able to buy their own homes and more than a million people are stuck on social housing waiting lists, compounded by the threat of no-fault eviction were they to move into the private rented sector. More homes must be built.

While the Government have promised a rebalancing of the relationship between tenants and landlords, unless we see several amendments, the current crisis looks set to continue. The Bill is a good launching point, but Labour would significantly strengthen protections for private renters beyond its scope, so that good landlords can be assured of being on a level playing field, bad landlords will stop misusing their powers and tenants will finally be able to get the long-term security, rights and conditions that they deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the ever-patient John McDonnell.

9.20 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I know, always being called last means that we have the enjoyment of listening to the whole debate. Today's debate has been extremely valuable across the House, going into forensic detail on the Bill.

I want to make a plea for urgency, that is all. I welcomed the inclusion of this issue in the Conservative manifesto. In fact, I congratulated my then constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge, on bringing it forward. I also accused him of plagiarism, because it was in our last two Labour manifestos. I congratulated him because, as many have reported today, my constituents are in a housing crisis. Most of the council housing has been sold off. To go on the housing waiting list, they must have lived in the area for 10 years, and they have to prove that with documentation, which many people cannot. Once on the housing waiting list, they will wait between three and five, maybe seven, years. Their children will have grown up by then.

Four thousand new properties are being built in the middle of my constituency, but there are barely any that my constituents will be able to afford, because the prices are so high and the wages in my constituency—despite high employment levels—are relatively low. Since 2010, rents have gone up on average by three times the rate of wage increases. In London alone, rents over the last year are up 15% on average. In some areas, they are up 20% to 25%. Basically, that means that people struggle to get a roof over their heads, whether from the council or rented, and certainly struggle for owner occupation. I do not know any firefighter, teacher or NHS worker in my constituency who lives there any more—they commute for miles because they cannot afford accommodation in the constituency.

People live in my constituency in slum conditions: damp, cold, unsafe and mouldy, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). I have the phenomenon of beds in sheds. In my office, we have a moral dilemma about whether we tell the council that someone is living in a shed, because we know that if we do, enforcement comes in and that person is then homeless, with nowhere to go whatsoever.

As has been said throughout the debate, as soon as people complain about the conditions or rents, the landlords bring in section 21. That is why it was right for the Conservatives to include the Bill in their last manifesto, and I welcomed it. Landlords always use the excuse that they are moving in a relative. We would need genetic link mapping to identify the relationship between some of the tenants who move in and the family. Landlords might say that they are selling the property but, as has been said, when we tour around, we see that in fact they have not: within days, the “To let” board goes up. They scam us all the time.

My constituents live in fear of complaining at all because they know that if they do, many of them will lose their properties. It is correct that the majority of landlords are good, but it is the rogue landlords that I fear the Bill does not address.

Mr Fysh: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, in London, part of the problem is that the amount of rental property available for new renters on the market is 20% down? It is important to encourage good landlords, as he talked about, to have longer rental periods. Should we incentivise them to do that through things such as tax breaks?

John McDonnell: Look, the major problem is that we are not building enough council houses. On the Conservative Benches a couple of Members referred to Harold Macmillan. Harold Macmillan took on from

Clem Attlee a huge housing programme and built council houses. My family was a beneficiary of that. We moved out of a slum and into a council house. We just need to build more council houses. We cannot rely on the private market, because it profiteers. In my constituency, landlords can make a profit by leaving the property empty because the price will always go up, and sometimes they do not want to be encumbered by a tenancy. When tenants complain, they get kicked out and are made homeless. In my constituency, people have been pushed all around the country. I have people living in a Travelodge in Slough. They have to bring their children into Hayes each day, which takes an hour and a half. Then there is temporary accommodation with poor conditions and hostels. We have children being brought up in temporary accommodation. I looked at the figures: 131,000 children are now living in temporary accommodation.

I fully support the Bill's getting rid of section 21, but the problem is exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) said. The sanctions and conditions will render it totally ineffective. Landlords will simply take a three-month hit and then rent it out straight after that. And to rely on the court system! We have to be honest with one another. The Government have closed 300 county courts. There was a cut of 35% in the Justice budget over the last period. In addition, if we are looking to local authorities to enforce, nearly 20 local authorities are under section 114 notices. In other words, they are bankrupt and do not have the staff to do the enforcement. To be frank, in many areas now the lack of access to basic legal advice—not legal aid, but basic legal advice—from local law centres is non-existent. My citizens advice bureau, bless it, works so hard, but it is rushed off its feet so it cannot provide sufficient advice on the scale that is needed.

My plea is for urgency. We have had a really good debate, a forensic analysis of the Bill: the detail and the beneficial elements, but also the gaps and the need for change and amendment. I hope the Committee will, on Report, bring back a significantly amended Bill that will scrap section 21—that is what both parties promised in our manifestos at the last election, and I believe that other political parties did exactly the same. There is unanimity in this House to scrap section 21, but we must do it with a sense of urgency and we must do it effectively.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman.

9.27 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close this Second Reading debate for the Opposition, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken in it. It has been a good debate and one defined by a great many thoughtful and eloquent contributions.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) so rightly argued in her remarks at the outset, this is a piece of legislation that is shamefully overdue. As she and other speakers pointed out, not only is it now over four and a half years since the Government first pledged to abolish section 21 no fault evictions, but, for reasons that now appear quite clear, Ministers sat on the Bill for a further five months subsequent to its publication in May. Drawing attention to the lengthy delay in bringing the Bill forward is not

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

simply a parliamentary debating point. As many of my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friends the Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson), for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist) pointed out, it has had very real consequences for private renters across the country.

During the years that Ministers prevaricated and the months this year they clearly spent negotiating with the discontented on their own Benches, tens of thousands of renters have been pushed to financial breaking point by multiple rent rises or threatened with homelessness as a result of being served a section 21 notice. We will continue to justifiably bemoan the fact that the Government have not acted with the urgency that was required, but we do welcome the Bill's finally progressing. I want to take the opportunity to thank once again, on behalf of those on the Labour Benches, all organisations, particularly the 20 that comprise the Renters Reform Coalition, for not only making the case for change over many years, but for joining Labour over recent months in urging Ministers to get on with the process of turning the Bill into law.

The case for fundamentally reforming the private rented sector is as watertight as they come, and Labour has called for it for many years. More than 11 million people in England—not just the young and the mobile but, now, many older people and families with children—live day in, day out with the knowledge that they could be uprooted from their home with little notice and minimal justification, and a significant minority of them are forced to live in substandard properties for fear that a complaint would lead to an instant retaliatory eviction. Such a situation cannot possibly be justified.

The sector should have been transformed a long time ago. Its regulation should have been overhauled to level the playing field between landlord and tenant decisively. The Bill is a good starting point to that end, and, as the debate has made clear, the principle of it enjoys broad support across the House. General support has been expressed today for the White Paper proposals that have found their way into it, including a new property portal and ombudsman, a simpler tenancy structure, the end of rent review clauses, prohibitions on multiple in-year rent increases, the right to request keeping a pet, and, of course, the abolition of section 21 notices.

However, as nearly all Opposition Members mentioned, a significant degree of uncertainty now surrounds the implementation of the promised section 21 abolition as a result of a concession made by Ministers to appease a minority of disgruntled Conservative Members—seemingly without complete success, given the tone and content of the contributions of the right hon. Members for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) and for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the hon. Members for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) and for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher).

As we have heard, the Government have made it clear in recent days—although it would seem that Members were told two weeks ago—that section 21 notices will not be phased out until Ministers judge that

“sufficient progress has been made to improve the courts.”

Explicit reference was made to end-to-end digitisation of the process, which could well take a great many years to achieve. Private renters across the country, who have

been assured repeatedly by Ministers that the passage of this Bill will finally remove the threat of a section 21 eviction, have no guarantee whatsoever that the concession made does not amount to an effective deferral of that change well beyond the phased transition already provided for by the Bill.

If this sounds all too familiar, that is because it is. The Secretary of State has form when it comes to acquiescing in damaging concessions rather than facing down the unruly Benches behind him, with future housing supply in England a notable past casualty.

After 13 years of Tory government, the courts system is on its knees. The Government have had more than four and a half years, since they committed themselves to abolishing section 21 evictions, to make significant improvements to it in order to support good-faith landlords, and they have not succeeded. As things stand, HMCTS does not expect to be able to deliver even the reduced-scope reform programme to its current timetable. Given this Government's record, why on earth should renters take it on trust that things will improve markedly any time soon? The inefficiency of the courts system is a huge problem, and action must be taken to address its lack of capacity so that landlord possession claims can be expedited, but the end of no-fault evictions cannot be made dependent on an unspecified degree of future progress subjectively determined by Ministers. In the absence of very clear commitments from the Minister on metrics and timelines in this respect, we will seek to amend the Bill in Committee to ensure that it is not.

While Ministers face the prospect of having to give further ground as the Bill progresses to keep their Back Benches onside, Labour will work in Committee to see it strengthened so that it truly delivers for tenants. We will press for clarification of the new grounds for possession for students' landlords to ensure that they are not too expansive, and will probe the Government's intentions in respect of dealing with the complexities of the student market. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), rightly called for that.

We will put forward a number of sensible changes, including an increase in the proposed notice periods from two months to four months to protect renters better. I am pleased that my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) argued for that. We will press the Government to reconsider their position on a range of White Paper proposals that did not make it into the Bill. They include measures to strengthen councils' enforcement powers—I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and for Blaydon for raising that point—along with powers to limit the amount of advance rent that landlords can ask for, and provisions to expand rent repayment orders to cover repayment for non-decent homes.

We will explore why essential reforms that were outlined in the White Paper, including the proposed legally binding decent homes standard and the proposed ban on landlords refusing to rent to those in receipt of benefits or with children—a point powerfully made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East—are not on the face of the Bill. We will explore what more might be done to ensure that the separate measures that have

been promised to enact each of those reforms are passed and applied quickly and effectively. We will also look to amend various provisions in the Bill relating to new and revised grounds for possession, including the far too sweeping and punitive proposed new mandatory ground 8A and the proposed change to discretionary ground 14 relating to antisocial behaviour, so that blameless and vulnerable tenants are properly safeguarded.

Perhaps most importantly, we will seek to close the numerous loopholes in the Bill that would allow the minority of disreputable landlords—such as the unscrupulous owner of Dorchester Court mentioned in the powerful contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes)—to exploit tenants and jeopardise their security of tenure. Let us take two examples that are featured prominently in the Bill. Even with the proposed expanded right to challenge, it is far from clear that the tribunal system would prevent significant numbers of tenants from being evicted by means of an extortionate rent hike. We need to explore what more can be done to put in place genuinely effective means of redress for them. Similarly, the proposed three-month ban on landlords re-letting properties they have taken back to sell or move into themselves is not only insufficient but appears not to apply in some circumstances and will almost certainly be impossible to enforce even when it does. We need to tighten it.

The Bill is shamefully overdue but imperative. We support it in principle and are pleased that it will progress today, but it needs to be enhanced rather than undermined by concessions aimed at placating a minority of Members. Private renters deserve a piece of legislation that will ensure that they have real security and enjoy better rights and conditions in short order. We are willing to work constructively with the Government on the Bill, but make no mistake, we plan to do everything in our power to see it strengthened to the benefit of private renters who have waited long enough for meaningful change.

9.36 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): It is a huge pleasure to deliver the closing speech today on the Second Reading of the Government's Renters (Reform) Bill, and I begin by thanking Members across the House for their valuable, thoughtful and knowledgeable contributions to the debate. I have enjoyed and noted the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts)—the Chair of the Select Committee—my right hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), whom I thank for all his work across a range of all-party parliamentary groups, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield)—I would be very happy to meet him and his APPG—and my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), who will know about all the work we are doing to help address the second home issue in his constituency. He has spoken to me about that on a number of occasions.

I also thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for the support from the Liberal Democrat Front Bench. I declare an interest similar to that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), as I have four children in their 20s who are renting in London. I know at first hand of the issues that they and their friends face, and that is why I am so convinced that this Bill is the right thing to do for the next generations of our children and grandchildren.

Mr Betts: The Minister's children are in their 20s, but we want to make sure that they are not in their 30s before the Bill actually comes into effect, so will she give us a clear time when the courts will be ready for the Bill to be active in the Government's view?

Rachel Maclean: I will come on to that precise point, if the hon. Member will allow me.

