

**Wednesday
11 September 2024**

**Volume 753
No. 21**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 11 September 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that the ballot for the election of Select Committee Chairs is currently taking place in Committee Room 15. It will close at 4 pm.

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF FORENSIC PATHOLOGY

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, That he will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of the Report, entitled *The Patronising Disposition of Unaccountable Power: Independent Review of Forensic Pathology*, dated 11 September 2024.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Clean Energy Projects

1. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for clean energy projects in Wales. [900305]

7. **Gill German** (Clwyd North) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for clean energy projects in Wales. [900312]

9. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for clean energy projects in Wales. [900314]

12. **Henry Tufnell** (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for clean energy projects in Wales. [900317]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): This is my first oral questions session as Welsh Secretary, so I congratulate and welcome all Members elected to represent Welsh constituencies, particularly the 84% of those Members who sit on the Labour Benches. I also welcome the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), to the Front Bench—for Wales questions. Finally, I pay tribute to our fantastic Welsh Olympians and Paralympians, who have brought home a record medal haul to a very proud nation.

I recently met the Energy Secretary and visited the energy cluster in Pembrokeshire with the Deputy Prime Minister. The Government have established Great British Energy to drive down bills, create jobs and deliver energy security. Its new partnership with the Crown Estate will boost new green technologies, such as floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea. That will supercharge the work already undertaken by the Welsh Government, which the Prime Minister saw at first hand in west Wales with the new First Minister.

Nick Smith: I support my right hon. Friend's sentiments, and wish her well in her job. In advance of the statement, what can she say about jobs and investment in this crucial sector?

Jo Stevens: I am delighted that seven Welsh tidal, solar and offshore wind projects were successful in securing contracts in the Government's main scheme for supporting low-carbon electricity generation. Those projects will support the Government's mission to deliver clean power by 2030, as well as creating high-quality green jobs and attracting private investment. I look forward to further Welsh projects coming through in future rounds.

Gill German: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer; I am delighted to see her in her place. I am pleased to say that the development of the skills needed for such projects is well under way in Clwyd North. Creating Enterprise in Rhyl works with local social housing providers to develop energy-efficient housing solutions, and has partnered with Rhyl College to train local people in renewable energy, green heating and solar technologies, giving them the key skills needed for the green energy sector, and us the local trained workforce that we need. Does my right hon. Friend agree that green energy offers huge growth and employment potential for areas such as Clwyd North, and will she join me on a visit to Creating Enterprise the next time she is back home in north Wales?

Jo Stevens: I congratulate my hon. Friend on winning her seat. The Government have a clear mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower by investing in home-grown energy to grow the economy, create jobs, boost skills and strengthen our energy independence. In Wales, we have the resources and skills to be a leader in cutting-edge energy technologies, creating high-quality jobs right across the country, including in north Wales. It would be a pleasure to visit Creating Enterprise with my hon. Friend.

Bill Esterson: My right hon. Friend mentioned the exciting opportunities from offshore wind for the people and economy of Wales. Can she tell the House about the discussions that she and her Cabinet colleagues have had with the Crown Estate about maximising the benefits from those opportunities?

Jo Stevens: We believe that the new innovative partnership between Great British Energy and the Crown Estate will leverage up to £60 billion of private investment into the UK's drive for energy independence. I am delighted that the Crown Estate has today published plans to bring an additional 20 GW to 30 GW of offshore wind to market by 2030. That is excellent news for Wales's clean energy ambitions, particularly for floating offshore

wind in the Celtic sea. I recently met the Energy Secretary, and separately the Crown Estate, to discuss how this new industry can deliver jobs and growth across Wales.

Henry Tufnell: Will the Secretary of State set out how Great British Energy will deliver benefits to the port of Milford Haven and to families across my constituency?

Jo Stevens: I welcome my hon. Friend to his seat. I had the privilege of visiting the port of Milford Haven energy cluster in Pembrokeshire with him and the Deputy Prime Minister in August. I really value the critical role that the port plays in securing the UK's energy supply, and I am proud that the region is pioneering new green technologies. We have established Great British Energy to drive investment in those technologies, which will deliver sustainable skilled jobs in Pembrokeshire and across Wales.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Ynys Môn has a long history of clean energy production, but Tory delays on Wylfa have cost the island over 400 jobs since 2010. In March, the Secretary of State urged the UK Government to get on with delivering new nuclear power. Now that she is in power, will she back those words with a concrete plan?

Jo Stevens: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. Our manifesto commitment to delivering new nuclear in places such as Wylfa still stands—we will do that. The Government have now completed the purchase of the Wylfa site, as she knows. We will end over a decade of inaction by the previous Government on nuclear power, as part of our wider plans to get Britain building again.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate new Ministers on their appointments.

The last Conservative Government spearheaded various clean energy schemes for Wales, including the Celtic freeport, which has the potential to create more than 10,000 green jobs. Will the Secretary of State join me in recognising that the last Conservative Government led the way in delivering clean energy projects for Wales? Does she recognise that the Welsh Government also have to play their part, and what discussions she has had with them about their own plans to support clean energy projects in Wales?

Jo Stevens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. My colleague the Secretary of State for Business and Trade said immediately after the election that we do not intend to make any changes to existing freeport commitments. I am backing the delivery of the two freeports in Wales, and I am very pleased that, with the involvement of the Welsh Government, we have fair work elements in those freeports, which I fully support.

Steel Industry

2. Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support the steel industry in Wales. [900306]

5. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support the steel industry in Wales. [900310]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): Under my chairmanship, the transition board has moved from discussion to delivery. Last month, I announced £13.5 million for supply chain, skills and employability funds. I also announced our business and community pledge scheme, bringing together over 50 organisations in support of affected workers.

Steve Witherden: I thank my right hon. Friend for beginning to deliver funds to support business confidence and provide a safety net for workers. Will she explain how that will support workers who are dealing with great uncertainty?

Jo Stevens: The two funds that have been announced are specifically for people in businesses and in the supply chain, because we know that they have already been affected by the uncertainty of the situation at Port Talbot. They will help people to retrain and reskill into new employment, and will help businesses to diversify and go into new markets if they are a primary customer of Tata Steel.

Jessica Morden: I know that my right hon. Friend will serve Wales admirably in her new role.

Llanwern steelworks in Newport is a key strategic site that manufactures world-class automotive steel and more, and it has so much potential. We all await the statement later, but can she outline what she has been doing, alongside the Department for Business and Trade, to secure future investment in Llanwern as part of ongoing discussions with Tata?

Jo Stevens: The Government absolutely understand the importance of Llanwern as a key manufacturing facility for steel products. We have worked with Tata Steel UK to ensure that Llanwern is clearly considered in plans for the future of steel in south Wales. My hon. Friend is a dedicated advocate for the workers at Llanwern, and I know that that she will follow closely the upcoming statement from the Secretary of State for Business and Trade.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Today the Government are expected to unveil details of their steel plan for south Wales. From what has been briefed to the press, it seems that the new deal is, at its core, the same deal—worth hundreds of millions of pounds—that was agreed by the last Conservative Government. At the time, the Secretary of State and the Welsh Labour party appeared to rubbish the deal, and suggested that a better one was possible. Does she now regret the Labour party's previous criticism of the deal?

Jo Stevens: I do not recognise that characterisation of the deal on which the Business Secretary will make a statement later. He will make that statement to the House—I do not want to pre-empt it, because we are a party and a Government who will always come to the House first to make major announcements—but I am confident that he will set out a sustainable future for steelmaking in Port Talbot, in Wales and across the UK.

John Lamont: The fact remains that key parts of the deal, as it appears in the press, appear to be largely unchanged from what was agreed before, including almost £100 million to help steelworkers who might lose their jobs. In its negotiations with the last Government, Tata Steel was crystal clear that no other deal was possible. Moving forward, it is crucial that funding to help retrain those who will lose their jobs reaches them swiftly, so will the Secretary of State lay out the detail of how and when the money will be sent to those impacted?

Jo Stevens: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my previous answer. We had the transition board in place for nearly 10 months under the last Government and not a single penny went out the door to businesses or workers affected. Within weeks of my taking over chairmanship of the transition board, £13.5 million has been released to help supply chain businesses and workers. That is the first tranche, with further funds to come.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): I welcome the Front Benchers to their places. They will know that the steel industry in Wales is just one of a number that have suffered in recent decades. Last year, the Industrial Communities Alliance said that tackling the effects of deindustrialisation in Wales has been hampered by competitive bidding, which forces local authorities in deprived areas to bid against each other, preventing partnership working and a more strategic approach. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether future rounds of the UK shared prosperity fund allocated to Wales will no longer be subject to competitive bidding?

Jo Stevens: This Government were elected on a manifesto that stressed a partnership approach with local authorities and an intention to stabilise the funding system, moving away from wasteful competition. Those are the principles we will seek to apply as we think about the future of local growth funding. As with all Government decisions regarding funding beyond March 2025, it is ultimately a matter for the spending review.

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

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): Under the previous Government, the transition board met six times and formed two sub-committees, but did not distribute a single penny of the funding that was promised to support businesses and workers in south Wales. Will the Secretary of State provide an assessment of how the transition board has changed under her leadership?

Jo Stevens: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her election as Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, and I look forward to engaging with her and her colleagues as they take on their important work.

As I set out, we have released £13.5 million as the first tranche of funding from the transition board. That has changed the situation radically from discussion to delivery. That is what we promised; that is what we have delivered.

Cross-border Train Services

3. **Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): Whether she has had recent discussions with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Welsh Government on steps to improve cross-border train services. [900308]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): Last week, I met the Transport Secretary to discuss rail infrastructure and steps to improve cross-border connectivity. I also joined the Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary, Ken Skates, to announce the joint Network Rail and Transport for Wales programme that will increase rail capacity by 40%, with 50% more timetabled services on the north Wales main line.

Shaun Davies: It a real delight to see my right hon. Friend in her place.

The train line from Aberystwyth to Birmingham International via Telford is critical to the university, and to the economies and connectivity of mid Wales, Telford and wider Shropshire. What conversations has my right hon. Friend had with the Welsh Government, Transport for Wales and the Department for Transport about improving that line and the rolling stock?

Jo Stevens: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Cambrian line provides an important connection to and from Aberystwyth University, and it plays a key role in supporting cross-border connectivity for the people of mid-Wales and beyond. In recent years, Network Rail has undertaken work to improve infrastructure on the Cambrian line to support the introduction of new trains. Enhancements to the railway in Wales that deliver passenger benefits, including proposed electrification, are being considered by the Wales Rail Board.

Mr Speaker: I call Liz Saville Roberts.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Llefarydd. I am sure the Secretary of State will join me in sending every sympathy to the friends and family of the late, great singer and comedian Dewi Pws.

On-the-day cancellations on the north Wales to London lines stood at 15.4% in August. We consistently have the highest on-the-day cancellation rates for the entire Avanti network, three to four times higher than the next worst part of the network. How will the Secretary of State use her role to stop Avanti punishing Welsh travellers?

Jo Stevens: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question, and concur with her remarks. The Government are clear that the performance of Avanti West Coast has not been good enough. Many times in this Chamber, we have heard about the appalling service—too many cancellations and too many delays. This Government have required Avanti West Coast to improve its performance on services, and I discussed this matter with the Transport Secretary last week. Ministers and officials are holding regular performance reviews with Avanti West Coast and Network Rail to hold them to account, closely monitoring compliance with contractual obligations and driving improvements using the contractual mechanisms.

Liz Saville Roberts: Sadly, it seems that between the Welsh Government and Labour in government here in the UK, that service in north Wales is not a priority—we see that in the rate of on-the-day cancellations. The truth is that the railways are broken, and Labour's plan fails to address the chronic underfunding that is the cause, particularly in Wales. In 2022, the Secretary of State—then shadow Secretary of State—said that it was “utterly illogical” to designate HS2 as an England and Wales project, and called on the Conservatives to “cough up” the billions owed to Wales. Will she cough up now?

Jo Stevens: We cannot go back in time and change the way that project was commissioned, managed and classified by the previous Conservative Government. They need to accept responsibility for the chaos, delay and waste on their watch. What we can do, though, is work closely with our Senedd and local authority colleagues to develop and invest in transport projects that improve services for passengers right across Wales.

Transport Infrastructure

4. **Matthew Patrick** (Wirral West) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help improve transport infrastructure in Wales. [900309]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): I was pleased to meet with the Transport Secretary last week to discuss our approach to rail in Wales. She is reviewing the previous Government's transport infrastructure commitments and will report in the autumn. We will deliver rail improvements that will make the services more accountable to the people who use them through the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill, which completed its Commons stages last week, and Great British Railways, which was launched in shadow form earlier this month.

Matthew Patrick: It is great to see my right hon. Friend in her place. Connections between my constituency of Wirral West and north Wales are many, they are deep, and they are valued on both sides of the border. Sadly, though, our transport connections are lagging behind. Could she please set out what conversations she is having with Ministers and stakeholders to improve those connections?

Jo Stevens: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House and congratulate him on his election.

In my meeting with the Transport Secretary last week, we discussed a range of issues, including connections between Wales and Merseyside. I recognise the importance of cross-border travel for people across the region. The UK and Welsh Governments are committed to strengthening those connections, which are vital to unlocking economic growth and employment opportunities for people and businesses. I know that rail enhancements are required to improve services on the Wrexham to Bidston line, and will work across Government to drive progress.

Economic Growth

6. **Torsten Bell** (Swansea West) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting economic growth in Wales. [900311]

10. **Claire Hughes** (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting economic growth in Wales. [900315]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dame Nia Griffith): This Government's No. 1 mission is to kick-start economic growth across the United Kingdom. Wales can be at the forefront of that mission, with renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, our vibrant creative sector, fintech and the life sciences each offering huge opportunities to create jobs and drive growth.

Torsten Bell: I thank the Minister for her answer and congratulate her on her appointment. Welsh universities are central to economic growth in many of our communities, but these are difficult times: Swansea University has already seen 200 voluntary redundancies, and many more are happening across Wales. Our universities are affected by decisions of the Welsh Government as well as those of the UK Government, so can the Minister update the House on how the two Governments will work together to nurture those crucial institutions?

Dame Nia Griffith: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place, and am very sorry to hear about the recent redundancies at Swansea University. Only last week, the Secretary of State and I met with Professor Paul Boyle, vice-chancellor of Swansea University and chair of Universities Wales, to discuss the challenges facing Welsh institutions and ways of supporting the higher education sector in Wales. We recognise that Welsh universities, including Swansea, have a huge contribution to make, both to our mission of growth in the economy and within their local regions. Colleagues at all levels in the UK and Welsh Governments are working closely together to safeguard those universities' potential amid the difficult economic circumstances we have inherited.