I want to thank the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms), the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), whom I will be happy to meet again, as requested. I also thank the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) and the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). I am deeply concerned about the case she has raised with me and will continue to work with her. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), the hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and for Putney (Fleur Anderson), and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

It is right to say at this point that we are committed to honouring the manifesto commitment that we made in 2019 to create a private rented sector that works for everyone and to level up housing quality in this country. I am grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members who continue to engage constructively with us on the provisions in the Bill so that we can deliver the change needed to create a fairer rental market for both tenants and landlords. Of course, I echo the sentiment of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who said in his opening remarks that we will continue to work closely with Members to further hone and refine this legislation as it is put on the statute book.

Several hon. Members rose—

Rachel Maclean: I will make progress, because I have limited time and I must address the points that have been put to me.

First, it is right that antisocial behaviour is a discretionary ground. Judges must decide on the circumstances of a case. Having formerly been Minister with responsibility for safeguarding and domestic abuse, I completely understand the importance of taking such serious issues into account and striking the right balance between tenants and landlords. I was asked whether local authorities will have funding to carry out their enforcement duties. Of course they will have that new burdens funding, as they would with any Government legislation.

[*Rachel Maclean*]

I was asked about blanket bans on benefit claimants and families with children, and I make it very clear that we are committed to outlawing the unacceptable practice of such blanket bans. We are carefully considering how to get these measures right. This is a significant reform, as I think all Members understand. We must do it in the right way, while ensuring that landlords rightly have the final say on who they rent their properties to.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Maclean: I will give way to Members if I have time, but please allow me to make my points.

There have been many questions about the ombudsman. We need simplicity and clarity for landlords and tenants. It is important to say that this Bill does not, in itself, establish a new ombudsman. An existing ombudsman could do the job and, again, we are looking at that very carefully to make sure we get the right solution for this vital part of our regulatory reforms.

I am grateful that many Members have welcomed the point about pets, and I agree that we are a nation of animal lovers. Again, this is about reasonableness. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle is exactly right—the circumstances she set out would constitute a reasonable ground for refusal, but we need to look carefully at how this works.

The decent homes standard has been raised again, and it is a key part of our reforms. We must make sure that the new system we introduce means people are living in decent, safe and warm homes. Everyone in this House will be under no illusion about how importantly this Government take this issue, as they can see the work that has been introduced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to tackle these issues, which have laid unresolved for many years. This Government brought in groundbreaking reforms in the social rented sector, and we will do so in the private rented sector to give tenants the same protections.

It is important to note at this point that the vast majority of possession claims do not end up in the courts—only something like 1% of claims go through the courts. In my capacity as Housing Minister, I work closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), who is responsible for His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service. There is a wide-ranging programme of reform in the court system.

The courts have already made huge improvements. It is worth saying that over 95% of hearings are listed within four to eight weeks of receipt, and of course the ombudsman will encourage the early dispute resolution process, taking a lot of claims out of the courts and freeing up court time for more complex processes. When we bring in this reform, however, it is right that we ensure landlords have confidence in the justice system because, as everybody has pointed out, if we do not have good landlords in this country who have confidence in the systems that underpin the justice system, we will not have the rented homes in every constituency that our country needs.

We have always committed to aligning and synchronising the reform of the private rented sector with the court system; we note that that was a recommendation of the

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. We do not think that a housing court is the right way to do that; nor is that the view of the sector or of the stakeholders, with whom we have engaged in huge detail. This work remains a priority for our Department and for the Ministry of Justice. We want to see landlords being offered a digital process for possession on all grounds.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): If the Bill's Second Reading receives widespread support because it will rightly ditch no-fault evictions of tenants without triggering an exodus of private sector landlords, that will in no small part be down to the hard work, for which I am very grateful, of Ministers including my hon. Friend. While she is looking at what is a reasonable speed to resolve antisocial behaviour claims in the courts, will she confirm that it is the Government's firm intention to fulfil our manifesto commitment and implement the Bill as soon as possible?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend very much. I can absolutely give him that assurance.

Mr Fysh: Does the Minister accept that if the Country Land and Business Association's estimate is correct that the Bill may reduce the available private rentals by 40% in rural areas, that could have a completely deleterious effect on the Prime Minister's main pledge, which is to get inflation down? Core inflation is driven by rentals. Will the Minister work with me to fix the Bill and ensure that that does not eventuate?

Rachel Maclean: I am very happy to work with my hon. Friend on this and many other issues, but it is important that I say that we have done considerable analysis. There is no evidence, such as the estimate that he has just pointed to, that the Bill will lead to landlords leaving the sector, but it is right that any policy that the Government bring in is based on evidence. That will always be our approach.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Maclean: I want to wind up now, because I cannot detain the House any longer. I assure right hon. and hon. Members that we are focused on introducing this groundbreaking once-in-a-generation reform. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

RENTERS (REFORM) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Renters (Reform) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 5 December 2023.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

Question agreed to.

RENTERS (REFORM) BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Renters (Reform) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

- (a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State; and
- (b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—
(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

Question agreed to.

RENTERS (REFORM) BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Renters (Reform) Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

- (1) the charging of fees under or by virtue of the Act; and
- (2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—
(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

Question agreed to.

RENTERS (REFORM) BILL (CARRY-OVER)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Renters (Reform) Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION**The Kytes Regeneration Project**

9.48 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I rise to present this petition to reflect concerns raised with me on behalf of Kytes Drive residents. Given the substantial regeneration project on the Kytes Drive estate in Watford, residents request that Anchor Hanover reintroduce the previous covenant to provide a legally binding reassurance to ensure that veterans will continue to be housed in the new homes; and that it extend this to provide protections to those with disabilities and to the elderly.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Anchor Hanover to engage with the council and include a legally binding agreement that the Kytes Estate includes purpose-built and well-maintained accommodation to house people over the age of 55, those with disabilities, and veterans and their families.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the protection to house veterans with disabilities at Kytes Drive has been removed; further that a legally binding covenant should be included into the Kytes Regeneration Project to ensure that new homes to be built will continue to only house veterans, those with disability and the elderly, and their families.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Anchor Hanover to engage with the Council and include a legally binding agreement ensuring that Kytes Estate includes purpose-built and well-maintained rented accommodation to house people over the age of 55, those with disabilities, and veterans, and their families.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002865]

Environmental, Social and Governance Developments

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

9.49 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): As the founding chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on environmental, social and governance, I am delighted to have secured the first ever debate on environmental, social and governance developments in the UK in this place. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and to the all-party group's interests as well.

ESG is a set of characteristics that can be used to assess the non-financial elements of an investment or business decision. In its simplest form, ESG is a way to take into account potential risks and rewards that might not be obvious from a balance sheet. Everyone, in their own way, incorporates ESG criteria into each and every economic decision, even if unknowingly.

For instance, the property developer does not buy land next to a crumbling cliff; a family might choose not to go to a particular shop because they have heard that it treats its employees badly; or a woman might change jobs to work for a firm that is fighting the gender pay gap. ESG is simply the use of non-financial criteria in decision making—a way for investors, companies and individuals to get a bigger picture of the impact of their investments, which will help them better understand the risks and, more importantly, the rewards.

Recently, there has been much debate about ESG, as it has risen in prominence. The number of ESG assets under management has grown by more than 150% since 2015, with global ESG assets expected to exceed £41 trillion or about four times the value of all the assets held in the UK. They will also account for a third of all assets under management by 2025. This scale-up has been met with some concern about ESG perhaps having some underlying political current. This is wrong. In its true form, ESG is simply an investment strategy—one that, like all investment strategies, aspires to low risk and high return. ESG is not a political stance, a way of life or a mantra for investors, although of course in some situations it is unfortunately used wrongly to pursue certain political agendas. In others, it is seen as shorthand for ethical or impact investing. However, it is neither.

In this debate, I will be sticking to our definition of ESG as an investment strategy and hoping to make the case to Government for why we should be encouraging it, what problems we have to overcome and how best to claim the crown, and the associated benefits, as the world leaders of ESG investing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. Does he agree that if we create a science-based and world-beating taxonomy, businesses that can show alignment with the UK green taxonomy will automatically be in alignment with international taxonomies, which should ensure that there is no divergence, which should subsequently enhance our capacity? Does he further agree that Government and the Minister have a role to play in assisting businesses to achieve that potential, so that all

of us in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can gain and everybody can be a winner?

Alexander Stafford: I thank the hon. Member for intervening; it is always a pleasure when he joins such debates. He mentioned the Minister, who I know has a good, keen, personal interest in ESG, having worked in the field prior to coming to this place. The hon. Member is completely right about the green taxonomy. We need a robust taxonomy—I will come to that later—but it is a shame that we are behind where we should be with the green taxonomy. We need to be careful to ensure that our green taxonomy is robust and world leading. One of the many benefits of leaving the European Union is that we can define what we want and how we want it ourselves. By having a UK green taxonomy, we can ensure that we are world leaders in the UK, including in Northern Ireland especially, which I know has a high level of financial services.

Let me go back to the meat of my speech. It is not the case that those investing along ESG lines do not want to see good done for planet and people—they do. For example, we know that ESG investors are sometimes willing to pay higher fees and to see lower returns than their more returns-focused peers. *The Wall Street Journal* reported earlier this year that ESG funds could charge up to three times more. I do not exclude those types of companies and investors from this discussion. Rather, in holding the first ever debate on ESG in the House, I hope that more discourse will lead to more action.

It is clear that using non-financial metrics, and thereby factoring in all the data available to make the most rational, informed investment decision possible, will lead to financial returns. For example, more ESG-aligned employers will be able to hire better candidates for less—something known as taking a green cut, which is the attitude that up to 48% of younger people were recently reported as taking. Equally, improving environmental ratings through technology can lead to huge efficiency savings for companies. For example, some studies have shown that using low-energy lighting has a payback of less than 12 months, which is a win for the company's bottom line and its sustainability standards. This reflexive impact of ESG is known as “double materiality”, which is how a business is affected by changing conditions—be they climate, social, or governance—and what that company is doing to contribute to or militate against those changes. That is becoming more and more important for investors to factor in.

There are also huge financial benefits to be gained from embracing ESG for the whole country, including Northern Ireland. The UK is already home to the oldest and most trusted conventional financial centre. That is coupled with the City of London's commitment to sustainability, topping the Global Green Finance Index. Therefore, with a little extra effect, we will secure a home for ESG investors inside our border.

ESG's recent rise in popularity has caused some growing pains. Primarily, the lack of universal frameworks and metrics mean that trust in ESG is at an all-time low, as we have seen in anti-ESG proposals approved by boards globally. In ESG investing, as in all business, trust is paramount. Just as an investor must be sure that their investment is sound, and that they will not suddenly find themselves out of pocket, an ESG investor needs to be sure that any claims to sustainability are true.

We have a rich history of accounting for financial accuracy in this country, with the Domesday Book perhaps being the earliest example—in that case, the new, or relatively new, King William checking that his investment was as profitable as he had thought. That invasion of 1066 did not come cheap. It took 800 years, and a parliamentary Select Committee to develop something closer to modern accountancy practices, but the UK is now an oasis of bookkeeping and verifiable investing. Fraudulent financial claims can be easily spotted and shut down. Why then, is the same not the case for fraudulent ESG claims?

One of the main causes of the problem is that much of what ESG seeks to account for is intangible and therefore incalculable with our current frameworks. How, for example, might a company begin to calculate its effect on biodiversity? What metric can an investor look for to see an investment's diversity score? This problem is not insurmountable. Twenty years ago, as major economies were waking up to the true effects of increasing carbon emissions and climate change, the issue of how to count carbon seemed similarly difficult. Today, after much trial and error and leadership from the UK, we can quickly and easily calculate the carbon footprint of any business, person, or product.

Developing frameworks to help business understand, quantify and account for non-financial factors is difficult but very important. Proper frameworks are the first lines of defence against a full breakdown in trust in ESG reporting and investing. They will also help to stop so-called greenwashing, where a product or investment is marketed as being more sustainable than it is. Despite the name, this applies across all three ESG objectives. Such distrust is made worse by some ESG advisers and ratings agencies, whose business plans seem to depend on being able to sell five-star ESG ratings to the highest bidder, without giving any proof of them whatever—a veritable wild west of the ESG world. Of course, many of these businesses are doing comprehensive evaluations of the products, but given the difficulty that an investor would have in distinguishing the good ratings from the bad, it is hardly the confidence-inspiring boost that they need.

I know that the Treasury is well aware of the concerns, and I am pleased that there was a consultation held earlier this year on how best to introduce regulation on ESG ratings. This is a good and necessary step, but we are in danger of winning the battle but losing the war if we delay any further. I urge the Minister to speed up this regulation as much as possible.

We can go further than regulation, however, and set up the frameworks we need to allow any investor or company to understand quickly and easily the ESG impacts of their investments. A taxonomy—essentially a classification of what is and what is not allowed—would do just that, and the Treasury's plan to develop a UK green taxonomy is exactly the right step. This taxonomy, as well as its social and governance cousins, would clearly outline investments that are sustainable—and therefore could be marketed as such—and those that are not. Given that the EU's version of a green taxonomy is dead in the water—it is a bureaucratic nightmare that is no longer fit for purpose—we can make our own decisions here.

We are lucky that, thanks to Brexit, we have been given the chance to design our own robust taxonomy, one that could and should lead the world and entrench

the UK as the true home of sustainable finance. Sadly, we have seen our taxonomy delayed and delayed and delayed. I was pleased to see the UK green taxonomy mentioned in this year's green finance strategy update, but on the original timeline we should already be halfway through the legislative process by now.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is aware, but one of the arcane practices is that because the Adjournment debate started before 10 o'clock, we had to move the motion again at 10. The hon. Gentleman has the Floor.

Alexander Stafford: Thank you for that guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker, and for explaining some of the wonderful aspects of this House.

I ask the Minister whether he will ensure that investors have a framework to separate the sustainable from the spurious, and whether he will take this chance to outline the full timetable for the taxonomy. He will have plenty of time to do so, as we have more time for this Adjournment debate. I look forward to a full and detailed timeline of when we will get this taxonomy. I am willing for him to intervene now if he so wishes. Clearly he does not.

Perhaps another, less discussed difficulty facing ESG is imbalance. The heavy focus has been on environmental considerations as being the most important, often at the cost of social and governance factors. Let me refer to one recent example of the consequences of failing to take that holistic approach. Dame Alison Rose is clearly a champion for socially sustainable business, particularly around gender equality. She is a torchbearer for women in business, having smashed the glass ceiling to become the first woman to lead a major UK bank. However, despite her very strong credentials in social sustainability and the progressive environmental policy of NatWest Group as a whole, under her leadership there was a clear failure in governance when discussing a customer's private banking details with a journalist—I think that we all know the gentleman I am referring to.

I am sure that all Members will agree that it is right that Dame Alison resigned over that abject failure of governance, but I also know that many will join me in expressing our disappointment that the further empowering of women in business and entrepreneurship will suffer because of that failure of governance. Excelling in one area does not absolve someone from indiscretions in others. The E, S and G cannot and should not be separated; a failure in one is a failure in them all. Clearer metrics and frameworks, both within each strand of ESG and encompassing all three elements, will allow for better reporting and therefore better understanding for investors and companies. That will, in turn, return the trust that ESG has been lacking.

It is easy to oversimplify the true impact of more data and disclosures, and we cannot ignore the practical implications of such policies, particularly on smaller businesses and individual investors. Since the turn of the millennium there has been a 647% increase in ESG regulations, alongside miles of other red tape in all

[Alexander Stafford]

shapes and sizes. The disclosure burden on investors and businesses is bigger than at any previous point, leading to whole sectors and teams devoted to auditing every aspect of a business. The EU's own research indicates that its disclosure requirements will cost large firms upwards of €100,000 a year in paperwork alone.

Likewise, the UK green taxonomy, when it is eventually published, will join about 30 other environmentally focused taxonomies across the globe, each needing different types of disclosures. Large companies may be able to absorb that, but it is a potentially lethal issue for small and medium-sized enterprises, which make up 99% of British businesses and have a far more limited staffing and budgetary ability to process those types of disclosures. In pushing for more comprehensive reporting frameworks, we should not bury small businesses under piles of paperwork.

Over the course of my time chairing the all-party parliamentary group, I have been delighted to meet many small businesses that want to integrate ESG into their practices. Many of them, however, have expressed to me their nerves about how to keep up with a continually changing regulatory landscape, and the addition of further disclosures hangs like a dark cloud, so how do we achieve better ESG reporting without overburdening businesses and, perhaps more importantly for those businesses, why should they engage in this space? How do we make ESG work for businesses rather than making businesses work for ESG?

In this debate, I have mostly spoken about ESG as a risk management tool that investors can use as part of their normal investment analysis. There are, however, many upsides for both businesses and the UK as a whole. I have already outlined how a business might utilise ESG to increase efficiency or improve its workforce. For the UK as a whole, though, SMEs are the perfect vehicle for public policy objectives to be achieved without the need for public sector financing or burdensome legislation.

The all-party parliamentary group's latest report—on women in business, to be published tomorrow—is perhaps a good example. It is a sad fact that women are still under-represented in business today. That is not only a social problem; it also represents a £250 billion gap in our economy. Luckily, as in other areas, the private sector is far ahead of policymakers here. Thanks to private firms and independent groups, the UK has one of the highest levels of female representation on boards in the world; it is beaten only by countries that have legislated to force companies to adhere to quotas. Top-down government can make serious strides, but the home straight will always require us to rely on great British businesses. We cannot let them down.

ESG adds value to business, but it cannot become a barrier. Many Members will, like me, have heard concerning reports about some companies, particularly those involved in defence, being excluded from access to investment and capital on ESG grounds. As the Government's defence Command Paper points out, there is no contradiction between investing along ESG principles and the defence industry.

I have already spoken about the concerning anti-ESG movement, much of it stemming from the view that a movement for divestment in such contentious businesses

is because of a political stance. Again, I argue that that is a mischaracterisation of ESG. Instead, and like the Government, I believe that ESG allows investors to factor in the environmental, social and governance impacts of these firms into their decision-making process and helps firms to take action that will result in better returns. These factors should not be unduly taken out of context for political reasons.

Governments need to create an environment where businesses can disclose problem areas without the fear of backlash, so long as they are responsible. Good investors can be a driving force behind companies cleaning up their acts. We must continue to ensure that all businesses have access to the capital they need from reputable, interested investors. We have seen continued protests as part of an environmental campaign, calling for businesses to divest away from oil and gas. But that would actually be detrimental to the world's overall climate ambitions.

Once contentious industries such as oil and gas, defence, tobacco or alcohol can no longer rely on investment from large, public companies that are open and clear about their business ethos, they will most likely leverage finance from less savoury investors. It is in our interests to engage, not divest, and make sure that trusted investors retain a hand on the wheel of these industries, to steer them to a more sustainable and better future.

The issue is not just about a handful of industries. When faced with challenges that may bring public and investor backlash, all firms need to feel secure that they are able to disclose bad practices and work to rectify them, rather than quietly divesting of the malpractice. I will give one example: the International Labour Organisation estimates that there are nearly 50 million modern slaves across the world today. It is almost impossible, therefore, for any large company not to use modern slavery at some point in its supply chain. As much as 20% of worldwide cotton production stems from slave-labour—Members in the Chamber today could be wearing slave-manufactured clothing.

What should a responsible clothing business do if it discovers that it has been accidentally buying slavery-produced goods? Should it quietly switch suppliers and hope that the next one does not have the same problem, or should it work with the supply chain to end the practice of slavery? Divestment for fear of repercussions will not solve environmental, social or governance problems, and companies should not be penalised for bringing accidental wrongdoings to light.

Making ESG work for businesses requires that they should be able to show investors what they are doing to tackle poor business practices without fearing that they will be left without access to capital. The frameworks we build must include room for transitional sustainability improvements, allowing investors and companies to own up to their failings and work to improve them, rather than divesting and passing the problem along.

Having outlined why we should be encouraging ESG, what problems we face in doing so and how it can help business, investors and the UK as a whole, we must now ask what real action we can take to achieve this. I have in this debate referred consistently to frameworks or metrics, which will give certainty and clarity, but what form should they take? Any framework needs to be credible, useable and, importantly, international. What is more, we need to act quickly to ensure that the UK is

the go-to place for ESG. Will the Minister be sure to look into speeding up the publication of frameworks and regulations designed to restore trust in ESG?

The importance of credibility in a framework was confirmed by the EU's recent green taxonomy failures. As Members will know, the EU decided to include natural gas in its green taxonomy, effectively allowing any product using energy derived from fossil fuels to claim it was "green." That is perhaps the most serious and egregious example of greenwashing, and it completely undermines any pretence that the EU's taxonomy can be relied upon to build the trust that I have been so clear we need. Our own framework, and certainly our own green taxonomy, must not have the same problem. Can the Minister assure me that any framework will be science-led, and that ensuring trust will be a key consideration in the design of those frameworks? We may be delayed in our green taxonomy, so ours may not be the first, but let us make it the best. Let us learn from the mistakes made by other countries so that the UK is the gold standard.

Going further, if the UK is to be the ultimate home for ESG, we need to create metrics for ESG criteria that are currently unquantifiable. Much of the work that has already taken place has gone into fleshing out areas with existing data, but in order to ensure that greenwashing cannot happen across any element of ESG, we need to drive forward progress on creating standardised metrics for areas such as biodiversity, community impacts, management structures and so much more. To ensure that the UK is truly world-leading, will the Minister be sure to speak to his colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Work and Pensions to create cross-governmental taskforces that will be able to create those types of framework?

Usability is also vital. As I have mentioned, particularly in reference to SMEs, burdening investors and businesses with extra regulation should not be the objective of any Government, let alone a robust Conservative Government. Any framework must allow for companies to disclose failures and work hard to redeem themselves. Companies' work to achieve better results should be what they are judged by, rather than their failures. To encourage businesses to use ESG to their advantage along the lines that I have described, and so that the UK can leverage the firepower provided by our booming private sector, will the Minister ensure that making the UK an ESG hub will not have negative impacts on businesses and investors? We must look after SMEs.

Today's supply chains, employees and financial flows span the world. It is our duty as policymakers to help British businesses and investors benefit from being part of the global economy. When it comes to ESG, that will mean working with the frameworks of our international partners and using our Brexit freedoms to design a system that allows for international co-operation. The Government's signal earlier this year that we will be adopting wholesale the international financial reporting standards created by the International Sustainability Standards Board is a great start and will ensure that we remain international players, but I want us to be international leaders, especially as the EU will continue to build its own full disclosure system. Can the Minister confirm that we will continue along this path whenever possible?

ESG is not going away, and the UK should not be concerned about or discouraging of it. I must again pay tribute to the Government for already being proactive in creating a welcome environment for ESG, of which I know the Chancellor is already a keen advocate, but if we are to become the global home for ESG, we must move faster and do ever more. I hope that this place sees many more debates on the topic, and that we continue to open lines of communication and inquiry on one of the fastest growing sectors across the UK. As a home for ESG, we have strong foundations, but before we can fully welcome ESG inside, we must make sure that the structure is solid, or it risks total collapse.

10.13 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies):

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on securing the debate, not least because, amazingly, it is the House's first dedicated debate on this subject, which is remarkable—it will certainly not be the last. I know that he cares a great deal about this subject, not only as the chair of the APPG on ESG, but from his career. He speaks with great authority and knowledge of the subject, and I am grateful to him for the opportunity to set out the Government's position on the important issues that he raised.

My hon. Friend will be aware of our steadfast commitment, enshrined in law, to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2050. We already lead the world on tackling climate change: we have decarbonised faster than any other major economy since 1990, reducing our emissions by nearly half while growing our economy by some two thirds. Renewables have gone from less than 7% of our electricity supply in 2010 to 48% in the first quarter of this year, which is fantastic progress. However, as the Prime Minister has said recently, we will not stop there. The Chancellor has set out his view that the UK's green industries are key to creating growth across this United Kingdom and our whole economy, and the Prime Minister's announcements have outlined how the Government are working to unblock key barriers to investment and decarbonisation.

Growing the sustainable finance sector to support the transition to net zero is a major priority for this Government, and in March we published our green finance strategy. The strategy sets out the policies, regulatory changes and frameworks that we will be focusing on and taking forward in the next two to three years, helping businesses to have more certainty. It includes, for example, our commitment to deliver a useful and usable UK green taxonomy—an important evidence-based classification tool that will clearly define what is meant by "green" so that the market knows where to channel investment. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly highlighted, that supply of relevant and reliable information will help guide us all in financing activities that actually support our net zero and environmental objectives, while making clearer where damaging greenwashing is taking place.

Businesses that claim to be delivering green outcomes while doing no such thing not only continue to damage our environment, but damage our collective efforts to reduce the impact on the natural world by undermining the efforts of their competitors and the confidence of the public. This is clearly something that we need to

[Gareth Davies]

tackle. The Competition and Markets Authority has led a crackdown on greenwashing advertising; the green taxonomy will go much further, making it easier to test and verify claims across the board. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley that our next step towards delivering that taxonomy—something that he has directly asked for—is direct consultation, as he would expect. That consultation will take place this autumn, ensuring that we gain market views. It is right that we do so, as that will help build trust in the process and build on lessons learned in other parts of the world.