Claire Hughes: As has already been said, passengers on the north Wales coast are being let down by the poor performance of Avanti. This issue is affecting passengers and businesses, and hampering economic growth in my constituency of Bangor Aberconwy. What specific discussions has the Secretary of State had with our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport on this issue?

Dame Nia Griffith: I welcome my hon. Friend to her place. As she quite rightly says, transport plays an essential role in driving economic growth across Wales. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met the Transport Secretary last week to discuss rail connectivity, including the performance of Avanti. As the Secretary of State has set out, the Government are clear that the performance of Avanti has not been good enough, with too many cancellations and delays. So Ministers and officials are now holding regular performance reviews with Avanti and Network Rail, and monitoring Avanti West Coast compliance with its contractual obligations, with the aim of securing better services for her constituents.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): One of the biggest contributions to economic growth is the agrifood sector. With today being Back British Farming Day, does the Minister agree that farmers, whether they be in Wales or Northern Ireland, need the support of this Government to ensure they reach their full potential to contribute to economic growth?

Dame Nia Griffith: As the hon. Member quite rightly says, farmers make a huge contribution both to the economic growth of this country and to our food security. That is why we are absolutely determined to work hand in hand with the Welsh Government to ensure that we can offer the very best to our Welsh farmers.

Nuclear Power Plant: Wylfa

8. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): What the Government's policy is on the proposed nuclear power plant at Wylfa. [900313]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dame Nia Griffith): Nuclear energy can play an important role in helping to achieve energy security and clean power, while providing thousands of skilled jobs. Great British Nuclear has acquired the Wylfa site with a view to developing a new nuclear project. Decisions on the project and the technologies to be deployed at Wylfa will be made in due course.

Sir Ashley Fox: The last Government announced the biggest expansion in nuclear power for 70 years, including the commissioning of Hinkley Point C in Somerset. Does the Minister agree that a new nuclear power plant at Wylfa is vital to the UK's energy security, and can she give a timeline for its development?

Dame Nia Griffith: As a previously designated nuclear site that has hosted nuclear power, Wylfa is ideally placed either to be used for large-scale nuclear, or to be used for a series of small modular reactors. We will be setting out our plans for the site in due course.

Rural Digital Infrastructure

11. **David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve digital infrastructure in rural Wales. [900316]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dame Nia Griffith): This Government are committed to improving digital connectivity, as demonstrated by our commitment to full gigabit and national 5G coverage by 2030. I have recently met internet and mobile providers as well as Ofcom. The hon. Member will be aware that, thanks to the UK Government's shared rural network, 4G connectivity has been boosted in his constituency as a result of the activation last month of two additional masts.

David Chadwick: Many of my constituents living in areas such as Llanwrthwl and Llanafan Fawr have been missed out by previous roll-out schemes. Are the Government committed to ensuring that funding is available to ensure that people living in so-called hard-to-reach areas can be connected?

Dame Nia Griffith: I very much appreciate the concern that the hon. Member has for his constituents, particularly in a rural area that has so many challenges for connectivity. I can tell him that over 90% of premises in his constituency can access superfast broadband speeds. To extend gigabit-capable coverage further, approximately 3,000 premises in his constituency are currently expected to receive gigabit-capable connection through the Project Gigabit cross regional procurement framework. Alongside this, there are 21 voucher projects across the constituency,

which will cover approximately 5,000 premises. However, if he has any concerns, perhaps he could come and see me on the matter.

NHS Waiting Lists

13. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Welsh Government on NHS waiting lists. [900318]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): We recognise that the NHS in Wales faces unique challenges, and we are committed to working closely with the Welsh Government to improve NHS waiting times. Our approach is grounded in the belief that public services, such as healthcare, should not just be fit for purpose today, but be robust and resilient for the future.

Jerome Mayhew: Treating cancer early is critical for survival rates. In England, the target is to have 85% of patients treated within 62 days. In Wales, that target is more generous; it is just 75%, yet it has never been achieved. The current rate is an appalling 56.7%, much worse than the equivalent figure in England. Why is it that Welsh Labour is underperforming England? Is it really still the blueprint for Government?

Jo Stevens: More people in Wales have been told that they do not have cancer than ever before, and that is good news. Performance increased against the 62-day target for treatment in June compared with the previous month, and over the past two years, the number of patients waiting longer than two years has reduced. Average waits for treatment remain steady.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900402] **Torsten Bell** (Swansea West) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 11 September.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): This weekend we remembered the late Queen and her enduring legacy of service and devotion to our country, and I was proud to announce a new national monument located at St James's Park to honour her memory. I know that the whole House will join me in sending our best wishes to the Princess of Wales as she completes her treatment.

This afternoon we will introduce the Renters' Rights Bill. After years of inaction, this Government will oversee the biggest levelling up of renters' rights in a generation, and I urge the whole House to get behind it. Later this week, I will visit Washington to meet President Biden for a strategic discussion on foreign policy.

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

Torsten Bell: Back in the 1990s, the Conservatives claimed that the minimum wage would cost 1 million jobs. Instead, low earners have seen the fastest pay rises year after year, with no effect on employment—[*Interruption.*] They opposed it. Today, and on their watch, 1 million workers are on zero-hours contracts

and more than 1 million people have no sick pay whatsoever, facing risks that nobody in this House would bear. The details matter, but it is outdated nonsense—

Mr Speaker: Order. Please sit down. One, it is easier if you face me—I can hear it better. The second part is that it is meant to be a question, not a statement. *[Interruption.]* No, I decide. I call the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Economic growth is our No. 1 mission, and that is why we forged a new, positive relationship with business, but too many people are insecure at work, and that holds them back and holds our economy back. This Government were elected to deliver for working people, and that is exactly what we will do.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in his words about Her late Majesty the Queen and in his words about the Princess of Wales. She has been in the thoughts of everyone across the country, and I know that everyone in the House will be delighted and relieved at the progress she has made.

May I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to Nicholas Howard? This is his last Prime Minister's questions after supporting eight consecutive Prime Ministers through these sessions. It was never my favourite part of the week, but his commendable service made it far more manageable.

Yesterday, Labour MPs voted to remove the winter fuel payment from more than 10 million British pensioners, including those with just £13,000 of income. With that decision debated and made, it is now important that the House understands the full consequences of the Government's choice. May I specifically ask the Prime Minister this: will he now publish the impact assessment before the House rises?

The Prime Minister: The fact of the matter is this: the Conservatives left a £22 billion black hole, and they hid it from the Office for Budget Responsibility. Richard Hughes is absolutely clear that it is the "largest year-ahead" overspend outside the pandemic. Of course, when it comes to mitigations and impacts, we have put those in place, ramping up pension credit, dealing with housing benefit and linking it—something that the party opposite did not do for years. Because of the tough decisions that we are making to stabilise the economy, we can make sure that, through the triple lock, increases in pensions will outstrip any loss of payment. But before the right hon. Gentleman complains about us clearing up his mess, perhaps he would like to apologise for the £22 billion black hole.

Rishi Sunak: This has—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the question.

Rishi Sunak: When I was in government, I delivered record increases in the state pension. We protected the winter fuel payment, and we gave pensioners cost of living benefits. The Prime Minister is the one who is taking money away from pensioners on £13,000. This has got nothing to do with the public finances. Just this

morning, his own Chancellor—his MPs may not have been listening to her—admitted that she would prefer it if this policy did not even raise any money. Obviously, the Government would not have made this decision without an impact analysis. Yesterday, the Energy Minister confirmed that. So I ask very simply again: why will he not publish the assessment now?

The Prime Minister: I remember the days when the Conservative party was concerned about balancing the books. It has left a £22 billion black hole; responsibility for this decision lies there. The only way we can rebuild our country, invest in our public services and make sure that everyone is better off is if we clear up that mess and deal with the £22 billion black hole.

Last week, we learned that the shadow Housing Secretary was calling for means-testing of winter fuel payments, and now it turns out that the shadow Paymaster General agrees with her and even boasted about texting his own mother saying that she did not need the payment. Until the right hon. Gentleman apologises for the mess that the Conservatives have created, he is in no position to criticise the action that we are taking.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Rishi Sunak: They are shouting now, but those arguments did not even convince 50 of the Prime Minister's own MPs, who suddenly found yesterday that they had urgent business elsewhere. We know why the Prime Minister is hiding the impact assessment: the Labour party's own previous analysis claimed that this policy could cause 3,850 deaths. Are the numbers in his impact assessment higher or lower than that?

The Prime Minister: We are taking this decision to stabilise the economy. That means that we can commit to the triple lock. By committing to the triple lock, we can make sure that payments of state pension are higher, and therefore there is more money in the pockets of pensioners, notwithstanding the tough action that we need to take.

The right hon. Gentleman goes around pretending that everything is fine. That is the argument that he tried in the election, and that is why he is sitting on the Opposition side and we are sitting on the Government side.

Rishi Sunak: Pensioners watching today will have seen that the Prime Minister has repeatedly refused to admit or to publish the consequences of his decision. We will continue holding him to account for that.

Changing topics, today is Back British Farming Day, when we recognise that British farmers produce food that is of higher quality and has higher welfare standards and higher environmental standards than imported food. At a time of increasing global volatility, it is also crucial for our food security and national security. Will the Prime Minister therefore confirm whether he will be adopting the National Farmers Union's recent proposal to enshrine a national food security target in law?

The Prime Minister: Food security is really important; I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman raised that. We have talked to the NFU about it. Rural issues are really important—that is what we fought the election on and

why we have a lot of rural constituency Members sitting behind me now. We will continue to talk to the NFU. We take food security very seriously.

Rishi Sunak: I am not sure I heard a specific answer, but farmers also do great work to preserve the beauty of the British countryside—something I am sure the Prime Minister will appreciate, given his new-found preference for landscapes over political portraiture. When it comes to land use, protections are currently in place to ensure that the most productive farmland is used for food production rather than alternatives like solar. Does he agree that it is not appropriate or right that developers with a vested interest grade the quality of that farmland themselves? Will he look at making that process independent?

The Prime Minister: Rural communities were neglected under the last Government. Confidence was at an all-time low, and thousands of food and farming businesses are being forced out of business. Of course, we will work with them and get the balance right but, again, we are picking up and clearing up the mess, and rebuilding our country.

Rishi Sunak: As a glimpse, in Wales, the Labour Government hammered farmers, hitting them with top-down eco-targets. Labour's own assessment of those plans said that it would lead to thousands of job losses, less food security and would destroy rural incomes, while farmers described it as bleak and damaging. Will the Prime Minister reassure English farmers that he will not threaten their livelihoods, and will he rule out imposing those same top-down targets here?

The Prime Minister: We will work with farmers across the whole of the United Kingdom, as we have made clear, to support them. But here we are, and it is absolutely clear: no contrition and no responsibility for the economic black hole, the broken NHS or the prison crisis—the ruinous legacy of 14 years of failure. We have started rebuilding the country: renters' reform, house building, GB Energy, the national wealth fund and the border security command—I could go on. While the Opposition try to rewrite history, we are getting on with building a better country for the future.

Q4. [900405] **Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join me in paying our respects to Lieutenant Rhodri Leyshon, who tragically passed away last week. My thoughts are with his family and loved ones, and with the HMS Queen Elizabeth crew during this very difficult time.

Housing in Portsmouth is in dire straits, but local residents in Portsmouth North have valid concerns around population density, infrastructure and the environment, so I am glad that this Government are working on delivering affordable housing in the city. Will the Prime Minister ensure that the infrastructure is properly considered, and that communities are involved in the planning process for any new developments?

The Prime Minister: Let me start by saying that I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending condolences to the family of Lieutenant Leyshon.

I agree on the desperate need for affordable housing, which is why we will deliver the biggest social and affordable housing uplift in a generation. We will get Britain building again—1.5 million houses—because the dream of home ownership was snuffed out under the last Government.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself and my party with the earlier comments from the Prime Minister about our amazing late Queen, and join him in sending our best wishes to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. I do not think anyone could not have been moved by her powerful video, and we hope that she will make a full and speedy recovery. When it comes to fighting cancer, we know all too well that every day counts. In the last year of the last Government, over 100,000 patients waited more than two months just to start their urgent cancer treatment—the worst on record. Will the Prime Minister help boost cancer survival rates by guaranteeing that every patient can start their cancer treatment within 62 days?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question on a really important issue. A report by Lord Darzi will be out tomorrow, which will set out in stark terms the failure in cancer treatment under the last Government, which is a really serious issue. This timeline matters, which is why we are taking steps straight away to ensure that we comply with it, because lives depend on it. We have already taken the decision to put in more scanners and to use technology to catch this earlier. It is a very serious issue, and a very serious failure by the last Government.

Ed Davey: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer. I will look at the plans the Government are putting forward.

Last night, Liberal Democrats voted against withdrawing winter fuel payments. We believe it is just wrong to balance the books by removing this support from pensioners, but we do understand that there are difficult choices to be made to clear up the appalling financial mess left by the last Conservative Government. One of the many reasons for that mess was the Conservatives prioritising tax cuts for the big banks, costing £4 billion a year. Will the Prime Minister instead reverse those cuts, so we can afford to support millions of struggling pensioners through this very hard winter?

The Prime Minister: I will resist the temptation to get ahead of the Budget. What is important is that we recognise there is a £22 billion black hole that has been left by the previous Government. *[Interruption.]* Their practice was to ignore it and kick it into the long grass. We are taking the tough decisions, because I am absolutely convinced that that is the only way we can start rebuilding our country, investing in our public services and making sure that everybody is better off.

Q7. [900408] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): My Southport constituency has experienced a difficult summer. First, I want to reiterate that our thoughts are with the families of Alice, Bebe and Elsie, who tragically lost their lives in the attack in July. I welcomed the Prime

Minister and the Home Secretary to our town in the weeks that followed and we worked together to find further ways to bring our community together. May I therefore ask the Prime Minister to take this opportunity to recommit to the Government's support for our town, for those grieving and affected by the tragic attack?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We stand with those who tragically lost their loved ones in this heinous attack. I did go up to Southport the day after, and went back three days after that on a private visit, to meet some of the first responders who had been at the scene, simply to say thank you to them. I cannot tell the House how angry I was when I got back to London and saw that those same officers who had responded were having things thrown at them by far-right thugs.

We will work tirelessly to support my hon. Friend's constituents. I thank him, as well, for his hard work at this difficult time, working with Sefton borough council and Liverpool city region combined authority to deliver a support package. The community has endured a horrendous event and should be supported, and I know it will be across the whole House.

Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform): Yesterday, we witnessed some extraordinary celebratory scenes outside Britain's prisons, where in some cases serious career criminals were released. That was to make way for—yes—rioters, but equally those who have said unpleasant things on Facebook and elsewhere on social media. Does the Prime Minister understand that there is a growing feeling of anger in this country that we are living through two-tier policing and a two-tier justice system?