Alexander Stafford: I am pleased that my hon. Friend is speaking so passionately from the Dispatch Box about the importance of building up trust. Does he agree that if we get this wrong, ESG greenwashing could be the next payment protection insurance scandal—something that everyone signed up for decades ago, for which we are still paying the price even now? If we get this wrong, we will face huge financial disadvantages and penalties down the line, so we must get the taxonomy right.

Gareth Davies: One of the reasons why we are looking at a UK taxonomy and being clear that we want to introduce one is to ensure that there is great transparency and clarity for investors; that, when they buy an investment product, they know what they are getting. One of the things that has historically been lacking in the market is an understanding of what fund managers mean by “green”, so investors are put at a disadvantage and at risk of not purchasing what they believe to be a green product. We will see how that consultation goes, but I assure my hon. Friend that it will take place this autumn.

On a global scale, the markets for ESG ratings and data are rapidly developing, and they are increasingly relied on by investors to guide their decision making. The growth of the integration of ESG into the investment process is expected to continue across all jurisdictions. However, ESG ratings providers currently fall outside the regulatory perimeter. This raises the risk of harm with unrated ratings, which often lack transparency, directing capital flows towards some companies and projects, and away from others. We are therefore exploring action to address these growing ESG investment trends, to ensure that this activity is robust, and that it protects

UK markets and, ultimately, consumers. Alongside the updated green finance strategy, the Treasury has published a consultation seeking views for a potential future regulatory scheme for ESG ratings providers. The consultation closed on 30 June, with 94 responses received from industry, and we are reviewing those responses to inform the next stages of our work.

Any potential regulation would be aligned with recommendations made by the International Organisation of Security Commissions on how ESG data and ratings providers could improve their activities, such as improving transparency and mitigating conflicts of interest. It would also seek to be aligned with other jurisdictions, including those of Japan, Singapore and the EU, which are putting forward initiatives in this space. More transparent ESG ratings would build confidence in these products and the wider sustainable investment market, as investors would be better able to understand how their money is put to use.

Since the UK is at the forefront of international efforts on this issue, we have the opportunity to shape the approach of other jurisdictions. If they are to follow us, it is incumbent on us to set a good example, so we must recognise and address where ESG principles are misapplied. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, we have seen concerns around banking raised recently. We have been clear that, as a matter of public policy, it is wrong to remove someone's bank account simply because of their political views. Free speech and the legitimate expression of differing views are essential British principles, just as much as is ESG.

Let me conclude by saying that I hope that, in the time I have been given, and in the time we had listening to my hon. Friend, he and other hon. Members can now appreciate that this country has built a sustainable finance market, product set and industry of which we should all be proud. We are one of the world's great democracies, a country that advocates for the fair and considerate treatment of the environment and the people of this world, and one that practises what it preaches. We are determined to carry that on, making conscientious decisions that work for our country, supporting our finance industry to play an important role in our economy and, of course, in society.

Question put and agreed to.

10.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 23 October 2023

[MRS SHERYLL MURRAY *in the Chair*]

Honesty in Politics

4.30 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Before the debate begins, I remind Members that the motion is on a general topic. The normal rules about criticism of or accusations against Members of either House are not affected. I remind colleagues of the rules in “Erskine May” paragraphs 21.21 and 21.24 and, in particular, that “Erskine May” paragraph 21.21 makes it clear that it is not in order to try to evade those rules by quoting someone else’s words. I call Martyn Day to move the motion.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 561730 and 576886, relating to honesty in politics.

Both petitions call for it to be a criminal offence for MPs to mislead the public or to lie in the House of Commons. I am delighted to see you in the Chair today, Mrs Murray, and equally delighted to lead this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. It is perhaps a pity that such major events are being discussed in the Chamber, or we would have had a larger attendance.

On a home visit just the other week to Blackburn, West Lothian, my constituent Glenn told me that

“the problem with Parliament is that it filled with”

a shower of “lying B’s”—Members can fill in the blank for themselves, but they will get the picture. In politics, public perception is everything, and even more so when the public are rightfully scunnered by the actions of some bad apples and by the non-correction of genuine mistakes. Addressing the issue is therefore crucial for all of us if we want to restore public trust in our democratic processes.

The Petitions Committee had to request a revised Government response to the first petition, “Make it a criminal offence for MPs to mislead the public”, because the Committee did not think that the Government’s original response directly addressed the petition’s request. The Government’s revised response stated categorically that the Government

“does not intend to introduce legislation”,

citing the MPs’ code of conduct and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards as suitable substitutes. However, I met with the Constitution Unit, the Institute for Government and Full Fact ahead of this debate, and we all agreed that those are not appropriate mechanisms to deal with the problem of MPs’ misleading the public or lying in Parliament. That the Government had to be asked for a response that actually addressed the petition’s request is an indication that this issue was not given due and proper consideration. I hope that today’s debate will correct that, and that agreement can be reached on how we achieve a mechanism that alleviates the existential high public concern over MPs’ misleading Parliament.

Both petitions are now closed, and over two years have passed since the Government responded to them. I will refer to the responses further during my speech, but it is appropriate at this early juncture to state the obvious: events have passed relating to this matter since the responses were given. Indeed, I will discuss one of those events at length to demonstrate how the current Commons procedures hinder accountability for MPs who mislead or lie. It will be interesting to learn whether the responding Minister agrees with the Government’s historical responses, or whether the passage of time and related events have since been given due consideration.

By way of background, it is relevant to note that this debate was originally scheduled to take place on 6 June 2022. However, it was delayed by the related event that I will discuss: an investigation by the Committee of Privileges on a matter referred to it about the conduct of the former Prime Minister and Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, Mr Boris Johnson. It concerned whether Mr Johnson misled the House of Commons and whether, in its nature, his conduct

“amounted to a contempt.”

That is an important word to which I will return very shortly. I raise the Privileges Committee’s inquiry because its investigation of six gatherings between 20 May 2020 and 14 January 2021 at No. 10 Downing Street, during Mr Johnson’s residency, substantiates the petitioners’ concerns, even though the gatherings were not public knowledge when the petitions were started in November 2020 and April 2021.

I recently met Mr Baccas, the creator of petition 561730, entitled “Make it a criminal offence for MPs to mislead the public”. I asked him what led him to start the petition more than a year before the allegations that covid rules had been broken in No. 10 emerged. He told me that it was due to the lies that had been told in relation to Brexit, and that he had been influenced by the failed legal challenge on the ground that Mr Johnson had

“repeatedly lied and misled the British public as to the cost of EU membership.”

I am spotting a pattern here.

Mr Baccas believes that if an MP “intentionally or recklessly” does not speak the truth or misrepresents facts, they should face sanctions in the same way that other public servants would. It is simple: as public servants, MPs should face tangible accountability. Mr Baccas further believes that this would improve the quality of our politics, and I am inclined to agree with him. He shared his disappointment at what he described as the Government’s “expected response” to his petition, and revealed that his intention had been that the anticipated response would put on the record, and thereby highlight, the poor quality of UK politics. I agree that the response reflected the poor quality of our politics currently.

Mr Baccas added that he understood it was not in the Government’s interest to face sanctions for misleading people. I believe that self-interest should not be so apparent, given that the Government are supposed to serve the country and that MPs are elected to serve their constituents. Mr Baccas agrees, pointing out that it is in the interest of voters that MPs are expected to tell the truth due to the impact they have on other people’s lives. He believes that MPs are guardians of the morals

[*Martyn Day*]

and standards that create a civilised society, and that they should set an example to which the population aspires. In Mr Baccas' own words:

"If MPs cannot be relied upon to maintain those standards, why should the electorate maintain them? The passive attitude towards dishonesty in politics opens the door to the breakdown of civilised society."

Who can argue against improving the quality of our politics? I thank Mr Baccas and all the petitioners for making today's important debate possible.

After allegations emerged about the Downing Street gatherings in December 2021, Mr Johnson proceeded between then and May 2022 to make over 30 statements to the House of Commons about compliance with covid rules and regulations in No. 10. The Committee of Privileges concluded that Mr Johnson's statements "misled the House", and it shared its provisional conclusions with him on 8 June 2023, inviting him to make further representations. That led to Mr Johnson announcing his intention to resign the next day, with his resignation being confirmed three days later. The fact that he made a statement ahead of the Committee's final report being published on 15 June, knowing that the Committee would not be able to respond publicly, is significant. Indeed, Mr Johnson's conduct on 9 June was considered "in itself a very serious contempt".

That brings me back to the importance of the word "contempt". It strikes me that, in this context, the word is important for two main reasons. First, the House of Commons initially referred the matter to the Committee of Privileges to consider whether Mr Johnson's statements amounted to a contempt. The reason for doing that is that, in parliamentary terms, the word refers to a contempt of privilege, which describes any act that might disrupt Parliament's work. Additionally, the Committee's final report used the word repeatedly, indicating its thoughtful consideration, and concluded that:

"Mr Johnson's conduct was deliberate and...he has committed a serious contempt of the House."

When the final report came to the Commons for debate on 19 June, the word "contempt" was again used multiple times by Members of different parties. On that day, I joined 353 other Members in approving the Committee's findings. This is an opportune moment to thank all members of the Committee of Privileges for their diligent work in producing its final report. To be clear, the Committee found that the work of the House had been frustrated by the highest office of Government, and the House of Commons agreed with its findings.

The second main reason why the word "contempt" is important is that the seriousness of the findings is not reflected in the consequences, given that expulsion from the House is the worst penalty a Member can face when they do not speak truthfully in Parliament. Being expelled from the House pales in comparison to the penalties for committing a contempt of court, which can see someone going to prison for up to two years, getting a fine, or both. Being expelled from the House pales in comparison to the legal framework for coronavirus restrictions and fixed penalty notices, some of which amounted to thousands of pounds that ordinary members of the public had to pay.

Let us bear in mind that a false statement made in court amounts to perjury, or lying under oath—a crime treated with great seriousness because the very foundation

of the legal system depends on trust and credibility. Let us remember that in many cases perjury leads to justice being perverted. The very foundation of democracy also depends on trust and credibility. Democracy must not be perverted, especially by those who have been entrusted to defend it. Why should lying in Parliament not be treated with the same seriousness?

Contempt is usually associated with legal jargon and is defined as disobedience to or disrespect for the rules or orders of a court or legislative body. The House of Commons is not a court, but it is a legislative body that debates and passes new laws, and changes existing laws as required. The Government introduce most plans for such laws and the Government actively seek public comment on some of the legislative change that they wish to pursue. For that reason, the Government should be cognisant that in this case the rules are perhaps reversed, and the public is asking them to

"introduce legislation to make lying in the House of Commons a criminal offence."

Why should they not comply with such a reasonable request? After all, it is the collectively held will for the common good that forms the political legitimacy of the social contract and determines that we should all live by a common rule. Why should introducing legislation to make lying the House of Commons a criminal offence be opposed? Or is it indeed a case of one rule for them and another rule for everyone else?

Both petitions are clear that trust, truth and honesty are crucial elements in a modern democracy and that lying in Parliament should carry the same penalties as lying in court. I agree with the sentiments of the nearly 244,000 people who felt compelled to sign the petitions. As Members take an oath before they can take their seat in the House, just as anyone does ahead of appearing in court, the same principle should be applied to this legislative body as in a court.

Let us look again at the Government's response, which states:

"Once elected to Parliament, all MPs must abide by the seven principles of public life which form the basis of ethical standards expected of holders of public office. These are set out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life and are: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership."

Honesty is there, but should truthfulness be introduced as an eighth principle in public life just for the avoidance of doubt?

The MPs' code of conduct states,

"Members have a duty to uphold the law"

and it is part of the parliamentary commissioner's job to oversee the code of conduct. Despite the Government's response citing the MPs' code of conduct and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards as suitable substitutes to legislation, it is noted in the code of conduct's procedural protocol that

"The Commissioner cannot investigate allegations solely about breaches of the Seven Principles of Public Life."

Will someone please enlighten me as to what sense these myriad procedures make? We have only to look at the length of time between public concerns being raised about Boris Johnson misleading the public and his referral to the Committee of Privileges to see that

"the hurdles to achieve this are very high."

As the director of the Constitution Unit points out,

“In any less extreme case even triggering an investigation to examine the facts might have proved politically impossible.”

Would it not be more straightforward to make lying in Parliament to be an offence?

The UK Government should take the number of petitioners that want legislative change as a clarion call that legislative change is not just desired, but necessary. We must never forget that we are elected by people across the UK to represent their interests and concerns, not our own. We must never forget that as MPs our primary privilege is that we are elected to serve our constituents, not ourselves. We must also never forget that one of our duties, as laid out in the MPs’ code of conduct, is that we should act on all occasions in accordance with the public trust placed in us. At the very least that must mean being truthful.

It is a sign of the backwards nature of the Westminster system that in February 2022, after both of the petitions had closed and it was obvious to many that lies had been told, the then SNP Westminster leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), was forced to leave the Chamber for telling the truth. At the same time, the then Prime Minister, who happens to be the guardian of the ministerial code, was able to use his position to spread misleading information and rebuke facts through lies, without recourse or accountability. The hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) was also ejected for calling Boris Johnson a liar—she was expelled for telling the truth. This madness places a stain on both Members’ parliamentary records for getting it right. Can the Minister put on the record whether either Member has even received an apology?

When the House of Commons’ rules eject Members from the Chamber for calling out dishonesty, the rules are clearly not working. Parliamentary privilege grants Members the right to speak freely without fear of legal liability or other reprisal, but that privilege has been abused, and that abuse goes against our code of conduct with little repercussion. We should grab the opportunity to examine the challenges and complexities of this matter and come together to find a solution that works. Legislation should be brought forward that prevents the trust between Government and those who are governed being further eroded. It should be done at the earliest opportunity, so we can move the backward nature of this Parliament forward.

4.46 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Murray.

Just one in six people in the UK—17% of the British public—who were polled last year said that they were highly satisfied with how democracy is working. I am afraid that compares very badly with some of our friends and neighbours, such as Canada and Germany, where 36% of the public say the same of their Governments. Clearly, whether we are in government or opposition, we need to take a careful look at issues of honesty and trust in Government.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day). The points he raised about partygate are absolutely central to the issue. I will extend one of those points. On 12 April 2022, the Metropolitan

police served a fixed penalty notice on the then Prime Minister and the then Chancellor of the Exchequer for attending a rule-breaking event in the Cabinet Office in June 2020. Newspapers were full of that dramatic news when, just two days later, the Government announced the so-called Rwanda partnership. Whatever one thinks about the Rwanda partnership—the £120-million scheme that would see some asylum claimants having their claims processed while they were in Rwanda—it is, at the very least, newsworthy. My point is that increasingly over the last couple of decades, we have been subject to something that started out as spin but has since become something that verges on dishonesty.

Going back to 11 September 2001, we heard the phrase that it was a “good day to bury bad news”. At the time, that was symbolic of the worst aspects of the dark arts of spin. Since that time we have seen the development of that into an election campaigning technique. We now hear about the dead cat strategy. “Dead catting” is the idea that when something inconvenient is in the news headlines, the masters of spin might slap a dead cat in front of the public—a shocking announcement to divert attention away from those inconvenient headlines. Hon. and right hon. Members, it is time to end “a good day to bury bad news”, and it is time to end the dead cat strategy. It is a good day to bury the dead cat.

We need more honesty in public life, but if the public considered that MPs tell the truth only because it has become a criminal offence to lie, that could reduce trust in MPs. I pay tribute to the people who put the petition together and to the more than 100,000 people who signed it, but if we were to adopt the measures called for, we would need to be careful about a couple of things. First, if it became a criminal offence for MPs to lie in Parliament, what about when MPs are thought to have not told the truth outside Parliament? Could that, by contrast, reduce trust in MPs when they are speaking in other places, such as in the media or in meetings in their constituencies? The other thing that worries me about the idea of making lying an offence for which MPs could be prosecuted is what we see in other countries where political prisoners are made of people who are simply practising opposition politicians. Of course, that is taking the risk to the extreme, but I worry about the idea of opposition politicians getting locked up simply for telling the truth.

We should not need this. We should be able to proceed on the basis of honour, a term that goes in front of our constituencies: we are the hon. or right hon. Member of the constituency that we represent. We need more than a code of conduct or code of honour that binds us to the truth. Back in the days of Boris Johnson, we witnessed the terrible technique of a wild claim being amplified by denial: if a political opponent made a claim that we knew to be untruthful, by denying it we would repeat it, and by repeating it we would amplify it. We have to be aware of these partial truths because they are getting us into great political hot water.

For example, the 2019 Conservative manifesto claimed that 40 new hospitals would be delivered in this Parliament, but since then we have heard that they are not hospitals, there are not 40 of them and they are not new. Instead, the community hospital in Seaton in my constituency is under threat and there are suggestions that part of it might be demolished by a wrecking ball.

[Richard Foord]

We need honesty and integrity to underpin our democracy. As politicians, we have a job not only to call out fake news, but to stand up and act with integrity. Over recent years, we have seen a dangerous rise in misleading statements from political parties and politicians. Clearly, the public feel there is distortion going on. Research from the organisation Full Fact showed that 71% of the public believe there is more lying and misuse of facts in politics now than 30 years ago. Yet the Constitution Unit found that the public admire politicians who are prepared to stand up and admit mistakes, rather than being dishonest about them. On top of that, a wave of sleaze and scandal has emanated from the Conservative party, and it was one such scandal that resulted in me coming to office as the Member of Parliament for Tiverton and Honiton.

In this place, we have a mechanism for correcting the record and inadvertent errors by going before Parliament, but we need a better method for MPs to correct *Hansard*, rather than things being distorted and going viral over social media. We have to be wary of politicians who cook up half-baked proposals, pretend that they are meaningful policies and then claim they have scrapped them. I take as a case in point the Conservative party conference earlier this year, where ideas about seven bins were magicked up. There was a time when the office of Prime Minister was that of statesman, but to stoop this low is to go to the level less of statesman and more of binman. It is deceitful and against the Nolan principles.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman says, but does he recognise that some of his proposed solutions already exist, yet we are still in the condition we find ourselves in? They do not work. Somehow or other, we need to shift the dial and, within the politics of the United Kingdom, stop rewarding those who say what they like and get away with it, and rather reward those who stick by the truth.

Richard Foord: The right hon. Member is exactly right. We absolutely need to put on a pedestal those people who are prepared to stand up and admit when they have made a mistake and applaud those who correct their own record.

Before I close, one other aspect that I see increasingly is neighbouring MPs claiming credit for the work and achievements of the community campaigners in my part of Devon. Flattery is clearly at play here; it is sometimes said that mimicry is a form of flattery. However, what we are seeing is against the Nolan principles of honesty and accountability.

Finally, anyone who has joined the House of Commons Chamber at the start of proceedings will remember this part of the prayer that we listen to every day. We pray that Members

“never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility”.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I gently remind hon. Members that accusations of dishonesty against currently sitting MPs should be made via the proper channels, and not in a debate on a general motion.

4.56 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I was not intending to make any allegations about any sitting Members, but I might refer to a couple of former sitting Members and others. It is a great delight to have you in the Chair, Mrs Murray, and to have this debate. It is only a sadness that, of course, it is in competition with very serious matters in the House of Commons Chamber this afternoon.

There is an irony that it is the fundamental assumption of the House of Commons that every single Member always speaks the truth to the best of their knowledge, understanding and ability. Of course, sometimes we get things wrong by mistake; we accidentally misspeak and all the rest of it, but it is the fundamental assumption of the House of Commons that every single Member always speaks the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

However, it is the absolute presumption of every single member of the public these days that, every time a Member of Parliament opens their mouth, whether in the House of Commons or outside Parliament, we are lying. I cannot tell you, Mrs Murray, how many times I have heard that. We have all known it. We have all seen it on the Twittersphere—I cannot bring myself to call it X any more; it seems a very odd name. It is the working assumption of lots of people, and it is considerably worse than when I first arrived in the House. I cannot remember when you first arrived, Mrs Murray, but I arrived in 2001—I think I am the longest-standing Member present this afternoon. It was nowhere near that bad back in 2001. The statistics have got worse in every decade since the second world war, and the public are now at catastrophically low levels of trust in what politicians say. That is truly problematic.

Of course, as I said, we all make mistakes. I have made mistakes. I have had to correct the record several times. Sometimes, entirely inadvertently, one says “million” when one meant “billion”. Sometimes one gets the name of a country wrong. These things happen. Sometimes I have said “Labour” when I meant “Conservative”, or “Conservative” when I meant “Labour”. Sometimes we just have to correct the record, but it is not that easy for a Back-Bench Member. There is not, at the moment, a formal process for us to do so. We can do a point of order, although sometimes we may feel—I know I can be pompous anyway—

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): No!

Sir Chris Bryant: Oi.

We can feel phenomenally pompous when raising a point of order about some minor correction of the record and can kind of think that we are wasting the House’s time. I really hope that tomorrow afternoon we vote through the amendment that will allow for the process to correct the record—which we introduced in government in 2007—to apply not just to Ministers but to all Back Benchers. We all know times when we wish we could have been able to correct the record. The good thing about this is that it will correct the original moment in *Hansard*. At present, if I were to say something foul that I believed to be true about a member of your family, Mrs Murray—I would not be able to say it about you, because of the rules that you have already laid

out—but I subsequently found it to be untrue, it would still stand in the original *Hansard* even if I corrected the record two days later. But if the motion goes through tomorrow, we will be able to correct that problem in the present system.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) spoke very eloquently at the beginning of the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I think his heart was in it and he was not just doing it for the Petitions Committee. He referred to the term “bad apple”. Now, I dislike this term, because I think people believe it means, “Oh, there are just some bad apples, but everybody else is okay.” That has never been the meaning of the proverb, which goes all the way back to Chaucer. In “The Cook’s Tale”, one of the pilgrims refers to the one bad apple spoiling the whole barrel. That is the point—there needs to be just one bad apple to spoil the whole barrel, which I honestly think is what has happened in this Parliament.

We need to be terribly cognisant of the fact that 25 MPs in this Parliament since 2019 have been suspended for a day or more or have left Parliament before a report on their misconduct was produced to the House. That is 25 out of 650 of us, which is a record by a country mile. The Clerk of the House tells me that a country mile is as far as someone can see into the distance, to the horizon. I think that it has become normalised for some of our colleagues. I will not refer to specific individuals, but the whole idea of a meat tax theoretically being proposed by the Labour party—which has never, ever been proposed by the Labour party—is a flat-out, blatant lie.

Liz Saville Roberts: This is why it is so critical, because we have to challenge the advantages associated with the influence that someone can gain under lies; otherwise, the individual is being rewarded by throwing a lie out there, and in no way are they penalised for bringing it back again. That, in the sense of it affecting all of us and polluting our whole politics, is why we need to address this, in a way that presently this House does not seem to have sufficient resources for.

Sir Chris Bryant: I completely agree. If this Parliament does not get around to doing it, the next Parliament will have to address this issue far more seriously than we have heretofore. I will come on in a moment to some of the problems with the present system. I commend the right hon. Member for suggesting a way to deal with it. She is not the only Member to do so, as a Member from my own party has done the same. I will explain why I disagree with the precise route that she wants to go down, but I do not disagree with what she is seeking to change. Incidentally, what I said about the meat tax could be said about seven bins, and so on.

A legitimate point was made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) from the Liberal Democrat Benches, which is that the public does not draw an enormous distinction between whether an MP has lied in Parliament or out of Parliament. They just think that we all lie all of the time, and that at pretty much the moment our lips start moving, we are all lying. This is surely problematic for the whole of democracy.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk alluded to another problem. We have a rule that states that a Member cannot say that somebody else has lied, unless the motion on the Order Paper is specific on

whether that is what we are debating. I remember some people got awfully excited in the Chamber when people started saying that Boris Johnson had lied, when the motion on the Order Paper was about whether Boris Johnson had lied. Of course, we have got to be able to advance that argument and prosecute that case in such a debate, but we have an assumption that we cannot say that a Member has deliberately lied. We have to say “inadvertently”, even though we all know that every time somebody says, “He has inadvertently lied,” the person who is saying “inadvertently” is actually lying themselves. What they really believe is that the other person has not “inadvertently” lied at all, but has absolutely advertently lied, and deliberately and recklessly done so. We then throw that person out of the Chamber for a day if they refuse to retract the point. I do not want us to get to a place where we spend all our time accusing each other of being a liar. That would be a very inelegant way of conducting our business, and it would not enhance political debate in this country. We are, however, going to have to review this rule at some point.

It is also a particular irony that, as has been said, two Members of Parliament were thrown out of the Chamber for calling Boris Johnson a liar when, first, Boris Johnson patently was a liar, and secondly, he was subsequently found to have misled the House on precisely the grounds that had been adduced by the two Members concerned. Yet they are the ones who ended up on the list of bad MPs—they are on my list of 25. I think we will have to review that.

My second point is that it is even more important that a Minister tells the truth, as I said earlier, in so far as they are able to know it to be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The reasons for that are, first, Ministers have an army of advisers to make sure that what they are saying is true and to tell them that they must correct the record should that be necessary; secondly, decisions on spending and public policy are made on the basis of what Ministers say in the Chamber; and thirdly, it is a fundamental principle of good Government and written in the ministerial code that Ministers must always tell the truth.