The Prime Minister: I am angry to be put in the position of having to release people who should be in prison because the last Government broke the prison system. The last Prime Minister was repeatedly warned—he had his own release scheme—that he had to adopt the scheme that we have put in place. The former Justice Secretary said that if they did not do it, they would have to get down on their knees and pray. Police chiefs made it absolutely clear, in a letter to the last Prime Minister before the election, that he needed to take action, saying that they would not be able to discharge their duties and that the risk was a loss of the ability to detain suspects. That means an inability to arrest people committing offences—that is how bad it was. They warned him that further delays until after the general election would increase the risks significantly. What did he do? He delayed and increased the risks.

Q8. [900409] Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I welcome the Government's swift action to bring railways back into public ownership. Great British Railways will deliver much-needed reform, ensuring that the network serves both passengers and rail freight effectively. Will the Prime Minister explain how Labour's ambitious railway plan will also deliver improvements to rail infrastructure to ensure that my constituents get the service they deserve at Luton station?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. One of the first Bills we introduced was to reform our railways after 14 years of chaos. Great British Railways will unite track and train

under a single leadership. That means closer collaboration across the industry and faster, more effective decisions on critical infrastructure, and I know how vital that will be in relation to both Luton and Leagrave stations in her constituency. We are carefully considering the best approach, but I assure her we are committed to ensuring that our railways will be open to everyone.

Q2. [900403] Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Today is Back British Farming Day. The previous Government let our farmers down and, in their incompetence, underspent the farming budget by £100 million. Will the Prime Minister deny rumours that his Government plan to take advantage of the Conservatives' failure by removing that £100 million permanently? Farmers across the country want to know that the Prime Minister will increase the agriculture budget, as the Lib Dem manifesto proposed, speed up the roll-out of the new environmental land management schemes, and support profitable, sustainable and nature-friendly farming.

The Prime Minister: This is a really important issue; our rural communities were neglected by the previous Government, which is why confidence is at an all-time low. We will protect farmers from being undercut in trade deals, make the supply chain work more fairly, and prevent shock rises in bills by switching to GB Energy. We will not pre-empt the Budget in relation to this matter, but we will put the support in place.

Q9. [900410] Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): Many of my constituents, including those at Chapel Gate, have told me about the so-called management agents, who charge them rip-off service fees and then fail to provide even the most basic of maintenance. Many constituents spend hours each week battling these agents, just to ensure that they and their neighbours are not fleeced in their own homes. Will the Prime Minister recommit this Government to acting—where the previous Government failed—to reform the leasehold system, which is archaic, outdated and feudal?

The Prime Minister: May I first welcome the first-ever Labour MP for Basingstoke? Yes, we will reiterate our commitment to act to bring the feudal leasehold system to an end and ensure that leaseholders can benefit from more rights, power and protections over their homes.

Q3. [900404] Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): International law is clear: dropping 2,000 lb bombs on densely populated civilian areas is a crime. It is beyond dispute that Israel has used F-35s to do exactly that, yet this Government have chosen to exempt F-35 components from the arms licence suspension, when all they had to do was say that Israel could not be the end user if UK-manufactured parts were included. Last week, the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and said,

"we either comply with international law or we do not."—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 303.]

Why has he chosen not to?

The Prime Minister: We are complying with international law. We have set out our reasoning, and I think all fair-minded Members of the House would support the decision that we have taken. The most important thing now is that we get a ceasefire in place—that is one of the

topics that I will be discussing on Friday—to ensure that the remaining hostages can come out, the desperately needed aid can go in, and we can start the process to a two-state solution, which is the only way to lasting peace.

Q11. [900412] Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): As the Prime Minister will know, Fife has a proud defence heritage, and that continues in my constituency of Dunfermline and Dollar with the dockyard at Rosyth, which constructs Type 31 frigates for the Royal Navy, and a supply chain of local small and medium-sized enterprises. Will the Prime Minister ensure that the strategic defence and security review team visit areas of strategic importance, such as Fife, so that they can engage fully with the local supply chain and ensure that the SDSR supports Britain's security and local economies?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for championing his constituency, including the work at Rosyth dockyard. The strategic defence review will ensure that defence is central both to security and to economic growth and prosperity. The review will consult widely, including across the devolved nations, and I know that the reviewers recognise the strategic importance of constituencies like his. I will ensure that he gets the chance to meet the relevant Minister to discuss the particular issues in his constituency.

Q6. [900407] Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): The previous Conservative Government committed themselves to rebuilding Whipps Cross hospital and Princess Alexandra hospital in Harlow, and to the establishment of a new community—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am determined to hear this question. I do not expect Members on the Front Bench to be shouting me down, and it will not happen.

Dr Hudson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The previous Conservative Government—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Do you want to join in again?

Dr Hudson: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The previous Conservative Government committed themselves to rebuilding Whipps Cross hospital and Princess Alexandra hospital in Harlow, and to the establishment of a new community diagnostic centre at St Margaret's hospital in Epping. Will the new Labour Government honour those commitments in full and make progress with those projects, which are vital to improving the health services needed by my constituents? If it helps the Prime Minister at all with his answer, I can tell him that those services will also help some of the constituents of his Health Secretary, just next door in Ilford North.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to champion the hospitals in his constituency. The problem with what the last Government promised was this: they promised 40 new hospitals, but there were not 40, they were not new, and many of them were not hospitals. We need to review what we can do and put it on a sustainable, deliverable basis, but we will do that, and the hon. Gentleman is right to champion those in his constituency.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): Last week, I met my constituent Cheryl Korbel, the mother of Olivia Pratt-Korbel, the nine-year-old who was tragically murdered in 2022. Cheryl is campaigning for Olivia's law, which would compel convicted criminals to attend court to face the judge and receive their sentence. Will my right hon. and learned Friend commit himself to supporting Olivia's law, and will he meet Cheryl to discuss how we can move this forward without delay?

The Prime Minister: In the King's Speech, we confirmed that we intended to introduce legislation in this Session so that courts would have the power to order the most serious offenders to attend their sentencing hearings. This is really important, and I know that that is felt across the House, because to deprive victims and their families of seeing the sentencing exercise is to deprive them of justice. I will meet Cheryl; indeed, I have already met Cheryl, and I gave her a commitment last August that we would do this. I repeat that commitment today, and I pay tribute to the campaign that she has led.

Q10. [900411] Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): If the Prime Minister were a pensioner earning £11,350 this year and receiving no winter fuel payment, what would he prioritise this Christmas—heating or eating?

The Prime Minister: We have to be clear about why this decision is being made: there is a £22 billion black hole. The last Government would walk past these tough decisions and pretend they were not there—they would kick them into the long grass—but we are not prepared to do that. Because we are taking tough decisions, we can commit ourselves to the triple lock, and that means that the state pension will increase by more than any loss of the winter fuel payment. But I will just say this: the biggest impact on pensioners in recent years was when the Conservative Government lost control of inflation and allowed energy prices to go through the roof, and we went through a cost of living crisis. We are stabilising the economy to make sure that pensioners never, ever have to live through that again.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): Annabel is five years old and lives in my constituency. She has high-risk neuroblastoma. Annabel has endured 15 months of chemotherapy, high-dose chemotherapy, stem cell harvest, proton therapy, immunotherapy, hair loss and nasal feeding. Now she urgently needs the drug DFMO, which is not yet available in the UK. It must be administered within 90 days of the end of immunotherapy; 91 days is too late. Will the Prime Minister please meet Annabel's parents to discuss the lifesaving care that she needs?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to Annabel for her incredible bravery. I understand how important it is that cancer patients are able to benefit from rapid access to effective new treatments. The manufacturers of this drug have applied for a UK licence through Project Orbis, which allows the rapid review and approval of new cancer treatments. We will ensure that that process is completed as quickly as possible, and I will also ensure that the Health Minister sets up the meeting that my hon. Friend has asked for.

Q12. [900413] **Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thought that socialism was about taxing those with the broadest shoulders in order to help the most vulnerable, but it appears that Starmer socialism involves scaring those with the broadest shoulders out of the country while taking away the winter fuel allowance for frail 90-year-olds living in draughty homes. Will the Prime Minister apologise to my shivering constituents for his personal choice, and will he reverse this chilling decision?

The Prime Minister: My choice is to stabilise the economy after 14 years of failure, and I will tell the House why: when a Government lose control of the economy, it is working people who pay the price. I will not let that happen under a Labour Government.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): More than half of people with pancreatic cancer die within three months of diagnosis, and seven in 10 never even receive treatment. Every two minutes in the UK, someone is diagnosed with cancer, but for those diagnosed with the least survivable cancer, time has too often already run out. I am really proud of the Labour Government's commitment to our NHS, but will the Prime Minister now commit to reviewing the long-term cancer strategy so that we can improve diagnosis and treatment rates in this country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue; it is the second time it has been raised in this session. I will have a lot more to say tomorrow, when I deal with Lord Darzi's report. I pay tribute to her for her tireless campaigning, particularly in relation to pancreatic cancer. Cancer patients have been failed by the last Government, and have been waiting far too long for diagnosis and treatment. We will get the NHS capturing cancer on time, diagnosing it earlier and treating it faster, so that more patients survive this horrible set of diseases.

Q13. [900414] **Mr Louie French** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Following Labour's disgraceful political decision to scrap winter fuel payments, with little notice to millions of pensioners, will the Prime Minister today rule out scrapping concessionary travel fares and council tax discounts, which also help millions of pensioners across the UK—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows very well, I am not going to pre-empt the Budget. It will all be set out in due course.

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): May I pass on the heartfelt thanks of the Bolton Council of Mosques, which greatly appreciated the dedication and leadership that the Prime Minister showed during the riots over the summer? Does my right hon. Friend agree on the importance of supporting inter-faith and community groups, which play a vital role in bringing people together?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. We owe an incredible debt of gratitude to our police for their courage in dealing with the recent disorder, and we took action to ensure they had the resources and powers that they needed to tackle violence and restore order to our streets. We also provided

additional security for mosques, ensuring freedom of worship and protection from racist threats. In the aftermath, we saw communities who really represent Britain coming forward, led by faith groups and community organisations. They showed unity and demonstrated our values of tolerance and respect.

Q14. [900415] **Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Diolch, Llefarydd. Denmark has been undergrounding its electricity cables since 2008, building infrastructure and maintaining responsible stewardship of the countryside. The Welsh Labour Government's policy is for all new power lines to be placed underground where possible. The UK Labour Government favour overhead pylons. Why are the Prime Minister's Government opposing Welsh colleagues in Wales?

The Prime Minister: We are absolutely committed to the transition to renewable energy, because it gives us energy dependence. It lowers bills and, of course, the next generation of jobs are tied up with it. We have to do it in a cost-effective way, but we will make those decisions in a cost-effective way.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The UK steel industry needs a serious Government who work in partnership with both businesses and trade unions to secure a transition that is right for the workforce and delivers economic growth in Wales. We know that deindustrialisation can be devastating for communities, so can the Prime Minister tell me how the Government are safeguarding jobs and securing the future of steelmaking communities like ours for generations to come?

The Prime Minister: We are taking every step we can in relation to the steel industry because it is vital that we give it the support that it needs. We need steel in this country. We need steel made in this country, and our plans and our missions mean that we are going to need more steel, not less. It is the duty of the Government to ensure that jobs, communities and people are not ignored in the transition and that jobs are protected. The Business Secretary will provide an update to the House this afternoon.

Q15. [900416] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Oxfordshire has seen a huge amount of population growth in recent years, without the infrastructure to match. A new railway station on the great western main line between Didcot and Swindon at Grove and Wantage would help to reduce traffic and improve access to both Oxford and London. Does the Prime Minister support investment in our railways, and will he meet me to hear the case for a new railway station at Grove and Wantage?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this issue, which is important for his constituents. We are committed to putting passengers at the heart of our railways. Great British Railways will work closely with regional government mayors, operators and passenger groups to ensure that rail investment meets the needs of communities, and I will ensure that he gets the meeting he wants with the relevant Minister to discuss the issues in his constituency.

Mr Speaker: That completes Prime Minister's questions. I will let the Front Benches clear.

Port Talbot Transition Project

12.37 pm

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the improved deal that this Labour Government have secured for the workers of Tata Steel, specifically as it relates to its plant in Port Talbot. As well as setting out the details of this improved deal, I am also announcing today our ambition for a new UK-wide steel strategy—one that equips our steelmaking industry with the right support not just to adapt but to thrive in the new green economy. But before I do so, I want to address the situation we have inherited.

Since becoming Secretary of State two months ago, I have had to respond to a series of challenges, not just with the steel industry but in shipping—such as at Harland & Wolff—and in other areas where the previous Government had simply ceased to make decisions and decided to leave them for us to deal with. That was a dereliction of duty and it has left the steel industry in particular in an extremely perilous position. The previous Government had been promising a plan for the steel industry for years. With what I am able to announce today—with the signing of a legally binding deal that enables Tata to order its electric arc furnace as part of a significantly improved package—this Government have made more progress in two months than they made over the previous Parliament. But if we had started these negotiations even a year ago—never mind years ago as they had the opportunity to do—I have no doubt that we would have secured an even better deal for the community.

So I start with an apology to the people of Port Talbot, because they were let down by the previous Government. While this deal is much improved, I acknowledge that it falls short of what would be my ideal. I have, however, been to Port Talbot several times and met the workforce there, along with the reps and the generations of families who have literally forged Port Talbot as we know it. That is why, when Tata first announced that it would be closing the blast furnaces, resulting in some 2,800 job losses, I knew that the workforce deserved so much better. I warned my predecessor not to proceed with what they had negotiated. Why? Because I was confident that the Government could secure a better deal: a better deal for Tata's workers and a better deal for the people of Port Talbot. And I am able to announce today that this Government have secured that better deal, but I reiterate that if we had had the opportunity that the previous Government had over so many years we could have done more.

The key features are as follows. First, we have agreed a process with Tata to assess investment opportunities for new, additional capabilities that will deliver more secure, long-term jobs than the deal we inherited. This is on top of the plans for the instalment of the electric arc furnace. We have agreed a process with Tata to take this forward, and I will report back to the House on that progress. But this is the most important element, so I am announcing the deal now, rather than after the process is complete, because for Tata to secure the build slot for the electric arc furnace, that element needs to be sorted now. Further delays would put the whole project at risk and could lead to a much worse outcome.