I honestly think that 98% of the time Ministers do tell the truth. I know lots of Ministers who are very rigorous with themselves and their teams: “Can I really say that? Is that really true? Is that a correct interpretation of the statistics?” But there are others who are perhaps a little more casual with the use of statistics and whose approach effectively amounts to being misleading. That is why it is so important that Ministers have the opportunity to correct the record and should do so. They do it hundreds of times every year.

Ironically, Boris Johnson did it only once. Just after the second invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when asked by the Leader of the Opposition whether Roman Abramovich had been sanctioned, Boris Johnson told the House that yes, he had been sanctioned. I quizzed him again, and he said yes, Abramovich had been sanctioned. The next day, however, he corrected the record to say that no, Roman Abramovich had not been sanctioned—he was subsequently, but not at that time. It seems a little odd that the only time Boris Johnson chose to correct the record was when a Russian oligarch, with very deep pockets and very expensive lawyers to hand, called on him and made him do so.

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

As I said earlier, this system for correcting the record should be available to all Members, and I hope that the motion is carried tomorrow; I am fairly confident that it will be. But what are we to think if a Minister, or a series of Ministers, keeps on repeating something by using a statistic that is false, and that we know to be false because the Office for National Statistics, which consists of a pretty dry set of people who are not all that interested in getting into party political argy-bargy, writes to the Minister, “Thou shalt not use this statistic because it is not true any more”? I have a simple answer: if the Office for National Statistics writes to a Minister to say that they must not mention something again, and copies in Mr Speaker, but the Minister does not correct the record within 28 days, they should automatically be considered to have breached the code of conduct. The Committee on Standards could then decide the importance and significance of the issue. If a Minister were faced with such a situation, I suspect that after the first time they were caught out and suspended from the House by the Committee on Standards, they would never do it again. That is the kind of measure that we need to introduce.

In the present system, someone has to refer the matter of whether an individual Member has lied to the Committee of Privileges. This is phenomenally cumbersome. For a start, they need to get the whole House to vote in favour of it. Therefore, in the main, it is unlikely that Government Members, who, by definition, are in the majority, will vote for one of their own Ministers—let alone a Prime Minister—to be referred to the Committee of Privileges. It has happened once, but I suspect it is unlikely to happen again. It is a very long and cumbersome procedure. It requires Mr Speaker to grant permission for the reference to the Committee of Privileges. We need to reform that.

I note yet another irony: when the Department for Culture, Media and Sport Committee found, in essence, that Nadine Dorries had lied to the Committee, it decided to not seek a reference to the Committee on Privileges—I guess because it thought that it was just too cumbersome and tedious a process. We probably need to make this process simpler, and to not necessarily require a Committee of the whole House to do it.

The Government response to the e-petitions says:

“It is an important principle of the UK Parliament that Members of Parliament are accountable to those who elect them. It is absolutely right that all Members of Parliament are fully accountable to their constituents for what they say and do and this is ultimately reflected at the ballot box.”

Well, yes—sort of. I am conscious that I represent the Rhondda, the only seat in Parliament that has been Labour since 1885, although it is being redrawn at the next election. My point is that some MPs are more accountable to their electorate than others. We have a first-past-the-post system, which means that many MPs are sitting in very safe seats, and so are not as accountable. That is why it is all the more incumbent on the whole House to take these issues very seriously. We cannot just leave these issues to the ballot box.

Various ways of sorting out the issue have been suggested. One is that the Speaker should intervene and decide. I regularly see people on Twitter condemning poor old Lindsay for not having told off such-and-such

a Minister for lying. That is not fair. We cannot have the Speaker decide on the accuracy or inaccuracy of comments made by any Member of the House; that way madness lies. I fully support not giving that power to the Speaker; it would be unfair.

There is an argument that there should be a criminal offence of lying, and I understand that. However, I used parliamentary privilege to make allegations about Roman Abramovich in the Chamber, which I think enabled the Government to proceed with eventually sanctioning him under the Ukraine sanctions regime. I am sure that he has very expensive lawyers and would have sought a criminal prosecution. I think I was doing the right thing, and operating under another principle: the principle that all Members should speak without fear or favour. That is of course guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, which says in article IX that no proceeding in Parliament should be questioned or impeached in any court of law, or in any other place. That guarantees that we cannot be sued in other places for the things that we say in Parliament. It is important that we maintain that; otherwise, he would have been seeking some kind of criminal prosecution of me. We MPs need to use that power judiciously and carefully, and I admit that I have sometimes got that wrong. However, we need that power in place to ensure that we have a fully functioning system.

A further point to make about a criminal offence is that it will not deal with what happens outside Parliament. It would be difficult to start having MPs brought to court for what they may or may not have said on Twitter or whatever, unless they were inciting violence or breaking another law.

We must also bear in mind that sometimes two people can, quite legitimately, read the same event completely differently. I use the Evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—as an example. Matthew and Luke have completely different versions of the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain; they differ on whether Jesus is standing up or sitting down; on whether it is “Blessed are the poor” or “the poor in spirit”, and so on. That is a frivolous remark in one sense, but I am being deadly serious. I really do not want the courts—and, for that matter, the police—to spend all their time analysing whether something is proportionate, deliberate, and so on. That is why I am not in favour of a criminal offence. However, I do think that the offence of misconduct in public office is ripe for reform. It has been around for a very long time. It is rarely used. I am not aware of it ever having been applied to a Member of Parliament, but there is an argument that, if a statutory offence of misconduct in public office were introduced, then it should apply to Members of Parliament in certain circumstances.

I have two final points. First, I cannot tell you, Mrs Murray, how many times I have been told, or have heard on television or radio, during this Parliament: “The public doesn’t care about standards in public life. This is all just Westminster tittle-tattle.” I am sorry, but that is so wrong. If we do not care about it, the public certainly do. I gently suggest that the by-elections last week point to a public who genuinely care about standards in public office and lying. Let us not forget that Boris Johnson was referred to the Committee on Standards over what he said about parties in Downing Street; he was not referred to the Committee of Privileges for what he said about Chris Pincher, which was actually

what brought him down—but that was another set of lies. There were dozens of different issues that could have been sent to the Committee of Privileges if necessary.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, who spoke for the Liberal Democrats, was absolutely right: the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy, which has done a lot of work on this subject, said that by far the No. 1 thing that it sought in a Member of Parliament was honesty; that is by far the No. 1 quality it wants in a Member. Its favourite option would be to throw Members out of Parliament if they lie to Parliament. With all the caveats that I gave earlier—that we sometimes make mistakes and so on—if a Member refuses to correct the record, that is by definition a wilful misleading of Parliament.

This is my final point. Why does all this matter? In the end, if people start losing trust in democracy, it may lead to them not voting, or to believing, “Well, it is a lot more efficient just to have an autocrat decide,” as has happened in other places in Europe in recent years. We will then have lost one of our fundamental freedoms, and something that makes this country very special. Parliament is on trial. The linchpin of that is about whether MPs tell the truth or lie; whether we—the rest of the House—care when a Member lies; and whether we do anything about it.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): I gently remind Members that it is appropriate to refer to Mr Speaker as Mr Speaker, not by his Christian name.

5.17 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I thank my friend, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), for bringing these e-petitions before us. It has been really interesting to hear the previous speakers. Westminster Hall has the advantage of being a place where you feel as though you are actually debating something, rather than just standing up and saying a series of words. It is disappointing that there are so few of us here, although I understand the circumstances, given the statement being made in the Chamber.

Others have touched on partygate. It is timely that “Partygate” was broadcast by Channel 4 a couple of weeks ago, though this debate is over a year later than anticipated. “Partygate” reminded people—we saw this played out in the recent by-elections—of the real, visceral shock at how many people behaved during covid. It was like a slow disaster movie. There was shock that people were behaving in a completely different way from us, at a time when we had taken the Prime Minister on his word and given up our liberties. People were not just breaking the rules, but dispensing with the truth when justifying their actions.

During the conference recess, we heard claims about a meat tax, about proposals for seven different bins in which to separate out our refuse, and about people purporting to be gay to gain asylum. We were even given what we were told were concrete spending plans for HS2, only to be told, conveniently a couple of days later, that those plans were actually illustrative. How can people believe what they are told under such circumstances? In Wales, some politicians have dubbed the 20 mph legislation a “blanket” rule, but in my county, there are 85 exceptions to it, so how can it be a

monolithic imposition—unless what we have here is not a nuanced interpretation of various political standpoints, but lying for the sake of division and to stoke emotions? If it is that in action, we need to take a step back and ask where it will land us.

As a number of hon. Members mentioned, I tabled a private Member's Bill that would make it an offence for politicians to wilfully lie to the public. Like many private Members' Bills, it is an opportunity to talk about the gravity of the situation and the pros and cons of what we can do to address it, and I think that everyone who has spoken so far agrees that the situation needs to be addressed. The Elected Representatives (Prohibition of Deception) Bill would bring Parliament in line with 21st century standards, and make it an actionable offence for MPs, Members of devolved legislatures, police and crime commissioners, and elected Mayors wittingly to lie in their public statements, including in their public pronouncements on social media, in podcasts, and in broadcasts and printed election material. If found guilty, they could face an unlimited fine and be banned from standing for election for up to 10 years. Yes, those would be serious sanctions, evidently, but the question is: what sort of sanctions will bring about change? The Bill provides safeguards to ensure that only those who wilfully lie are held to account, and that police time is not wasted on frivolous tit for tat or malicious accusations, and of course national security concerns would be safeguarded.

As hon. Members have mentioned, we all make mistakes, but we do not have a culture that drives the admission of having made mistakes. We are penalised more for admitting our mistakes than we are for correcting them, and that is, to a degree, self-perpetuating. My party has been calling for such an Act for a long time. The Member of the Senedd Adam Price, who was the MP for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr, back in 2006 presented a Bill relating to misleading the public over the illegal war in Iraq. It is astonishing that, 17 years later, nothing has changed. A 2022 survey by Compassion in Politics found that 73% of people supported my Bill, including 71% of Conservative voters and 79% of Labour supporters, and the e-petitions show that there is real public support for accountability and integrity, and that purposeful dishonesty and deception should have consequences.

That brings me to the question: why legislation, rather than a protocol? I was holding myself back earlier and not intervening, because I thought, “I will talk about this, so I'll do it with a bit more decorum and dignity, and at a better pace.” First, let us remember that there is consumer protection legislation about the description of goods and services and, of course, advertising. What is advertising but another industry, alongside politics, that deals in influencing people? When it comes to what is true, and what is unacceptable falsehood, we should endeavour to control how we influence people. Why legislation rather than protocol? Because gentlemen's agreements work only between gentlemen who play by the rules. When there is a culture of disapplying the rules from people who consider themselves to be, let us say, world kings, we need something more robust than codes of conduct. The ministerial code is, in essence, as strong as the political stature of the Prime Minister.

We have heard about the role of the Committee of Privileges, and I think the phrase used was that it can be cumbersome and tedious. We have seen Ministers referred

[Liz Saville Roberts]

to previous Prime Ministers. I must say that this also happens with the First Minister in Cardiff. In both instances, there is the same risk of party considerations and immediate political priorities overriding the common ethical good. That holds true in both places.

Recent events have shown that we need to take greater preventive steps to safeguard against polluting public discourse with blatant untruths. I believe that in a democracy, this should be a collective action enshrined in law, not a privileged act of patronage, granted or withheld on the grounds of party political interests. Why does all this matter? To me, it is because politics is ethics in action. The alternative, if we do not safeguard that, is that it becomes self-interest in action. Diolch yn fawr iawn.

5.25 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for opening the debate and for bringing the petitions before us, and I thank all those who signed them. They have to be commended for their foresight, given that they signed up before many of the issues touched on this afternoon even came to light.

We live in strange and turbulent times, and there is a danger that we are slipping into an era of post-truth politics. We need only look across the Atlantic at the situation in the United States, where a former President is still denying the outcome of an election years after it happened; we can see the impact that is having on society. If we do not do something—I am not saying that I have all the answers—there is a danger of sliding down the same slope.

As has been touched on, the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, lied to the public and Parliament. He was found by independent ethics advisers to have broken the ministerial code after being found guilty by a Met police investigation, yet nobody in this place could call him out for lying. Surely it is our job to come to this place to hold people and systems to account. To paraphrase an Australian politician who used a much pithier phrase, we need to keep the scoundrels honest.

The public are sick and fed up of politicians who think they can have one rule for themselves and another for everyone else. They want politicians to be honest and to have integrity, which is surely the very least that the public should be able to expect from us. It was interesting that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) suggested that we need to throw out the “dead cat” strategy, and I entirely agree with him. Perhaps one or two Lib Dem bar charts could go with it, but that is perhaps another matter altogether.