Secondly, in every conversation I have had with Tata's directors, I have stressed the need to avoid compulsory redundancies wherever possible. I have asked them to channel their efforts instead into job matching and retraining so that the steelworkers of Port Talbot, who have dedicated so much to the industry in the past, can now help shape its future as they will be able to transition and move within the business. As well as that, Tata is agreeing to offer a comprehensive training programme for any employee as an alternative for those at risk of compulsory redundancy. This would be on full pay for one month, then £27,000 a year per employee for 11 months. Tata will fund all those costs. Employees will be able to choose from recognised qualifications to develop sought-after skills that will be in high demand in the local economy now and long into the future. We know, too, that Tata expects that during the construction of the electric arc furnace at least 500 new jobs could be created, which will tap into the local labour market wherever possible.

Thirdly, where we cannot secure new jobs or training, working closely with the unions we have helped to secure improved terms on redundancies. Tata's employees are now able to express an interest in the most generous voluntary redundancy package the company has ever offered for a restructuring of this size. Employees will now be paid 2.8 weeks of earnings for each year of service up to a maximum of 25 years. At the same time, we are ensuring that there is a minimum redundancy payment—£15,000 pro rata—and a retention payment of £5,000 for employees leaving the business because of these closures. Over 2,000 members of staff have expressed an interest in voluntary redundancy who will be eligible on these terms.

Fourthly, as part of the deal the company will also be releasing 385 acres of its site for sale or transfer. This is valuable real estate which will help bring in more companies and more employers not just from the steel sector but from a whole host of other industries too, helping to diversify the workforce at Port Talbot.

While Conservative Members told us that there was no alternative to the original proposal, we knew that there was, and we have bargained hard for it. And we are putting in watertight conditions within our grant funding agreement for job guarantees to claw back investment if these jobs do not materialise. For example, there is now an improved grant repayment of £40,000 for every job that is not retained post transformation. This money will be repaid directly to the Government and is a powerful incentive for Tata to deliver the 5,000 UK jobs target.

But our ambition for steel is so much bigger and broader than one single company: it is about the whole sector. The UK has always been a proud steelmaking nation, with a rich heritage stretching back to the industrial revolution. From cars to cranes to ships and scaffolding, British steel has been, and is still, used the world over, embodying our industrial might and innovation. Yet for years steel has been a neglected industry in this country. Crude steel production has declined by more than 50% in the last 10 years. Indeed, some proclaimed the industry's decline would be inevitable in the 21st century—that it was somehow a sunset industry—but those people are wrong: we on this side of the House have never believed that decline is inevitable and while the industry faces challenges today we want to do everything we can to ensure that it can adapt and grow tomorrow.

[Jonathan Reynolds]

That is why I am pleased to announce that we will introduce our new steel strategy. As hon. Members know, our manifesto included plans to make available £2.5 billion for steel, on top of the £500 million transformation of Port Talbot. Our intention is to increase our UK capabilities, something the previous Government never attempted, so that we can create a more vibrant and competitive steel sector in the UK.

As part of our steel strategy, this Government will look seriously at options to improve steel capabilities across the supply chain, including in primary steelmaking. We are clear that we cannot prioritise short-term subsidies over long-term jobs, which is why, with the help of independent experts, we will review the viability of technologies for production of primary steel, possibly including direct reduced iron.

Steel is essential to delivering on our net zero goals and building the next generation of green infrastructure, and I know that Labour Members are passionate about that. That is why, under our steel strategy, we intend to use the Procurement Act 2023 to drive economic growth and account for social value in the things that the Government buy and the projects we commission. Work is already under way to increase the role of steel as we build our manufacturing base.

We recognise that, for far too long, Britain's energy-intensive industries, including the steel sector, have been held back by high electricity costs. More often than not, this has made the UK less attractive to international investors, but we will take action on that. Our clean energy mission will ensure that we are no longer exposed to the kinds of gas price shocks that we have seen in recent years, and that will help British businesses to compete and win in the global market. In support of that ambition, we are working with like-minded nations to tackle global trade distortions, including through our chairing of the global forum on steel excess capacity this year.

Our steel strategy will be developed and delivered in partnership with the steel sector and trade unions, and it will work in lockstep with the Government's industrial strategy, which will set out our ambition to ramp up investment, strengthen our supply chains and create more well-paid jobs in the places where they are needed most. In order to drive forward our partnership on the steel strategy, I will shortly meet industry experts and interested parties for discussion on the industry's future. We intend to publish the steel strategy in the spring of next year.

The Government care about steel and the communities it supports, and recognise steel's fundamental importance to the economy. Supporting steel in this country is about being involved in the detail and shepherding individual plants into the future while protecting the people in them, but it is also about providing a direction of travel, an inspiration for investment and a cause for confidence, so that the sector can play its part in the next 10 years and beyond.

We are not naive about the scale of the challenge before us. Although the situation is still challenging, this is a better deal for Port Talbot than was on the table, and it is the maximum improvement we could make in two months. It represents a better destination

and a better transition to the bright future that steel will have under this Government. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

12.47 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement. I wish I could say that I am surprised by any of its content, but the media and the press have, of course, been relentlessly briefed on it over the last couple of days.

It is also no surprise that, once again, Labour is presiding over the demise of our steel sector. Output fell by 47% under the last Labour Government, and 56% of jobs were lost. Today's deal means that 100% of output will go at Port Talbot. An electric arc furnace will take five years at best to get up and running; some suggest that it will be eight to nine years before a single new job is created, if we see any new jobs at all. As the statement says, this is a transition, but it is a heartbreaking transition for thousands of people—a transition from being in work to being out of work. In his discussions with Tata, why did the Secretary of State not take steps to ensure that the blast furnace will not be closed before the new electric arc furnace opens? Is this not the New Labour playbook—scrap jobs, scrap production and become reliant on higher-polluting countries for imports? That is not what I call decarbonisation. I must say, I feel a little sorry for the Secretary of State, who has been dispatched here to announce these spending decisions just a day after Labour's day of shame on winter fuel cuts for pensioners.

In government, the Conservatives provided a grant of £500 million towards the £1.25 billion invested by Tata Steel, one of the largest support packages in the government's history. At the time of the last Government's announcement, that support was expected to save at least 5,000 jobs in the company. We worked with the Welsh Government and Tata Steel to establish a dedicated transition board to support affected employees and the local economy, backed by £100 million in total. Will the Secretary of State provide an update on any of those job projections?

Today's announcement is notable for the absence of any reassurance or plans for the thousands of steelworkers in Scunthorpe who may not have jobs by Christmas. Equally notable is the Government's failure, once again, to provide any detail on the domestic production of virgin steel. The Secretary of State says that we will have a steel strategy in the spring, but thousands of jobs, along with production capacity, have been scrapped today.

It was no surprise that last week, during the urgent question on steel, four times, the Minister for Industry failed to commit to safeguarding the future of virgin steel production in this country. I am sure that the Secretary of State does not need reminding that if he allows the Scunthorpe works to close, too, we will be the only G7 country unable to produce virgin steel. That leaves us open and vulnerable to cheap foreign imports, particularly from China. To his credit, he has always argued against offshoring our steel industry. He conceded once that it would be a "fundamental political mistake". What conversations has he had with the Secretaries of State for Transport and for Defence about the impact of

the Government's new steel policy on our national security and ability to deliver infrastructure? Will he assure the House that he is doing everything in his power to ensure that we do not lose virgin steel manufacturing in the United Kingdom?

For the benefit of new colleagues, the Government, when in opposition, were committed to £28 billion a year of borrowing to fund their decarbonisation plans—a price tag that has magically disappeared, although the target has not. The Secretary of State made promises about that to the steel industry, but where are those promises now? Where is that money? Is he still battling the Chancellor? We know that Labour's unions are quite successful in squeezing money from the Treasury, so maybe he can send them to stand up to the Chancellor if he is having problems.

The Government have our support in ensuring that the future of steelmaking in this country is sustainable. That goes beyond Tata and South Wales. Only in Labour's world can the word "improved" mean fewer jobs and higher-polluting imports. When he returns to the Dispatch Box, I hope the Secretary of State will do better for UK steelmaking.

Jonathan Reynolds: I have been a Member of Parliament for 14 years, in which I have seen some interesting political events, but I do not think I have ever heard a contribution with such brass neck. That is quite something, because there is quite a menu to choose from.

Let me explain what I was doing during polling week, in the lead up to 4 July. Parliament was not sitting, and I was shadow Secretary of State. I was going between key seats, as would be expected, negotiating with unions, Tata, my colleagues in the Welsh Government and every relevant body to prevent action that would have resulted in the entire closure of the Port Talbot works on polling day. It was as though the Government had already gone; they were not on the pitch. The first thing I had to do, before I even became Secretary of State, was ensure that there was something there to save, because it would have gone under the Conservative party. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members really need to listen, because my contributions are factually accurate, and I will help them to understand the real situation.

The point of the new investment is to save jobs. There will be better terms for the people who are unable to get the new jobs, including better cushioning during their retraining for entry into the rest of the economy. I have explained why it is a better deal, as I hope the shadow Minister has seen. He mentioned media reports; they have not come from my Department, but I appreciate that there were lots of interested parties. The unions and the Welsh Labour Government recognise that this is a better deal. I hope that the Conservative party recognises, on taking a step back from the statement, why the deal will make such a difference.

The shadow Minister mentioned virgin steel. Let me talk about my frustration about that. He will understand that the two blast furnace sites, Scunthorpe and Port Talbot, lose a great deal of money every day. The managers are so fed up with the lack of action under the last Government that they have put timescales on their closure. The simple truth is that I do not have the timeframe that was available to the Conservative party. Moreover, when it comes to Scunthorpe, I do not yet have the carbon capture infrastructure in place that will

be necessary for the ideal solution. I would love to be a position to look at the hybrid solution that the shadow Minister put forward—keeping the blast furnaces open while we bring the electric arc furnaces online—but all the time that could have been used to work on that was during the Conservative Government, and they did not do that work. There are therefore far fewer options available to us, and the situation is far more challenging.

Since I became Secretary of State, I have had many meetings with the UK management about Scunthorpe, and have had three meetings, I believe, with Mr Li, the principal shareholder. I also met him when I was shadow Secretary of State. We have been clear that we want a transition in Scunthorpe, and want to put up Government money alongside what the company may offer, but that has to be part of a transition to the future. The workforce and the route that is offered to them has to be part of that.

Even if we are successful in doing that, my frustration is that the options available are very difficult for the area. The solution I would ideally deliver, which could have been delivered by the Conservatives in those 14 long years, is not available. When Conservative Members leave the Chamber today, I hope they reflect on the mistakes they made, their lack of action, the legacy they bequeathed us and, fundamentally, the improvements we have been able to make in such a short time.

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

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I am not yet Chair of the Committee, Mr Speaker, but fingers crossed. I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement. I hope the whole House will recognise that what he has brought us today is not a set of sound bites but a strategy. In the long term, that strategy will benefit from a stronger cross-party consensus, so I hope that it can be the subject of a future Select Committee inquiry.

The Secretary of State puts his finger on the key issue: to safeguard the future of the steel industry, we need to de-risk the demand for steel in this country. What reassurance can he give the House about how we will use procurement and, crucially, the creation of a bigger offshore wind industry in this country to drive demand that will keep the furnaces going at Port Talbot and elsewhere? This country pioneered steelmaking; now we need to reinvent its future.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I say to Members, especially senior Members, that when they speak facing the opposite direction from where I am sitting, I cannot hear what they say? Please, speak towards the Chair. That is how we keep neutrality working as well.

Jonathan Reynolds: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are not just seeking to deliver new, improved transition deals for the key sites, but want to improve the overall business and investor environment for steel in the UK. I believe that can be done. The kind of investments in core capacities that we are thinking about could be very successful in the United Kingdom. Obviously, two months is insufficient for the due diligence that is required on some of the elaborate and considered business cases necessary, but the process is about delivering that. We can turn this into an extremely positive story for UK steel.

Mr Speaker: I call the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrat party.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Steelmaking is of vital strategic importance to the UK. We need it to build the crucial infrastructure necessary to generate sustainable growth and safeguard our national security. The neglect of the steel industry in recent years is just another part of the previous Government's disastrous legacy.

Today's announcement is a welcome sign of change. The steps the Government have outlined to help protect jobs and, crucially, to develop a steel strategy are long overdue. We need to finally move on from a patchwork of last-minute rescues to a long-term plan that will set the industry on a sustainable footing. This is true of the steel industry and across our economy. We desperately need a real industrial strategy that works in tandem with this plan for steel.

Will the Secretary of State assure us that his steel strategy will be fully aligned with a wider industrial strategy, and will take a view on steel's importance to our economy and society as a whole? Will it aim to balance the need for infrastructure, national security and net zero commitments? Will he assure us that he will bring the strategy to this House by spring next year for scrutiny and debate, so that the industry can finally move on with certainty?

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much welcome the hon. Member's words and her recognition of the improvements that we have made with this deal. Fundamentally, we have recognised the need for a better business environment, moving away from relatively short-term responses to that much better, more secure long-term framework. She will understand that the significant increase in investment that this new Government are willing to make can make a substantial difference. However, the emphasis must be on long-term investments for the future, so that we can secure those long-term secure jobs. There are several different ways that we can do that. I absolutely agree that our method should be aligned with the industrial strategy, and we will be able to make some announcements on that in the near future, leading up to the launch of the steel strategy next year.

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

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): That is incredibly gracious of you, Mr Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I think your words were heard across the Chamber.

May I welcome the Secretary of State to his place, and underline the importance of his commitment and the strength of his negotiation? I add my voice to those who talk about the importance of public procurement, but may I draw his attention to the carbon border adjustment mechanism? As I understand it, we have a disadvantage in this area because of how the mechanism was established in the UK. It is due to be introduced on 1 January 2027, which is later than in the EU, clearly disadvantaging our UK producers. Will he update the House on what he plans to do in that area?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and to you, Mr Speaker, for your very skilful introduction. He is right to talk about that wider

business environment, and specifically asks about the carbon border adjustment mechanism. We have inherited this situation of the UK being out of line with the EU. Obviously, because our carbon prices are lower, there is a potential carbon barrier to UK exports to the single market. I can tell him that we are looking at that. The carbon border adjustment mechanism is a key part of a wider policy environment that must deliver decarbonisation, which is not deindustrialisation. We must recognise that the current policy environment is not doing that in the way that any of us would want.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I listened to the statement from the Secretary of State with interest. Will he specifically say, first, when the strategy will be published and brought to this House? Secondly, what level of Government investment will be behind the strategy? Thirdly, what assurances can he give to steelworkers across England—at Port Talbot and Scunthorpe in particular—that their jobs will not be put at risk because of steel being dumped in the UK from China?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for her questions. We will see the strategy in spring next year and the resources behind it, including the existing Government allocation for Port Talbot and the new money that the Government will put in. It is a £3 billion clean steel fund, so it is a significant investment. Obviously, I want a certain amount of return from that. I want to work with private sector partners. The kind of capital expenditure that is involved in the transition to green steel requires very significant partners who can deliver. It is not just a question of the Government doing this alone, and I think hon. Members recognise that. Steel safeguards are important. The right hon. Lady will know that steel is a significant part of the existing Trade Remedies Authority protections, many of which relate to China, but not exclusively so, and we keep them under regular review.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for today's announcement and for reminding us of the role that steel plays in our green transition. He has done more in two months than the Conservatives did in 14 years. Many of my constituents in Monmouthshire, especially in Caldicot and Chepstow, work in the steel supply chain and in steel. Does he recognise that his announcement today has ramifications for the whole of south Wales?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend very much for her question. Let me say again that I wish that we were in a position to do even more, but I can tell hon. Members that this is the maximum improvement that was possible within two months. I know that in constituencies such as my hon. Friend's people are seeking more than anything else a recognition that steel is not a sunset industry. It is vital to the future; it is not the case that it should be in inevitable decline in the UK. Indeed, we are an outlier in terms of the size of our steel industry among comparable G7 and OECD countries. This could be and should be a very positive story, and I am honestly confident that we can deliver that in future.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman mentions procurement, and over countless years we have had statements and new strategies for

steelmaking. Will he set out his plans to secure a long-term order book for steelmaking in this country, so that investors can make sure that they get value for money as well as the taxpayer? Equally, how will he endeavour to use the public purse to purchase British steel, while at the same time encouraging the export of British steel to other parts of the world?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question and very much agree with him. As the shadow Secretary of State, I avidly read the statistics that the Department published about UK content in domestic steel procurement. We must recognise that it is usually relatively high, but only in the sectors where we are producing particular grades of steel. Part of the strategy has to look at future demand, not just for what we already produce, but in terms of gaps and business opportunities. If we are improving the business environment, we need not just to help incumbent producers in the United Kingdom transition, but bring in new entrants, creating more competition in the market. I can see that there is significant demand in the market. It is the market that is driving the demand for green steel. I have no concerns about the future order book; it is the business environment taking advantage of that demand that this strategy needs to address.

Torsten Bell (Swansea West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for all his hard work in recent months. It is clear that the delays in the negotiations have had a very real cost. When I was visiting Port Talbot on Friday, what the workers and the management wanted to know was whether those delays had now come to an end. Can he reassure the House that we will do everything we can to make sure that the construction does now get going on the future of this plant?

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for recently visiting the site to speak to management and the workforce. He is right about the understandable level of concern in the workforce. Obviously, that is often speculated on in the media, and there is a huge amount of interest in it. I made this statement today because of the need to proceed with part of the plan, and not to lose everything entirely. I also wanted to be able to answer questions such as his and to make it clear that the Government's manifesto commitment to the steel transition fund forms part of a wider ambition, a coherent strategy, for the future of steel across every part of the UK.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): The loss of virgin steel production in Wales is a serious economic blunder that will devastate the community of Port Talbot. Unions have previously called for additional investment of £683 million in Port Talbot to save jobs. Meanwhile, Germany has invested €1.3 billion in decarbonising steel in one region alone this year. Can the Secretary of State explain why he will not match the ambition of the workers here and Governments of other countries to save Welsh steel?

Jonathan Reynolds: The levels of ambition and resource that we have as a new Government are actually greater than the figures that the hon. Lady has just given. To do the work that she describes requires a private sector partner. The Government cannot alone meet the capital

expenditure needs. Indeed, to be successful it is better to work with a private sector partner to deliver that. Having a partner to retain virgin steel production is part of what the strategy will be able to address. If I had a partner willing to keep blast furnaces open, I would be very interested in that. However, I do not want to spend this very large sum of money in our clean steel fund on subsidising operating losses for one or two years, which would eat up most of that £3 billion and leave us with nothing at the end of it. I want to co-invest with the private sector for good, secure, long-term jobs, which are much in demand. She is right to say that other European countries have been way ahead of the UK in the past few years, but the level of ambition from this Government not only matches that among some of those European competitors but exceeds it.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the workforce and their unions about this improved deal?

Jonathan Reynolds: The answer is a great many, as my hon. Friend will understand. I have always been conscious not just of the specific impact on the workforce at Port Talbot, but of the fact that some of the big industrial transitions of the past in the United Kingdom, in the north-east of England where I grew up, were not handled well. I think people recognise that. I thought that the previous Government's levelling-up strategy was a recognition of the long-term damage that was done in the late '80s and early '90s by that transition. Getting that right, and showing the workforce that this is a Government who care, have always been paramount. I have been to Port Talbot several times. I last met the community reps a week ago, and was able to have frank conversations with them. In everything that I have said, and will continue to say, I recognise that we wish that we were in a position to do more, but within the parameters of what we had and where we almost were, in terms of the entire loss of the site, I am confident that this is the biggest improvement that was possible in two months. We will always work with them to ensure that we are getting everything that we can for the site.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The wholesale price of electricity in this country is already pretty much the highest in Europe, and it will probably get worse as we shift towards renewables, with the possibility of outages and intermittency. That means that electric arc furnaces will become more expensive. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that suppliers do not, perfectly legitimately, turn to China for its virgin steel, produced in dirty blast furnaces?

Jonathan Reynolds: The right hon. Gentleman will know that this has long been a campaigning issue of mine. I have talked repeatedly about the relationship between decarbonisation and the potential for deindustrialisation, and the policy environment in this country not being fit for purpose to deliver that. On the wholesale electricity prices of energy-intensive industries, for most of the time under the previous Government the UK's prices were wildly uncompetitive. There was some movement, as he knows, with the supercharger policy near the end. More can be done, and there is an even more exciting longer-term position that we could

[Jonathan Reynolds]

get to. He will have to wait for the Budget, and maybe the spending review, for some more detail on that, but this issue has to be an essential priority for the competitiveness of the UK. We have to recognise that a lot of the industries that we will transition to are very heavy users of electricity—not just clean steel, but for instance gigafactories. This will be a key tool in the future that we have to do better on than we have in the past 14 years.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this improved deal. I know how hard he has worked over many years, not just in the short term before and since the election, as he referred to in his answer to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith). On procurement, will there be a presumption in favour of using British-produced steel both in nationally significant projects in green energy and in defence? That would be in stark contrast to what the previous Government did, in particular with the fleet solid support contract.

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for all his support during our years in opposition, when we tackled many of these issues. He asks about procurement. Of course, anything that we do as a Government will be consistent with international trade rules and our commitment to open markets and multilateralism. There is a legitimate way in which social value can be considered in Government procurement. Given the value and quality of what we produce in the UK, I am very confident in procurement playing a bigger part in the future of the steel industry. On defence and the blast furnaces, he will know that neither Scunthorpe nor Port Talbot plays a direct role in some of the key Ministry of Defence contracts. Sheffield Forgemasters plays more of a role in that. There are more capacities and capabilities that we can look to as a country for opportunities in the future.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The truth is—and the country needs to know this—that the thousands of jobs and the loss of the blast furnaces announced today is because of both main parties' obsession with net zero. The reality is that blast furnaces have been losing money because of high energy costs caused by very expensive renewable energy, but we are where we are. In the event that Tata does not build the electric arc furnaces that are being promised, will the Secretary of State guarantee the House that the taxpayers' money will be returned to the taxpayer?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am afraid that the hon. Member is misinformed as to what this is about. The issue is that these sites lose approximately £1 million a day. They have done so for a long time, and the owners are fed up and want to know that there will be a plan for the future. The role of the Government is to make that future better than it would otherwise be were we not on the pitch delivering it. There are issues around the competitive cost of industrial electricity in the UK, but they are not the issues that he says.

On the guarantee that he seeks, he will have heard my statement. The contractual terms of the grant funding arrangement include that clawback capacity, not just

for the overall project but even down to the number of jobs retained. Those are the kind of job guarantees that I want in the public-private relationship going forward.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to introducing a new steel strategy. Steel is not a sunset industry; it is critical for our economy and national security. I know that he is a friend of Teesside. Will he give us some clarity on the status of discussions around investment in steel in Teesside at the moment?

Jonathan Reynolds: My hon. Friend is right to make that point. We cannot say enough that this is not a sunset industry; it should have a bright future. We can get this right. On the negotiations, my hon. Friend will know what I have already said about the conversations with British Steel. It is a very challenging issue. We have made it clear that the Government are there to play a part, and we obviously want that to be part of a transition. We have made that as clear as can be. As soon as I have further information, I will update the House.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As a supporter of industrial strategy, I welcome the idea of a steel strategy in the future, but I will ask a couple of specific questions on the detail. First, is it the Government's policy that the domestic manufacture of primary steel is a strategic industry that must be protected and guaranteed? What do the Government intend to do about the sourcing, either domestically or through the import of coking coal? Earlier, he seemed to suggest that he would not intervene to support British Steel in Scunthorpe. Can he confirm that, if we lose that capacity, we may go five, six or seven years without steel manufacture in this country?

Jonathan Reynolds: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for industrial strategy. I have said many times that there should be, as there is in many countries, cross-party agreement—perhaps not on the detail, but on the premise and what we are trying to achieve. He asks about domestic manufacture and the blast furnaces remaining open. That is of course my preference, but I need a business partner—a company that is willing to do that. I do not think that it would be reasonable to spend the very considerable sum of money that we have pledged on subsidising short-term losses rather than on the ability to deliver new things. He also asks about coking coal. Obviously, that depends on the long-term future of the blast furnaces. That is what they need.

In relation to British Steel, I want a transition plan. My comments earlier were about my frustration that, for me, the ideal deal in a place like Scunthorpe would have been to build the future alongside operating what we currently have. That was available to the last Government; they did not proceed with it. The kind of infrastructure needed for the long-term future of operating blast furnaces would require carbon capture and storage. It was cancelled many times by the previous Government, and is not there. I am heavily constrained in my options, but I am still doing everything that I can to get a deal for the workforce, and to ensure that there is a business there that commands the support of its customers to transition in the future.

Pamela Nash (Motherwell, Wishaw and Carlisle) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on announcing the steel strategy after such a short period in office. The industry has been crying out for it for a very long time. The Conservative party failed the industry by not producing it. Will he say a bit more about what he hopes the strategy can achieve for the steel industry throughout the UK, in particular in Motherwell in my constituency?

Jonathan Reynolds: There are future opportunities, particularly from renewables, some of the steels that will be necessary in the automotive sector, and some of the new technologies that are being taken up around other European countries. There is particular excitement about direct reduced iron. How we deliver the business environment, hopefully with new and existing partners, is absolutely key. I hope that that is what the strategy will deliver.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, which shows the priority that the Government are giving steel, in direct contrast with the previous Government, who had absolutely no industrial strategy—it was a real cheek of the shadow Minister to suggest otherwise earlier. Will the Secretary of State say a little more about the plans for Llanwern? Its dedicated workforce has been through hard times recently. With support, Llanwern can turn into the finest automotive finishing line in the world. Will he commit to developing that and to safeguarding the future of the plant?

Jonathan Reynolds: I say again that had the election not been called, a statement such as this would not have been not possible. It would have passed us by; that was the situation that we faced. My hon. Friend rightly talks with pride about her constituents at Llanwern, which is an incredibly important and successful part of the industrial supply chain in the United Kingdom. I will ensure, as part of the transition, that the downstream functions, which are so valuable and praised, and which carry such respect in the industry, are protected, and that the transition plan does not disrupt the business model, which is, again, proof of the sector's success and of future opportunities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his statement, and I welcome his endeavours, which I think we all recognise, to create

firm foundations for the sector as it moves forward. I also recognise his commitment to Harland & Wolff, to which he referred. That is indeed great news, not just for workers but for the construction sector in Northern Ireland. However, the steel industry faces the problem of affordable energy, which he mentioned in his introduction. Will he safeguard the long-term sustainability of that and other industries by immediately addressing the energy price crisis and implementing the necessary long-term green energy fixes?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for his support for what we have announced. Having a competitive environment is an absolutely key issue. I am already having extensive conversations with the Chancellor and key Cabinet colleagues, including the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, about the way to do that not just in the short term but in the longer term, when we will clearly have a significant renewable energy base. There are a lot of exciting options available, including in how we use some of that capacity in areas of low consumer demand. I can tell him that that is a key priority for getting this right in future.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the deal that he has announced. As a former British trade commissioner to India, I assure him that it is a better deal from a better and more serious Government than the Conservative Government. Will he tell the House what direct conversations he has had with Tata about future investments in the UK?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Although I know that the workforce has, at times, been frustrated by Tata's plans, I understand why Tata itself was frustrated by the previous Government and how long it took to do the deal. In opposition, I had extensive conversations with Tata to build the kind of relationship that has been necessary to deliver something like this. I met executive chair Chandra at Davos and then flew to Mumbai, as colleagues may remember, to build that relationship. I also saw him yesterday, alongside the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, because he was in the United Kingdom. We are continuing those conversations and working with all partners to deliver the kind of opportunities that we think will be available in the UK in future.

Patrick Finucane Murder

1.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the death of Patrick Finucane.

Patrick Finucane was a human rights lawyer. On 12 February 1989, he was brutally murdered in his home in north Belfast by loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Defence Association, in front of his wife, Geraldine, who was wounded, and his three children, one of whom is now the hon. Member for Belfast North (John Finucane). From that day onwards, Mrs Finucane and her family have campaigned tirelessly in search of answers about the killing of their loved one.

In 1990 an inquest was opened and closed on the same day with an open verdict. Subsequently, a number of investigations and reviews were conducted. In 2001, following the collapse of power sharing, the UK and Irish Governments agreed at Weston Park to establish public inquiries into a number of troubles-related cases, if recommended by an international judge. Judge Peter Cory was appointed to conduct a review of each case, and in 2004 he recommended that the UK Government hold public inquiries into four deaths: those of Rosemary Nelson, Robert Hamill, Billy Wright and Patrick Finucane. Judge Cory also recommended that the Irish Government establish a tribunal of inquiry into the deaths of former Royal Ulster Constabulary officers Bob Buchanan and Harry Breen. Inquiries were promptly established in all those cases, with one exception: the death of Mr Finucane.

Meanwhile, in 2003, the third investigation by Sir John Stevens into alleged collusion between the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries had concluded that there had been state collusion in Mr Finucane's killing. That investigation was followed by the conviction in 2004 of one of those responsible, Ken Barrett. With criminal proceedings concluded, the then Northern Ireland Secretary, Paul Murphy, made a statement to Parliament setting out the Government's commitment to establishing an inquiry, but despite a number of attempts, the Government were unable to reach agreement with the Finucane family on arrangements for one.

In 2011, the coalition Government decided against an inquiry. Instead, a review of what had happened, led by Sir Desmond de Silva QC, was established. Sir Desmond concluded that he was left

"in no doubt that agents of the state were involved in carrying out serious violations of human rights up to and including murder."