University College London research published last year revealed that the UK public want politicians who, over and above delivering outcomes, operate within the rules. UCL’s report, entitled “What Kind of Democracy Do People Want?”, details the responses of 6,500 people who are representative of the voting-age population across the whole UK, who were surveyed in July 2021. It is the most in-depth report to date on what roles people think institutions should play. It shows that UK voters care about how those in power are held to account, and there is notably higher support for judicial

intervention than is often supposed. It reveals that people do not want power concentrated in the hands of a few, but would like it shared among Parliament, judges, regulators, civil servants and the public.

When respondents were asked whether they agreed that

“healthy democracy requires that politicians always act within the rules”,

or that

“healthy democracy means getting things done, even if that sometimes requires politicians to break the rules”,

75% chose the former and just 6% the latter. Professor Alan Renwick, the deputy director of the UCL’s Constitution Unit, said:

“It’s true that few people pay much attention to the fine details of democratic institutions...But people do want a system in which politicians act with integrity and where power isn’t unduly concentrated with ministers in government. Most people, across different political affiliations, think that’s not the case at present.”

These findings show that voters care deeply about integrity and do not want power to be unduly concentrated in the hands of the Executive.

It is beyond doubt that the trust gap between public and politicians is threatening our democracy; as I say, Donald Trump and Boris Johnson have accelerated the slide. Unless we halt the political disinformation, democracy will be in deep trouble. I have previously highlighted the possible need for a truth tsar or truth commissioner to fact-check MPs and hold us to account, and I would be interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on that idea. Clearly, we cannot have a situation where we do that ourselves. In an ideal world we would, but that is what we have got just now and it is not working.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) is right that it would be entirely unfair to expect the Speaker to take on that role, but somebody has to, and we need to give that serious consideration. There could be an independent body entirely separate from the political system, which could give confidence not only to those of us in this place but to the public at large. It could have the power to investigate allegations of dishonesty against MPs and recommend sanctions, such as suspension from the House. That would be more than naming and shaming MPs who make mistakes, because mistakes happen in every workplace and every organisation. There is huge merit in the Bill that the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) introduced, which I hope will progress with a lot of support. We need to do something; if we do not, the entire foundations of our democracy are in danger of falling into disrepair.

I will give a case in point. Recently, a Minister—I will not name anyone—commented in the Chamber that Scotland “does not house refugees”. If someone was being fair, they could argue that that was a throwaway line or a flippant comment, but factually it is entirely untrue. I pointed that out through a point of order, but I have not yet seen a correction to the record. That was a very simple case, where somebody could look at the facts and check the statement, and the easiest solution would be for the record to be corrected, but at the moment there is nothing to make that happen.

There are other moves afoot. In Iceland, all major political parties have agreed to a code of conduct, which includes provisions for transparency, accountability

and ethical behaviour. Perhaps we could look at that existing model, at least to bring ourselves a bit further forward in terms of what actions we could take.

Public anger about dishonesty in politics runs deep; there is a deep-seated view that there is one rule for politicians and another for everyone else. A small number of people making wildly flamboyant claims undermines all of us; it impacts every single one of us. It is in all our interests to try to do everything we can to get this right.

The UCL experts showed that most people are outraged at the suggestion that they should have to use up the one vote they get every four or five years to make what they think should be the blindingly obvious point that lying in Parliament ought to be punished. They expect politicians to step up and enforce the rules. If that does not happen, they could increasingly support more stringent and perhaps problematic external constraints on Parliament. There would be nothing in that for any of us, so it is in all our interests to get this right.

5.33 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for leading this debate on a subject—honesty in politics and how MPs can be made more accountable for what they say in public and in Parliament—that was determined by the Petitions Committee but is clearly close to his heart, and for explaining very clearly the intent of the petitioners.

We all know the shocking reason why the issue of MPs telling the truth has become a matter of such public concern over the past few years: while people up and down the country were making huge sacrifices to comply with the covid rules and help to keep us all safe, with families unable to be with their loved ones in their dying moments, friends unable to attend funerals, businesses struggling and young people missing out on education and social contact, there were parties at No. 10 Downing Street. As if that were not enough, to add insult to injury, we had the unedifying spectacle—that is very modest language, Mrs Murray—of the then Prime Minister, himself in denial, squirming around and changing his story at the Dispatch Box. We can understand why the leader of the Labour party, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), called for him to be referred to the Committee of Privileges.

The problem, as we all know, is that that behaviour by a former Prime Minister has completely shattered the public's trust in politics. That is why we have said that, for Labour, it is a priority to try to restore trust in politics and to restore standards in public life. For us, that has to start from the top, with the Prime Minister and the Government. It is of paramount importance that all MPs should be honest, but clearly the influence and impact of what Ministers say is much greater. They affect people's spending decisions. They affect people's planning decisions. They are crucial in terms of what the future of the country holds.

We cannot continue with the current situation, in which the Prime Minister appoints his own ethics adviser, who can instigate investigations only on the say-so of the Prime Minister, and in which sanctions can be imposed only with the agreement of the Prime Minister.

Sadly, for all the rhetoric, the current Conservative Government have done precious little to restore the public's trust in politicians.

We have set out very clearly that a Labour Government would create a genuinely independent standards watchdog, the ethics and integrity commission, which would be completely independent of political control and would oversee and enforce standards in Government, ending the current situation in which the Prime Minister is the judge and jury on every case of ministerial misconduct. The current independent adviser on Ministers' interests and the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which advises on former Ministers taking up jobs, would be subsumed into that new ethics and integrity commission.

The new commission would have the power to launch investigations, without ministerial approval, into misconduct and breaches of the ministerial code; to put forward sanctions for breaches of that code; to recommend changes to ensure that the code is fit for purpose; to insist that former Ministers apply to the commission before accepting any job; and to ban former Ministers from lobbying, consultancy or any paid work related to their former job. That is how we want to clean up Government. Disappointingly in the light of the events described by hon. Members today, the Government have not brought forward proposals for much-needed reform to create independence in the system.

The conduct of MPs has traditionally been a matter for the House of Commons and the Speaker. I thank those hon. Members who have taken part in today's debate and set out their proposals for how things could be improved: my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant); the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats; the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), the Westminster leader of Plaid Cymru; and the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), the SNP spokesperson. It is an important feature of our democracy that we safeguard freedom of speech and that we should be able to express ourselves forthrightly. Inevitably, there will be strong differences of opinion. The question is this: how do we uphold the highest standards in the House while at the same time safeguarding freedom of speech? How effectively do the current procedures work?

Back in April 2022, the Leader of the Opposition called on Mr Speaker to allow a debate on a motion to refer the then Prime Minister to the Committee of Privileges for assertions that

“appear to amount to misleading the House”.—[*Official Report*, 21 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 351.]

In the event, the motion was agreed nem. con. As we know, a referral was made and sanctions were imposed. Those included a 90-day suspension, which would have allowed a recall petition had the Member not resigned. Therefore, democratically elected Members were able to do the right thing and back, or at least not oppose, the investigation of a fellow Member, albeit he was the Prime Minister, for misleading the House. However, the day before, Ministers had been minded to table an amendment to the motion, so perhaps there is a case for a stronger ministerial code that would prevent that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda has put on record, there are real concerns about that process, and there is potential for streamlining it.

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

As I said, the conduct of MPs in the Chamber has traditionally been a matter for the House of Commons and the Speaker, but it behoves each one of us not to tarnish the reputation of Parliament by knowingly lying to—or misleading, as it is always put—the House, and therefore lying to the public. I am sure that the majority of Members endeavour to be truthful the majority of the time. However, as Members have pointed out today, a Member is more likely to get into trouble and be thrown out if they point out that another MP has lied than if they are the perpetrator of the lie in the first place.

While there are a number of ways in which a Minister can correct the record, that is not the case for other MPs. They can choose to make a correction by using a point of order, but that is not referenced to their original statement, which remains in *Hansard*. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda, the former Chair of the Committee on Standards, pointed out how it could be made easier for an MP to make a correction and how the information could be made more accessible. What thought have the Government given to that proposal, and what will be their position on the proposed amendment when it is put to the House? What discussions has the Minister had with the Leader of the House and Mr Speaker about ways to foster a zero-tolerance culture towards telling and repeating lies in the House and to rebuild trust in Parliament?

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton explained the potential complications of making it a criminal offence for MPs to lie to Parliament or to the public. The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd explained how her ten-minute rule Bill, which would do that, would work. However, this has to be led from the top, which is why we in the Labour party think it very important to get the role of the Prime Minister, the ministerial code and the idea of an independent ethics and integrity commission off the blocks as a starter.

What proposals do the Government have for putting things right now? In the light of the events that have taken place, it is extraordinary that we have not seen significant action to create any form of independence in respect of ethics and integrity. What would the Minister propose to ensure that we have a better culture in Parliament and a better understanding of what honesty in politics means, and that we can demonstrate to the public that we are trying to clean up our act?

5.42 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to respond in this important and wide-ranging debate, which touches on one of the fundamentals of the unwritten constitution: honesty. It is fundamental not only to our relationship with the public, but to our relationship with each other, and to the relationship that everyone in society has with one another. Without honesty, democracy cannot work properly, and society cannot work properly either.

All credit to Members on all sides of the House: everyone has raised important examples—[*Interruption.*] This side of the House is being represented—it is being

represented now. Members across the Floor have raised important examples of Members being found wanting—often not examples from within their own parties, of course, but examples nonetheless. I toyed with the idea of finding examples of dishonesty from within the ranks of the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and Labour, but we all know that they are out there and I do not wish to engage in that sort of knockabout, much though the hon. Member for Llanelli (*Dame Nia Griffith*) tempted me by not mentioning certain things that occurred when her party was last in power.

Through the petitions, the question before us is how we improve honesty. The petitions set out a particular route; the question is whether that is the right and appropriate route. I have to be clear with the House immediately that I do not think it is, for the reasons set out by the hon. Member for Rhondda (*Sir Chris Bryant*). If honesty is one of the core values of our system, parliamentary privilege and freedom of speech within Parliament is one of the absolute pillars of the modern constitution—and not just in the modern constitution. The Bill of Rights 1689, in article 9, states that,

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

Perhaps closer to the heart of the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk who opened the debate is the Claim of Right Act 1689 from the Convention of the Estates in Scotland, which states,

“That for redress of all greivances and for the amending strentheing and preserueing of the lawes Parliaments ought to be frequently called and allowed to sit and the freedom of speech and debate secured to the members”.

That was not even a new idea in the late 17th century. We know that it was a principle upheld in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and there is a case from 1455, of a Member called Younge who proved that he had been unduly punished because of something that he had said in the House. The House agreed that there was

“The olde liberty and freedom of the Commons of this land...to speak and say in the House...without any manner of challenge, charge or punishment.”

Even in 1455, it was considered to be an old privilege. There are examples from the late 14th century that may show likewise, but they are more contested.

It would seem that one of the founding principles of parliamentary debate is that people should be free from interference when they speak. It stands to reason that within Parliament people will not always agree. Of course, that does not give everyone the right to say whatever they like. The House has means of regulating its own behaviour.

The example that the hon. Member for Rhondda gave was far better than the made-up example that I had in my head. The consequences of success for petitions such as these is that the hon. Member will stand up and make a criticism of an oligarch; that oligarch has very deep pockets, and will find a way to get him into court. Even if the hon. Member wins, which he would do, he might find that legal process very expensive—so expensive that the next time he stood up he might genuinely think twice about what he said. It would not just be him; every Member of the House would think twice before they spoke on a contentious issue. That would have a

supremely damaging effect on the honesty of discourse. Honesty is not just about what someone says; it is sometimes about what someone chooses not to say, and not to stand up against.

I do not believe it would stop there. Not only would there be rich individuals who sought to intimidate Members of the House, but there would be campaigning organisations with very deep pockets that would go after individuals who spoke on certain subjects and seek to clamp down on debate in certain areas. That would have a very damaging effect on our democracy. That is why, in my opinion and the opinion of the Government, the House has to grant those privileges and find means and mechanisms for self-regulation. That is why it is such an important and long-standing principle.

Hon. Members have raised interesting ideas about how those processes can be improved. I will not go into those today, but it is good that they have had the opportunity to air them here. If we were to accept the ideas put down in the petitions, though, we would be accepting—nay, sanctioning—the legal intimidation of MPs in the House of Commons. I am afraid that is something that this Government will not support.

5.49 pm

Martyn Day: We have had a good and wide-ranging debate. We have probably only scratched the surface of what could have been said. We have heard, basically, that it is very difficult for Members who genuinely wish to correct inadvertent mistakes to do so, and it is nigh-on impossible to hold people who deliberately mislead Parliament to actual account. There is no ultimate sanction other than the electorate at the ballot box, and that is not a proper sanction at all.