The publication of his findings in 2012 led the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, to make from this Dispatch Box an unprecedented apology to the Finucane family on behalf of the British Government, citing the "shocking levels of state collusion"—[*Official Report*, 12 December 2012; Vol. 555, c. 296.]

in this case.

In 2019, the Supreme Court found that all the previous investigations had been insufficient to enable the state to discharge its obligations under article 2 of the European convention on human rights. The Court identified a number of deficiencies in the state's compliance with article 2. In particular, Sir Desmond's review did not have the power to compel the attendance of witnesses; those who met Sir Desmond were not subject to testing

as to the accuracy of their evidence; and a potentially critical witness was excused from attendance. In November 2020, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced that he would not establish a public inquiry at that time, pending the outcome of continuing investigations, but that decision was quashed by the Northern Ireland High Court in December 2022.

This Government take our human rights obligations, and our responsibilities towards victims and survivors of the troubles, extremely seriously. The plain fact is that, two decades on, the commitment made by the Government to establish an inquiry into the death of Mr Finucane—first in the agreement with the Irish Government, and then to this House—remains unfulfilled. It is for that exceptional reason that I have decided to establish an independent inquiry into the death of Patrick Finucane, under the Inquiries Act 2005.

I have, of course, met Mrs Finucane and her family—first on 25 July to hear their views, and again yesterday to inform them of my decision. Mrs Finucane asked the Government to set up a public inquiry under the 2005 Act, and, as I have just told the House, the Government have now agreed to do that, in line with the 2019 Supreme Court ruling and the Court of Appeal judgment of July this year.

In making this decision, I have, as is required, considered the likely costs and impact on the public finances. It is the Government's expectation that the inquiry will, while doing everything that is required to discharge the state's human rights obligations, avoid unnecessary costs, given all the previous reviews and investigations and the large amount of information and material that is already in the public domain. Indeed, in the most recent High Court proceedings, the judge suggested that an inquiry could

"build on the significant investigative foundations which are already in place".

As part of my decision-making process, I also considered whether to refer the case to the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery. The commission has powers comparable to those provided by the 2005 Act to compel witnesses and to secure the disclosure of relevant documents by state bodies—powers identified by the Supreme Court as being crucial for the Government to discharge their human rights obligations.

The commission was found, in separate proceedings in February this year, by the High Court to be sufficiently independent and capable of conducting article 2-compliant investigations, and while I am committed to considering measures to further strengthen the commission, I have every confidence in its ability, under the leadership of Sir Declan Morgan, to find answers for survivors and families. However, given the unique circumstances of the case, and the solemn commitment made by the Government in 2001 and again in 2004, the only appropriate way forward is to establish a public inquiry.

Many of us in this House remember the savage brutality of the troubles—a truly terrible time in our history—and we must never forget that most of the deaths and injuries were the responsibility of paramilitaries, including the Ulster Defence Association, the Provisional IRA and others. We should also always pay tribute to the work during that time of the armed forces, police and security services, the vast majority of whom served with distinction and honour, and so many of whom sacrificed their lives in protecting others.

It is very hard for any of us to understand fully the trauma of those who lost loved ones—sons and daughters, spouses and partners, fathers and mothers—and what they have been through. There is of course nothing that any of us can do to bring them back or erase the deep pain that was caused, but what we can do is seek transparency to help provide answers to families and work together for a better future for Northern Ireland, which has made so much progress since these terrible events. I hope that the inquiry will finally provide the information that the Finucane family has sought for so long.

The Government will seek to appoint a chair of the inquiry and establish its terms of reference as soon as possible, and I will update the House further. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.32 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for advance sight of it and his courtesy call this morning. I am particularly grateful to him for bringing it forward before recess. I know the deadline that the Court gave him was 27 September, so it was important that we had the chance to hear the Government's position and ask questions before we rose for conference recess.

The murder of Patrick Finucane, like so many murders during the troubles, was a dreadful act of violence that must not be forgotten. The Opposition stand by the findings of the 2012 de Silva report that while there was no evidence of an overarching state conspiracy in the case of his murder, there were shocking levels of collusion—something for which the then Prime Minister, now Lord Cameron, rightly apologised to the House in that year. I fully appreciate the Secretary of State's desire to bring the matter to a close after a very long period, and I know that a full public inquiry will do it, but I wish to ask serious questions about the decision to choose a full public inquiry over one of the alternatives that he mentioned.

It is clear that the Finucane family, who have suffered so much, are owed a further and deeper investigation. That much was made clear by the Supreme Court's finding in February 2019, when it noted that the de Silva report had not been able to compel witnesses or take its evidence in public. In other words, it had not been article 2 compliant. However, as the Secretary of State said, this year the Belfast High Court concluded that the ICRIR was capable of conducting an article 2-compliant investigation and was sufficiently independent to do so.

My first question to the Secretary of State is: given that the ICRIR has powers to compel witnesses and take evidence in public, what is it that a full public inquiry will be able to do that the ICRIR cannot? This is important because the ICRIR is already fully staffed and active and could begin work quickly, whereas the establishment of a full public inquiry and the building of that team will inevitably take time. Given the opportunity for further delay, I ask him to set out for the House what steps he is taking to ensure that the public inquiry is conducted as quickly as possible. Can he give an undertaking to have appointed a chair and agreed terms

of reference before the end of the year, say? In his statement, he referred to the High Court proceedings, where the judge suggested that an inquiry could

“build on the significant investigative foundations which are already in place”.

I hope that will mean that we can have terms of reference relatively fast.

Similarly, in the Secretary of State's conversations with his right hon. Friend the Chancellor, has the Secretary of State set an expectation of time and costs? We know from previous public inquiries that unless these things are considered early on, the inquiries can take a long time and cost a great deal.

On the issue of the ICRIR itself, I am pleased to hear that the commission has the Secretary of State's confidence. We agree that it is showing itself to be an excellent and effective body with a highly capable chair. I note that it was also the creation of the previous Government. It was created, as he knows, by the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, which his Government have committed to repeal. Indeed, the House will appreciate that a large part of that legislation is given over to the creation of the ICRIR. I ask him to reassure us that he has no intention of repealing that part of the Act.

Returning to the public inquiry that has just been announced, there is one other issue on which we should seek clarity today. In his statement, the Secretary of State referred to the “unique circumstances” of the case. It is important that we understand exactly what those unique circumstances are, because it is important that the Government do not unwittingly set a precedent for many more public inquiries. As a veteran of the Cabinet Office, I became acutely aware of a danger that public inquiries could cease to be the exception and become the rule. Given that there are thought to be thousands of murders from the troubles still unsolved, there is a risk of setting a precedent that would make inquiries the rule. There will be those who ask that if there is to be a full public inquiry in one murder case, why not in another, or in many others? To avoid that happening if this case is, as the Secretary of State says, genuinely unique, the Government have a responsibility to set out why that is. We must not risk turning the system of public inquiries into a more routine process. I am sure that he will feel the same way, and I ask him to make that commitment. I thank him for his statement.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the Opposition spokesperson for his opening remarks, and I will respond directly to his very legitimate questions.

What is unique about this case—I apologise for the length of the opening statement but I thought it was really important to take the House through the history—is the commitment given on two previous occasions by the Government of our country that there would be a public inquiry. To come to his last question, it sets no precedent, but there were exceptional circumstances relating to this case that led me to take this decision.

I will of course, especially as the Finucane family have been waiting 35 years, seek to establish the inquiry as quickly as possible. We have to appoint a judge. The judge then has to be consulted by myself about the terms of reference. The time it takes will depend on how the inquiry unfolds. I am acutely conscious of cost—the

[Hilary Benn]

hon. Gentleman's point was extremely fair—which is why it seems to me that, given all the material and information that is already out there, what the inquiry can most usefully do is not seek to go over all of that, but interrogate the information, material and witnesses as necessary. As the Supreme Court made clear, that is what has been missing that led it to conclude that this was not article 2 compliant.

We have a commitment to repeal and replace the legacy Act, and we will begin that process shortly, finally laying to rest the conditional immunity. The hon. Gentleman will have heard what the Government have said about civil cases and inquests. On the independent commission, while I shadowed this role in Opposition and since taking up the office of Secretary of State, I have been very clear that while we want to return to the principles of the Stormont House agreement, there needs to be information recovery and there needs to be continuing investigation. It is true that the agreement envisaged two separate bodies, but those functions are combined in the ICRIR. As I have been very frank in saying, now that body has been established and all its staff appointed, I really do not see the point in abolishing it only to recreate something that looks very much like what we have today. It is a pragmatic decision that I have taken. I also made clear in my statement that I am committed to considering further steps to strengthen the ICRIR's independence and its powers as necessary. I hope that provides the hon. Gentleman with the reassurance he was looking for.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): On 17 January 1989, Conservative Minister Douglas Hogg claimed in Parliament that solicitors in Northern Ireland were

“unduly sympathetic to the cause of the IRA.”—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 17 January 1989; c. 508.]

Seamus Mallon MP responded that he had

“no doubt that there are lawyers walking the streets or driving on the roads of the North of Ireland who have become targets for assassins’ bullets as a result of the statement that has been made tonight.”—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 17 January 1989; c. 519.]

Three weeks later, lawyer Pat Finucane was shot 14 times and murdered in his own house in front of his wife and three children.

I commend Geraldine Finucane and the Finucane family, including of course the hon. Member for Belfast North (John Finucane), on their tireless campaigning to get to this point, and I thank the Secretary of State for finally doing the right thing on behalf of the British Government in announcing this inquiry. When does he envisage the inquiry beginning?

Hilary Benn: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his appreciative words. He alludes to a very, very unhappy history in this and many other cases. I do take the point made by the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) about all the pain and suffering that all families have experienced, but in this particular case, I have decided that this inquiry is the right thing to do.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The murder of Patrick Finucane remains a shocking crime even now, 35 years on, and even in the context of so many tragedies that

took place during the troubles in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the thoughts of everyone in the House are with the family of Patrick Finucane, as mine are. They have suffered for so long waiting for answers after that terrible day, and I hope that the independent inquiry announced by the Secretary of State will go some way towards bringing at least some closure for the family after all these decades.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the Secretary of State's statement and his announcement of the independent inquiry, but does he agree that there is a need to acknowledge the wider need for truth and justice in Northern Ireland? In contrast to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), I ask him whether he will come to the House with a wider statement on repealing the legacy and reconciliation Act, which of course the Liberal Democrats opposed in the last Parliament, and talk more widely about the role of legacy in Northern Ireland, which of course is so important. Can I also ask the Secretary of State to clarify the ability of this inquiry to compel documents and witnesses, and like others, can I ask about the timescales of the inquiry? I am sure he agrees that Patrick Finucane's family have waited long enough already.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the inquiry, and I am very happy to give him and all Members of the House an assurance that as we develop our proposals, I am in the process of talking to lots of people about how to give effect to the “repeal and replace” commitment that was in the Gracious Speech. I will, of course, come back to the House with proposals in due course and keep it informed. The honest answer to the question he and other Members have put is that I want to get on with this inquiry as soon as possible, but I have certain duties that I have to undertake in order to give effect to it. However, after this long period of time, let us get going with this inquiry as soon as we possibly can.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): The brutal murder of Pat Finucane in front of his wife and children was mired in collusion before the killing, as it has been in the many long years since. Today is about the tenacity of the Finucane family, including my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Belfast North (John Finucane), but it will have resonance for many other victims of the troubles whose needs have, for many years, been put behind the needs of the victim-makers who want the truth to remain covered up. I am so glad that the truth may now finally out for this family.

As the Secretary of State knows, many other families have faced obstruction from state and non-state actors in their quest for truth and a reconciled future. I am thinking of families such as those of the victims of Freddie Scappaticci, the family of Sean Brown, and many others. Will the Secretary of State commit to the same swiftness and determination in removing the barriers that have been placed in front of those families in their quest for truth?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Member has alluded to a number of cases. Of course, we are awaiting the final report on Operation Kenova, the interim report having been published early this year. I undertake and make a

commitment, as any holder of this office would do, to carefully consider each individual case and reach what I think is a sensible way forward. Collectively, there is a huge task for all of us in playing our part in enabling families to find out answers that they have not yet had.

In that context, I welcome the ICRIR's announcement on Monday this week that it has had 85 inquiries and has already agreed to start looking into eight cases. That is significant, because there are those who say that no one should go anywhere near the ICRIR because of its origins and parentage, if I may use that phrase. However, having taken the decision that the ICRIR will remain in place, it does have powers. It has the ability to get information and to question people, and it has said that it wants to develop what it calls a system of "enhanced inquisitorial proceedings", which is public hearings. Of course, hearings in public are really important to many families, because they want the truth to come out and to be able to ask questions, but, crucially, for justice to be seen to be done.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Can I press the Secretary of State further on the issue of other families? Months ago, under the previous Government, those families saw a Bill—which I did not support—repressing and restricting their ability to have inquests. Today, they see a full public inquiry being announced for another family. Will the Secretary of State update the House on what personal engagement he will have with those families? Inevitably, they are going to say, "We have got a public inquiry in this case, but we are being asked to wait in the queue for this legacy Bill inquest body." They will think something is not right about that.

Hilary Benn: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who was such a distinguished holder of the office I now hold, for raising that point. Over the past three weeks, I have met a number of those families whose inquests were brought to an end—some because of the 1 May portcullis that came down and brought an end to the inquests; others because the coroners had said, "We don't think we can take this any further because of issues to do with confidential material." I undertake to the House to reach a decision in those cases and inform the families as quickly as possible.

As I have said before, one of the reasons why we made our commitment in relation to the legacy Act is this: what is it about this part of our United Kingdom that means citizens should be denied the right to bring a civil case—which is what the Act did—and to have an inquest? That cannot be right and proper, which is why this Government have made that commitment.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and I am sure all colleagues give thanks that Northern Ireland and its people now live in peace. Can the Secretary of State tell us how he thinks this announcement will help contribute to continued and meaningful reconciliation in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: For one family, this now provides a process, but I am very conscious that many other families will say, "What about us?" That is why we need to find the most effective means to get to the truth, and that is part of the reason, as I have explained, why I decided that we would not get rid of the commission. I have met

Sir Declan Morgan a number of times, and I have confidence in his ability to do his work. We have to find practical means of providing answers to all of those families, so that they feel their story can be told and they can get what they have been looking for. The point I wish to emphasise again to the House is that this particular case is exceptional for the reasons I set out in my statement.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): One of the things the Secretary of State did not outline in his statement was that the Supreme Court considered whether it was appropriate not to proceed with a public inquiry, and that the Supreme Court agreed, provided that an investigation could satisfy article 2 compliance. He has said today that the ICRIR not only has his trust and confidence, but has the ability to perform such tasks for other families. So when he rightly says that families across Northern Ireland will ask the question, "What about us?", so too do I, because the most exceptional circumstance about this is the exceptionality of treatment. Over 1,200 families still have neither truth nor justice, and if the plans enacted last year continue, they will never get justice. I would ask him, in repudiating the ICRIR and suggesting today that it is not an appropriate mechanism for the Finucane family—and I do not besmirch their grief or their quest for truth and justice—but it is appropriate for every other, how can he honestly look victims in the eye and say that there is not a hierarchy?

Hilary Benn: There should not be a hierarchy, and the right hon. Gentleman and I shared reservations with—indeed opposition to—the legacy Act because it did cut off lots of routes to justice. In the end, I think families should have the opportunity to avail themselves of inquests and civil cases, but the commission is now in existence. The honest answer to his question is that in this particular case, and this does not apply to any of the others, the Government of our country made a commitment twice—once at Weston Park, and secondly by the then Secretary of State—to establish a public inquiry. I think it is right and proper, the Government in the past having made that commitment, that we honour it, and that is the answer I would give him.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): The state collusion in the murder of a human rights lawyer in front of his wife and children is an incredibly serious matter that chills us all, so I very much welcome the decision by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on a public inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane. It is a decision to be welcomed, and it is a good signal from our new Government that they are meeting their commitments and obligations. However, this very welcome announcement must of course be followed by the action that the Secretary of State has rightly outlined. Will my right hon. Friend therefore give further reassurance to this House that all necessary resources will be provided, so that there can be truth and justice in this incredibly important matter?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for what he has said. Having made this decision, I think all of us would recognise the need to get on with it as swiftly as possible.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): This is a bad decision today. It will cause anger and further hurt for the many hundreds of families who have not had justice for the murder of their loved ones, including the mass murder of Protestant workmen at Kingsmill, the blowing up of Protestant workmen at Teebane and the horrendous murder of worshippers at Tullyvallen, among others. I think the Secretary of State has to explain to the House why, after tens of millions of pounds have been spent on inquiries and reviews of this case, he still believes it is necessary to acquiesce in the demands of the family by having another inquiry. How does he justify it to those hundreds of families that no such resources will be put in place to seek out the truth about the murders of their family members? Given the record of inquiries of this nature being a golden goose for barristers and solicitors in Northern Ireland, how is he going to ensure that the costs are capped?

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Member recounts some of the terrible murders, and I have myself met, as I am sure others have, the only survivor of the Kingsmill massacre and heard at first hand the truly chilling story of what happened on that day. First, considerable resources are now being given to the independent commission, and it is important to recognise that, because it has a huge task on its hands. I hope others will come forward to the commission to avail themselves of what it can offer.

Secondly, and I have said this to other Members in answering their questions, in this particular case a commitment was made twice, and I think it is important that we honour it. We also have to recognise in this particular case that the Court held in 2019 that all of the investigations—I accept what the right hon. Member said about them and their extent, and of course they involved the expenditure of public moneys—did not meet the requirements of article 2. Faced with that, and faced with the quashing at the end of 2022 of the decision of a previous Secretary of State not to call an inquiry pending further investigations, it has fallen to me to look at this and to decide how we are going to go forward. I have set out my reasons as clearly as I can hope to do.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the Secretary of State clarify that he has now ended any opportunity for the families and loved ones who still held out hope that there would be an inquiry into the death and murder of their loved ones at the hands of terrorists across Northern Ireland? Is he saying that the only opportunity for them is to go to the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery—an organisation that does not have the full support of the communities of Northern Ireland and does not have the support of and has been queried by many of the families who have lost loved ones? Can I just seek clarity from the Secretary of State that he is saying to those families that their only opportunity for truth, recovery and justice is to go through this organisation, and that he will not engage with them about a further inquiry?

Hilary Benn: I say to the hon. Gentleman that the independent commission should not be the only opportunity open to them. That is why I have indicated that this Government will restore civil cases, and we will restore

inquests in the first instance in those cases where they had been brought to an end by the legacy Act. I agree with him that it would be quite wrong if one was to say that there was only one route, denying people—the families—the rights to inquests and civil cases that apply in all other parts of the United Kingdom. That was one of the things about the legacy Act that was so profoundly wrong. It did not say that we were going to establish a new body and people could use that route, but could also use the other two—inquests and civil cases—that had been available to them thus far; it shut those other routes down. That is part of the reason why the legacy Act was so widely opposed in Northern Ireland. I must be honest that it will take time, because it will obviously require primary legislation to deal with the bit of the legacy Act that stopped the inquests and the civil cases, and that will flow from the consultation I am currently undertaking.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. We should all put on record our thanks to the hon. Member for Belfast North (John Finucane), his mother Geraldine and all the Finucane family, who have campaigned for so long, as have so many others, for this inquiry. I recognise the difficulties in prescribing what an inquiry should do, the cost of it and the length of time it should take, but can the Secretary of State tell us roughly when we can expect to establish the inquiry in its formal setting? Can he give some kind of outline timetable for how long it will take to hopefully bring about a resolution, after the disgraceful murder of Pat Finucane all those years ago?

Hilary Benn: As I have already indicated, I will seek to establish the inquiry as quickly as possible. How long it will take is ultimately in the hands of the judge when he or she is appointed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As he understands, the Democratic Unionist party stood against the legacy legislation, in the interests of pursuing justice for victims. What he says today will give hope to families such as those affected by Kingsmill. I had an Adjournment debate on the Kingsmill massacre in the last Session. On 5 January 1976—48 years ago—10 innocent men who just happened to be Protestants were murdered with weapons that were linked to 40 other serious Republican terrorist crimes over a 15-year period. Information has indicated that the perpetrators were helped by the Garda Síochán. Clearly some of the Garda Síochán had IRA sympathies. It could be said that by their very position, they were agents of the state of the Republic of Ireland. Will the families of those 10 innocent Protestant men be granted the same path to justice as the Finucane family? If no inquiry is granted on Kingsmill, it will be perceived—and indeed will be proven by the Secretary of State himself—that a two-tier system of justice for victims has been clearly enshrined by this Government. How disappointing, how disgusting, and how angry that makes me.

Hilary Benn: I am sorry to have disappointed the hon. Member. As I indicated, having met the one survivor of the Kingsmill massacre, I have some appreciation of just what an appalling and brutal event that was, at a time of many appalling and brutal murders. There has

been an inquest, which concluded recently. As I recall, it held the Provisional IRA responsible for that murder. I am sure that the families want to proceed further, and one of the options open to them is to go to the independent commission, but at the risk of repeating myself, I need to point out that I came to my conclusion because the Finucane case is exceptional, for the reasons that I have tried to explain.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): May I begin by apologising to the Secretary of State and the House for being absent at the beginning of the statement? Secretary of State, has there ever been a family given more preferential handling by Government than the Finucane family? They have had a prime ministerial apology, multiple investigations, inquiries and now an uncapped public inquiry, after the family rejected previous Government offers of inquiries. Is not the tragic takeaway from the statement that the ICRIR is good enough for innocent victims of the IRA, the Ulster Volunteer Force and others, but not good enough for the Finucane family? Why is the Secretary of State perpetuating that odious hierarchy of victims?

Hilary Benn: I am not, is the answer. I know that the hon. Member was slightly late in coming to the Chamber, and from the beginning I set out my thought process. He will have an opportunity to read my statement subsequently. I clearly set out the reasons why I reached this decision. It is a fact that when the then Prime Minister David Cameron apologised from this Dispatch Box, it was unprecedented, because he referred to shocking collusion in this case. We Members of this House should take that extremely seriously, all of us who are committed to upholding our obligations. We were faced with two promises to establish public inquiries. I accept what the hon. Member says about that not happening after 2004 because of the then stance of the Finucane family, but that has now changed. There is also the Supreme Court decision of 2019; it said, I am afraid, that for all that had gone before, the state had not complied with its article 2 obligations. We will now do so.

BILL PRESENTED

RENTERS' RIGHTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Angela Rayner, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Shabana Mahmood, Secretary Bridget Phillipson, Secretary Liz Kendall, Secretary Jonathan Reynolds, Secretary Ian Murray and Secretary Jo Stevens, presented a Bill to make provision changing the law about rented homes, including provision abolishing fixed-term assured tenancies and assured shorthold tenancies; imposing obligations on landlords and others in relation to rented homes and temporary and supported accommodation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 8) with explanatory notes (Bill 8-EN).

Building Safety and Resilience

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before we begin the general debate, I remind the House that on Wednesday last week, Mr Speaker renewed the waiver relating to matters sub judice in respect of ongoing or adjourned Grenfell Tower inquests and cases relating to cladding. This is to allow debate to take place on relevant policy matters, including the phase 2 report of the Grenfell Tower inquiry and the Government's response to it. The waiver does not permit discussion of the details of individual cases. I remind hon. Members of the likelihood that both civil and criminal proceedings in the courts will follow in the coming months and years. Members will want to take special care to avoid saying anything in this House that could prejudice a future trial.

2.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I beg to move,

That this House has considered building safety and resilience.

I rise to open this debate on the critical issue of building safety and resilience, following last week's publication of the Grenfell inquiry's final report. Sir Martin Moore-Bick's findings on an entirely avoidable national tragedy were devastating, and I begin by remembering the 72 people who died, 18 of them children, in the biggest loss of life in a residential fire since the second world war. I pay tribute to the bereaved, the survivors and the wider Grenfell community, who have waited too long for the answers and justice that they deserve. It is thanks to their tireless crusade for truth, accountability and change that we are here today.

The final report of the Grenfell Tower inquiry represents a defining moment in the journey for justice. As Sir Martin stated:

"The simple truth is that the deaths that occurred were all avoidable, and those who lived in the tower were badly failed over a number of years and in a number of different ways by those who were responsible for ensuring the safety of the building and its occupants."

The report shines a light on a terrible culture in the industry in the years leading up to the tragedy—a culture of putting profit before people, and a culture in which safety took a back seat. It reveals a building safety system that was fundamentally broken, with deficiencies that went unchallenged by different Governments. The consequences of these failures are still with us today; there are too many buildings with unsafe cladding and the pace of remediation has been too slow. We will consider all the recommendations in detail, and we will respond within six months. As part of that work, we will listen to and engage with the bereaved, survivors and residents in the immediate community. We will update Parliament annually on progress against every commitment we make. As the Prime Minister said,

"There must...be more radical action to stop something like this from ever happening again."—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 313.]

The recent fire in Dagenham showed us the dangers that many residents continue to face. My east London constituency is among those with the most cladded

[*Rushanara Ali*]

high-rise blocks in the country, so I have long campaigned for the urgent remediation of affected buildings, and I know that Members across the House grapple with similar issues in their constituency. I have seen at first hand how relentless the work can be for residents who are trying to get remediation started. Our constituents not only have to endure the fear and uncertainty of living with unsafe cladding, but face the higher insurance premiums and service charges that go with it. The delays are holding people back. They cannot make plans or get on with their life. They live in fear. They feel stuck.

As Minister for building safety, I am honoured to have the opportunity to work alongside the Deputy Prime Minister to make things right and ensure that last week's moment of truth becomes a legacy of change, so that no other community has to go through that suffering. We will bring the full power of Government to bear on this task. Above all, we will accelerate the pace of remediation and go further and faster to drive change across the industry.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Minister for what she just said. On the remedial works that will be done, some will be in the public sector; most will be in the private sector. In many cases, residents are paying the price in very high insurance premiums, as she rightly acknowledged. Could those residents who have suffered a great deal of stress and cost over the past few years expect some form of compensation for their losses, because of the failure of Government and the industry to undertake the proper remedial works?

Rushanara Ali: We recognise the impact on those with high insurance premiums. We will take action to protect them, and will have the necessary dialogue to address the right hon. Member's points and ensure that there are not high insurance premiums.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that firefighters and the Fire Brigades Union need to be listened to, and that the Government need to deliver the statutory advisory body to ensure that the lessons of Grenfell are learned?

Rushanara Ali: We have already had discussions with key stakeholders, including firefighters and the head of the FBU. We want to ensure that we speak to all relevant stakeholders. We need to work across a range of institutions to get this right and tackle the root causes of fire risk.

I want to focus on the number of affected properties. The remediation of 4,630 residential buildings above 11 metres is being monitored by my Department. For half of them, remediation has started; 1,350 have completed remediation. However, counting the buildings that we know about is not enough. We estimate that as many as 7,000 buildings that need remediation have not yet applied for the cladding safety scheme. That is a maximum estimate—there may well be fewer than that—but those responsible for those buildings have no excuse for failing to apply. We will work with regulators to ensure that the buildings are identified.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Rushanara Ali: I will make a bit more progress. We will ensure that dangerous buildings are found and dealt with. The money is there. The speed must increase. We are not leaving this task just to regulators; the Government must do more, and this Government will do so.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on her appointment. It is absolutely right that the Government should be providing support, including financial support, for those buildings that need work done urgently. Of course, the problem is that the building safety fund has different rules and criteria for buildings in the social housing sector and those in the private sector. When the Prime Minister spoke about Grenfell, he spoke about the discrimination and poor treatment of social housing tenants. Will the Government rectify that by making social housing providers equally eligible for help from the building safety fund?

Rushanara Ali: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this matter. I served on the Communities and Local Government Committee under his chairmanship many years ago and learned a great deal from his work. The Government have committed up to £400 million in grant funding for the removal of Grenfell-style cladding in the social sector, and social housing landlords can apply for the grant schemes in particular circumstances, but we are working with regulators and the sector to ensure that social landlords assess the progress of remediation work. There is much to do, and I look forward to working closely with him on that and the wider agenda.

Since 2017, some progress has been made, including the Building Safety Act 2022, which Labour supported. But what is clear is that the speed of work to fix unsafe cladding is not fast enough. The recent fires in Dagenham and Slough underlined the vulnerabilities that persist in our built environment. Since coming into office, we have met regulators and other industry partners to press for action to make buildings safe. We are contacting all metro mayors in England to ask for their support in driving forward local remediation acceleration plans, working in partnership with regulators.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her appointment, which, in trying to put right these wrongs, is to one of the toughest jobs in Government. I wish her all the best.

One of the things that would help is to improve the skills throughput in the construction industry. In my constituency, only one large block has had its cladding completely removed, and that started five years ago—it has taken that long to deal with it—so those that have had no work started are way behind. One big brake on that is skills in the construction industry. What are the Government doing to improve and enhance skills in that sector?

Rushanara Ali: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention on this really important agenda. I will say more about the remediation action plan and our response. The Prime Minister committed to making sure that we respond to the recommendations of phase 2 within six months, and we will certainly be looking at those

recommendations. The point she makes, which is very important, has been raised with me over the past few months. I am also familiar with those concerns as I raised them myself when we were in opposition.