There is definitely something that we need to do if we are to restore public faith in our democratic processes. We have to send a message that honesty is not out of fashion, and the debate we have had today has helped to do that. We have got to ensure that there are repercussions when people wilfully mislead Parliament, and I hope the Minister will reconsider his position.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 561730 and 576886, relating to honesty in politics.

5.50 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 23 October 2023

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Inquiry

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): The Infected Blood Inquiry Chair has announced that the inquiry's final report has been delayed from autumn 2023 and will now be published in March 2024. I recognise the calls for urgency from those who have suffered and continue to suffer, and I remain committed to responding to the inquiry as quickly as the Government are able to do so. However, it is only reasonable that the Government's response is fully informed by Sir Brian's final report.

I am aware that for some the inquiry, as well as the ongoing parliamentary and public interest in this important issue, has meant reliving painful memories and feelings of loss and grief. I have been deeply moved to hear of the suffering and trauma that each individual has encountered as a result of this tragedy.

The timetable of the inquiry is a matter for the independent Chair and the Government support his desire to complete the inquiry's vital work quickly but with the necessary thoroughness. The Government continue to fully support the inquiry in its important work and are working hard to be ready to respond.

I will update Parliament as soon as it is appropriate.
[HCWS1082]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Simpler Recycling and Wider Waste Reforms

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Simpler recycling will help us all recycle more easily, doing our bit to help save the planet and make the best use of precious resources that we use every day.

On Saturday 21 October, we published the Government response to the "Simpler Recycling" consultation—formerly known as "Consistency in Household and Business Recycling in England".

These new waste reforms make it easier for households and businesses to recycle by introducing a simpler approach to waste collections. This common-sense approach means an end to the postcode lottery so, for the first time, people across England will be able to recycle the same materials, as well as get weekly food waste collections. Whatever product you buy with the recycling logo, and all your food you do not use, you will be able to recycle it at home—wherever you live.

In line with the Environment Act 2021, we are requiring all councils to collect seven different types of waste from your doorstep to be recycled—glass, metal, plastic, paper and card, garden and food waste. We will also require councils to collect other residual waste at least fortnightly.

That does not mean households need seven bins though. The areas with the highest recycling rates use just three bins or boxes for every home to collect this already. If it works for those parts of the country, the Government think that this approach can be undertaken by all councils. To that end, we will be legislating in early 2024 to enable that. It will still be for councils to decide how many bins or boxes they offer households. We have listened to councils and households and as part of the simpler recycling policy, local authorities will have the flexibility to design and implement the reforms that works for their geographical areas and citizens.

We will also bring in stricter laws for those who manage and transport waste in England, and introduce mandatory digital waste tracking across the UK—taking on the dodgy dealers, rogue operators and fly-tipping cowboy criminals who blight our countryside and cost our economy £1 billion every year.

Alongside "Simpler Recycling", we are also cracking down on waste crime to prevent illegal waste from blighting our communities and damaging the environment. Across England, we will be bringing in stricter regulations for those who manage and transport waste—carriers, brokers and dealers—as well as introducing mandatory digital waste tracking across the UK, using powers in the Environment Act to overhaul existing waste record keeping.

As set out in our landmark resources and waste strategy, we will go further and faster to reduce, reuse, and recycle more of our waste and resources, helping to leave the environment in a better state than we found it for future generations.

Together these measures will help us to achieve our 25-year environment plan commitment to eliminate avoidable waste by 2050, our Environment Act target to halve the amount of residual waste we produce per person by 2042, and our recycling ambition of recycling 65% of municipal waste by 2035.

"Simpler Recycling" will significantly contribute to the net zero strategy commitment to

"explore options for the near elimination of biodegradable municipal waste to landfill from 2028."

This policy will be the main contributor to reducing residual municipal food waste per capita by the equivalent of 50% from 2019 levels, set out in the environmental improvement plan (EIP).

The Government remain committed to delivering the environmental benefits of their resources and waste package of reforms.

[HCWS1085]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Shared Outcomes Toolkit for Integrated Care Systems

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): Shared outcomes in health and care are a powerful tool for driving integration in integrated care systems. As shared priorities, they bring organisations together to deliver on a common purpose for the people they serve. This is why shared outcomes were an important part of our integration White Paper (IWP), "Joining up care

for people, places and populations”, which outlined opportunities to progress further on the integration of health and social care.

Since the IWP was published, we have seen good progress in places developing local shared outcomes focused on addressing the needs of their populations and with a focus on health improvement. We have heard a consistent message from stakeholders that place leaders should have autonomy to select local outcomes that are appropriate to the needs of their populations, while also complementing national priorities. Our approach to supporting the development of shared outcomes reflects this feedback.

I am therefore pleased to update the House that we have published the shared outcomes toolkit.

Just as the Government have provided the NHS with a more focused set of priorities in the mandate published in 2023, we are supporting places through this toolkit to develop local outcomes and priorities that are as impactful as possible for local people. The publication of the shared outcomes toolkit also meets recommendations made in the Hewitt review and the Health and Social Care Select Committee hearing report into integrated care systems, both of which recommended that Government publish the shared outcomes framework as soon as possible.

This toolkit shares the learning from places that are further on in their development of shared outcomes, and includes case studies, examples of good practice, and suggestions for overcoming challenges. It is designed to be a resource to support places in developing shared outcomes, and recognising that places will be at different levels of maturity.

With the support this toolkit offers, we expect all places in each ICS will be able to evidence the work they are doing towards developing shared outcomes by March 2024. Going forward, shared outcomes are referenced as evidence in the Care Quality Commission (CQC) single assessment framework and this evidence may be considered as part of the CQC ICS reviews and assessments.

As places progress with their outcomes frameworks we will consider how the balance between nationally mandated and locally driven priorities is working in practice and review the commonalities that may inform the development of national shared outcomes.

The shared outcomes toolkit is available on the www.gov.uk website, and copies have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1083]

TRANSPORT

Bus Funding

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Buses are the most popular form of public transport in our country. They are an essential part of our national transport system, in both urban and rural areas, playing a vital part in levelling up.

In his speech on 4 October the Prime Minister announced, from the savings made by cancelling HS2 phase 2, that we will channel additional funding into better buses across the north and the midlands.

Today I am pleased to announce £150 million of new funding for local transport authorities in the north and the midlands over the next financial year. This is the first tranche of £1 billion in new funding to improve bus services; £770 million for the North and nearly £230 million for the midlands. This funding is in addition to the £1.1 billion for BSIPs announced in 2022 and 2023, and the £300 million to protect and enhance bus services through bus service operators grant plus (BSOG+) and bus services improvement plan plus (BSIP+) announced in May.

The £150 million committed today is from redirected HS2 funding, part of our new £36 billion Network North plan which will improve the daily transport connections that matter most to people, benefitting more people, in more places, more quickly.

We are giving this funding directly to local authorities, so that they can work in partnership with bus operators to decide how best to use it to deliver better services that meet the needs of each local area. This new funding can be used to reintroduce evening services to support the night-time economy, provide cheaper fares through ticket price caps, increase service frequency meaning less waiting time for passengers, or introduce new routes to connect previously unconnected areas. We estimate that the £150 million we are confirming today is enough to support up to 25 million miles of new bus services.

Further details and anticipated allocations for next year's funds will be published today for individual local transport authorities, and details of the remainder of this £1 billion new investment will be announced in due course.

Our support for the bus sector and passengers alike does not end there. The £2 bus fare cap has already made a huge difference, holding down prices and helping protect the bus market as it recovers. First launched for three months, the scheme has proven hugely popular and was extended until 31 October, to be followed by a £2.50 cap until November 2024, with £335 million committed to deliver these caps, save passengers money, and grow the economy. In England, outside London, bus fares last year fell 7.4%, whereas in Scotland, Wales and London, where the buses are devolved, fares increased by 10.3%, 6.3% and 6.0%, respectively.

Again, using the savings from HS2, we will extend the £2 fare right across England until the end of December 2024. This means the Government have committed nearly £600 million to cap bus fares. With over 140 bus operators currently running more than 5,000 routes in the scheme, maintaining the cap at £2 will ensure passengers all over the country can continue to save significant sums of their regular travel costs until 2025 and help encourage more people to get on board buses.

Finally, our support for buses includes community transport too. Community transport offers transport for people who have difficulty using, or no access to, regular bus services or other public transport. Funding until June 2023 supported community transport operators during the covid-19 pandemic by paying operators the same level of the bus service operators grant (BSOG) as they received pre-covid, regardless of services run. This has allowed operators to run services that might otherwise have been cancelled.

I am also announcing today that the Government will continue to provide increased financial support to these community transport operators to help protect

these key services by uplifting their bus service operator grant claims by 60%. This significant support will be available to operators for claims from 1 July 2023 to the end of March 2025, matching the duration of the BSOG+ support scheme. This enhanced funding comes as part of the Government's nearly £260 million annual BSOG to support bus services in England outside of

London. BSOG also includes up to £213 million for commercial bus operators and, for the tenth year, £42 million for local authorities.

Taken together, this is one of the biggest ever packages of support for buses and bus users we have ever put in place—vital support for our most used public transport.

[HCWS1084]

Petition

Monday 23 October 2023

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Phlebotomy Services

The petition of the residents of Deal and Walmer,

Declares that the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board, at long last, finally recognised that older, poorer, clinically dependent people and children in Deal and Walmer have been inadequately provided for following the closure of blood testing services and the hospital in October 2021; notes that residents in Deal and Walmer should have local access to these essential blood testing services; further notes that the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board are yet to reinstate the blood testing services at Deal Hospital.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to ensure that Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board reopen blood testing services at Deal Hospital immediately.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mrs Natalie Elphicke, *Official Report*, 19 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 1331.]

[P002859]

Observations from the Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince):

The Government understand that NHS Kent and Medway has agreed to reinstate a community phlebotomy service at Queen Victoria Community Hospital, Deal. They will launch a process to find a provider by the end of September, with the expectation that the new service will be announced in December. It will be commissioned for 12 months to establish service demand.

Within Kent, general practices are already commissioned to provide phlebotomy services at practice level and, within Deal, four practices have agreed contracts in place. The addition of a community phlebotomy service in Deal will increase the total number of blood tests available locally.

The Government believe that local health and care organisations are best placed to make decisions on commissioning services for their communities, working with local authorities, stakeholders and local populations to meet people's needs.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 23 October 2023

EDUCATION

Core School Budget Allocations

The following is an extract from the urgent question on Core School Budget Allocations on 17 October 2023.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): This is yet another error and case of incompetence under this Government. The average primary school is expected to be more than £12,000 worse off next academic year and the average secondary school £57,000 worse off than under the July publication. How will the Government help headteachers in Slough and across the country deal with the extra stress and pressure on account of this error, especially when they have to make difficult decisions on staffing and additional support for those pupils who need it?

Nick Gibb: The actual allocations to schools happen in December each year in the normal way, so this situation will not affect the figures that local authorities have informed schools they will be receiving. Those are based on the October census of pupil numbers and the application of the local formula. We then fund the local authorities on the basis of the national funding. The record funding of £59.6 billion equates to an average of £5,300 per primary school pupil and £6,830 per secondary school pupil.

[Official Report, 17 October 2023, Vol. 738, c. 174.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Schools, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). The correct response should have been:

Nick Gibb: The actual allocations of school funding to local authorities are confirmed in December each year in the normal way, so this situation will not affect the figures that local authorities have informed schools they will be receiving. Those are based on the October census of pupil numbers and the application of the local formula. We then fund the local authorities on the basis of the national funding. The record funding of £59.6 billion equates to an average of £5,300 per primary school pupil and £6,830 per secondary school pupil.

TREASURY

Business Banking: Undesignated Client Accounts

The following is an extract from the debate on Business Banking: Undesignated Client Accounts in Westminster Hall on 18 October 2023.

Andrew Griffith: I am also happy to give my right hon. Friend the assurance that she seeks. She has been very patient and tolerant. I understand her and her constituents' frustrations, but there will be no further delays. After having consulted earlier this year, we intend to look at how we can improve and reform the anti-money laundering procedures.

[Official Report, 18 October 2023, Vol. 738, c. 120WH.]

Letter of correction from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith):

An error has been identified in my response to the debate secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst).

The correct response should have been:

Andrew Griffith: I am also happy to give my right hon. Friend the assurance that she seeks. She has been very patient and tolerant. I understand her and her constituents' frustrations, but there will be no further delays. **Through consultation this year**, we intend to look at how we can improve and reform the anti-money laundering procedures.

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