I turn to enforcement action. Our message to building owners is clear: those who fail to make their buildings safe will face enforcement action. The funding is there: the Government have committed £5.1 billion to remove dangerous cladding, and industry is providing the rest. All blocks of residential flats above 11 metres now have access to a scheme to fix unsafe cladding. Qualifying leaseholders are protected by law from crippling bills for historical safety defects.

As the Prime Minister made clear in his speech in the House last week, we will take the necessary steps to speed this up. We are willing to force freeholders to assess their buildings and enter remediation schemes within set timetables, with a legal requirement to force action if that is what it takes to tackle industry intransigence. As I mentioned, we will set out further steps on remediation this autumn.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend to her new position; I know that she will be a firm advocate for those thousands of people who are still waiting for remediation to be done on their buildings. While we need to have partnerships with the big housing builders to meet our target of 1.5 million, some of those same developers are still dragging their feet on doing the remediation on homes. Will she assure residents in my constituency and across the country that part of the deal those developers may be doing with other parts of her Department will be about taking seriously their remediation responsibilities for those buildings?

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that important point. A number of developers have already signed agreements on the remediation agenda. The Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and the whole Government have made the clear commitment to building the 1.5 million homes. These are two sides of the same coin. We have to make sure that buildings that are not safe are made safe, and that the future homes that we build are safe and secure and address the needs of our country. She made important points, and we are very much on the same page.

There is no excuse for a building owner not to enter a cladding scheme that they are eligible for. Any owners who fail to do so will be held to account. We will not sit by while they fail to act. As well as acting now to keep people safe, we are learning the lessons from Grenfell for the long term. We are investing in and supporting local resilience to deliver strong planning, response and recovery. The Department has provided £22.5 million in core capacity and capability funding to local resilience forums since 2021. These are fundamental to our national resilience, and the Department will continue to consider every opportunity for further strengthening them, including by supporting the Cabinet Office to shape and develop the programme of engagement with local stakeholders through the resilience review.

We will ensure robust oversight, strong regulatory frameworks and an unwavering commitment to accountability at every level. That means reforming the construction products industry that made this fatal cladding. Those who compromise that safety will face

the consequences. That means taking steps to make the necessary improvements. My written statement last week focused on improving the fire safety and evacuation of disabled and vulnerable residents in high-rise residential buildings in England. In our first weeks in office, we have resolved an important recommendation from the Grenfell inquiry's first report—five long years after it was published.

The Home Office will bring forward proposals this autumn for residential personal emergency evacuation plans—residential PEEPs, as they are known. Residents with disabilities and impairments whose ability to evacuate could be compromised will be entitled to a person-centred risk assessment. This will identify appropriate equipment and adjustments, supporting their fire safety or evacuation, as well as a residential PEEP statement that records what they should do in the event of a fire. We are getting that important work going by funding social housing providers to deliver residential PEEPs for their renters. The Government will engage with representative groups as these plans are developed. The Home Office plans to lay regulations as soon as possible, with a view to the proposals coming into force in 2025-26.

In addition, we have made progress on delivering sounders—evacuation alert systems for new buildings—to reduce the likelihood and impact of future fires, as recommended in phase 1 of the Grenfell inquiry report. We will consider recommendations from phase 2 regarding construction products shortly, as I mentioned. As the House is aware, we have also announced the withdrawal of the outdated national classes for fire testing standards in favour of the more robust European standards, and we will update approved document B to make provision for sprinklers in new care homes. Last week, we also announced a further £2 million in grant funding to reopen the waking watch replacement fund, and to support more residents in buildings with fire safety defects to put in place common alarm systems, to help them keep residents safe.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The Minister has talked about support for high-rise buildings in my constituency. My local authority has removed cladding from several council blocks, including one I grew up in, which are of four storeys or fewer. What support will the Government be able to give lower-rise blocks, and what checks will they do?

Rushanara Ali: The evidence shows that the risks tend to be in the high rise, and that has been the focus, but there are arrangements to ensure that lower-rise buildings with safety issues are addressed. We need to look at these issues in the round. It is important that we do not miss anything, but in the Department's work so far, the bigger risks have been in the higher rise. I take the hon. Member's point, and where there are issues with lower-rise buildings, we are very much willing to look at how we provide support.

Dame Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way to Members across the House. As she said earlier in her remarks and just touched on again, sometimes recalcitrant developers are really reluctant to pay and do not engage with residents. There is a danger that those residents will be left at the bottom of the heap as they compete for skills, products and so on. I am sure she is mindful of that, but is she able to give those

[*Dame Meg Hillier*]

residents any comfort about the pressure the Government can put on those recalcitrant developers, to help get on with the work and make them pay later?

Rushanara Ali: Having dealt with such cases in my own constituency, I am very aware of the challenges. The Prime Minister made it clear that if further action is needed we will take it, but we will use the existing laws and the powers we have to take action now. I assure my hon. Friend that officials are working closely with Members of Parliament to support them and their constituents, to ensure that action is taken. I hope that I can meet colleagues regularly to support them, with officials, to ensure that those who are intransigent do the work that they are required to do. We will take action, and we will work with Members to ensure they get the support they need.

In response to the recent fires in Slough and Dagenham, the Government are supporting local teams to assist those affected. Firefighters also attended a fire in my own borough—a high-rise building in Blackwall. I am very grateful to emergency workers for their bravery and quick response to those and other incidents. Following the fire in Dagenham, at a roundtable of regulators and partners the Deputy Prime Minister made clear that fixing unsafe buildings must happen faster.

Members across the House will share our resolve in wanting the findings of the Grenfell inquiry to be a catalyst for change. I want to assure the House that we will hold a further debate on the Grenfell inquiry report in the autumn, which I know many Members will want to contribute to. It will be an opportunity for them to share their insights, to discuss the specific recommendations that have been made and to work with us to bring about the change that is urgently needed. In the meantime, we will support the Metropolitan police and the Crown Prosecution Service as they complete their investigations and bring prosecutions.

This is about delivering justice and accountability, but it is also about treating everyone, regardless of where they live, with respect. In that spirit, we are listening to those affected. We are engaging with residents, local authorities, housing associations and others in the fire safety community to ensure that our policies and actions reflect the concerns of those affected. We are setting an expectation of industry to ensure that residents are listened to, protected and have peace of mind that action to make their homes safe is a matter of priority and taken seriously. Looking to the future, we will ensure that the security, health and wellbeing of residents and their wider communities will drive our mission to build 1.5 million new homes over this Parliament.

We will never forget the Grenfell Tower tragedy on that night in June 2017. Over the past seven years, the bereaved, survivors and the immediate Grenfell community have campaigned relentlessly to protect their fellow citizens, despite their personal loss and pain. As the Prime Minister said, in the memory of Grenfell we will change our country and we will bring the full power of Government to bear on this task, because that is the responsibility of service and the duty we owe to the memory of every single one of the 72 lives lost.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

2.30 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I would like to open by sharing the commitment of His Majesty's official Opposition to supporting the Government in ensuring that, in particular, the legislation brought forward in the previous Parliament, broadly with cross-party support, to address the issues that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali) and colleagues have outlined following the Grenfell fire, takes full effect through regulation and implementation across the sector. It is absolutely clear, as was stated by the Leader of the Opposition during the Prime Minister's statement last week, that we share the Government's determination to ensure that everybody in our country is able to feel safe in their home, and that risks, whether they are known or might emerge from the continuing research into this field, are properly addressed. We will do our very best to work with her and colleagues in a constructive manner to ensure that that happens.

Today's debate is also an opportunity to consider many of the broader issues around building safety that will come into play as we consider the Government's plans to reform our planning system, increase our housing supply, bring in new forms of building into the United Kingdom and reform building regulations. A great deal of the report from Sir Martin into the Grenfell incident focuses on the role played by building regulations and their operation in the market for materials and design in the terrible disaster that took the lives of 72 people.

However, we should not waste an opportunity to consider more broadly how other parts of our housing system and our planning system can ensure that risks that might emerge in the future are dealt with effectively. For example, we are aware when a planning application comes forward that the safety and resilience of a building is not simply down to its construction and materials; it is also affected by its location, its proximity to other sources of risk and its design from its very inception. They all have a part to play. We know from points that have been made in the past by Members from across the House about the role that housing plays in the context of public health that, in the capital, for example, air quality is often worse indoors than it is outdoors as a result of buildings designed with poor ventilation and poor mechanical systems. That creates a long-term health and safety burden for residents which can be alleviated by giving due consideration to better design and resilience at the initial stages.

I encourage the Government to consider, as they embark on this process, how to manage some of the very complex interactions when seeking to improve the safety of buildings where there are freeholders, leaseholders and tenants all occupying some of the same space. I am aware, from experience in a local authority, that Hillingdon council had to go to court on 16 occasions to gain access to council properties to undertake basic maintenance and servicing work to installations against the will of the occupier, even though that work was being carried out at no cost to the tenant. That demonstrates some of the practical difficulties that that complex relationship can create in ensuring that local authorities and others are able to fulfil the duties that this House and the legislation place upon them.

It is also clear, from both the Grenfell report and other research, that the drive towards building efficiency, in particular energy efficiency, has created a risk of a loss of focus on safety. We know that this has been part of a global move to recognise the need to address climate change through better quality insulation and the more efficient construction of buildings. Increasingly, we see buildings being brought forward with modular construction of different types. Hotels arrive in a shipping crate: pre-constructed rooms are simply stacked up and then given a brick skin. Frame-constructed homes are a significant part of the delivery of the housing market. These provide an opportunity to make the available funds go further and create more homes more quickly. That is extremely welcome, but we need to ensure that the risks that might be associated with some of those forms of construction, especially where they take place at scale, are properly considered. I would like to hear a little more from the Government in due course about how the broader context of building safety and resilience will take those matters into account.

Mr Betts: Would the shadow Minister like to reflect on the fact that around four years ago the previous Government set up a committee to look at modern methods of construction, but the last investigation showed that it had not actually met? It is important that we get this right. We can see the problems with timber-framed homes and all the difficulties they caused in the 1980s. It is important we get the techniques and construction right, but there was a bit of a gap in the previous Government's approach, was there not?

David Simmonds: Of course, it is embarrassing to hear that. Again, from experience of local government, I know that a great deal of work has been put in to ensure that modern methods of construction are put forward for Government consideration. Often there are exemplars around the country of how new estates and new homes have been delivered. There is certainly no lack of evidence on the opportunities available.

We also have an opportunity to reflect on the many challenges in our current housing stock, and in other types of buildings such as schools and hospitals. Once upon a time, aerated concrete and asbestos were regarded as wonder materials, and house builders and Governments would have been considered inefficient if they had not ensured their use. We now know that they have created problems and risks that require significant levels of expenditure to remediate.

That brings me to another important point: building resilience is not just about homes. The BBC recently did an excellent piece of work commemorating the original Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, which was implemented by Government following a number of quite appalling incidents, mainly in factories, where significant loss of life occurred because the design of buildings meant that, in the event of a fire, for example, it was difficult or impossible for people to get away.

We know that school buildings have been destroyed and that thus far not a single school has been fitted with sprinklers where fire has resulted in total loss of the building. The cost of installing that equipment at the design and construction stage is relatively modest compared with the impact of retrofitting it, so there is an opportunity for the Government to reflect on how, as we take forward their strategy on investment in new schools, we

ensure that that resilience is, as far as possible, built in and that the full cost to the taxpayer that occurs when a hospital or a school is lost is considered. We must reflect also on how we ensure that office buildings and factories under construction meet the highest possible standards, especially as they often face many of the same challenges around new materials and new forms of design that are intended to make them more efficient but potentially bring in risks that it is our duty to foresee and prevent as far as we possibly can.

We will shortly consider the Renters' Rights Bill. That will have a wider impact, especially on the build-to-rent sector. We have seen new forms of developer coming into the market with the specific intention of constructing, from the outset, long-term rental homes.

Emily Darlington: I welcome the shadow Minister's comments about working cross-party. One thing we need to do is establish the facts, the reality of what is going on, and the confusion left by the previous Government. People are being told by mortgage providers that they need an EWS1 form, but by freeholders that they do not. They are stuck, going back and forth for years. Would he like to take this opportunity to recognise the confusing legacy left by his Government and apologise to all the thousands of people who are stuck in places feeling that they have no place to go?

David Simmonds: Given the broad cross-party consensus in the last Parliament about the importance of the new forms of legislation and the regulation that follows from it, I think we should seek to maintain that consensus as far as possible, but as somebody who in a previous life worked in banking and as a mortgage adviser, I know that the challenges around the mortgageability of properties, especially properties of novel construction, go back many decades. For instance, a very limited number of lenders will provide for properties located above shops, because of that particular sets of risks. EWS1 was a similar example; despite apparent clarity from Government, there clearly was a lot of debate within the sector and some lenders preferred to go belt and braces, demanding the provision of something that was not required by law or regulation before making a lending decision—and the then Government did significant work in the previous Parliament to bring clarity and address those problems.

That is a helpful introduction to a point that I want to touch on briefly: the role of the insurance industry, both in the challenges that will follow from Grenfell and in the wider experience of our constituents. Many people find themselves significantly challenged because, owing to a lack of clarity or to uncertainty about the construction of their building, they face significant insurance costs, sometimes to the point where only one insurance provider is available. Others face very significantly increased costs because of the behaviour of a landlord who seeks to apportion the insurance costs across all the properties in their portfolio, rather than according to the risks of a specific property that a particular tenant or leaseholder inhabits. It would be helpful for the Government to give some consideration to how they can work with the insurance industry to ensure that those who are paying for insurance are paying a fair price and that it provides the necessary cover that mortgage lenders, for example, will expect.

[David Simmonds]

It is clear that, as well as the strong commitment we on the Opposition Benches can give to support the Government and the Minister in taking forward the regulations and ensuring that they address the concerns that have been expressed, we must also make the most of an opportunity to consider wider issues of building safety. In London, for example, there are significant numbers of Bison blocks, constructed with pre-stressed concrete—at the time, it was considered a wonder material and a means of delivering significant numbers of new homes efficiently and at a low cost—which have particular structural risks around them that local authorities across the capital and the wider country have had to address. We have also heard a little bit about the role of the fire service in carrying out inspections and prosecutions where properties are found not to meet the fire regulations.

All those points are indicators of risk across the system, and there is an opportunity for Government to ensure that Ministers have a clear line of sight so that such indicators can be effectively addressed. If there is a role for we politicians to play in local government and here in Westminster, it is to ensure that all these other people are doing their job. I promise that the Opposition will support the Government as they seek to achieve that, and I hope that together we will be able to take this work forward effectively, so that all our constituents can sleep safely in their beds.

2.42 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), to her position. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) said in an intervention a few moments ago, it is probably one of the most challenging and difficult jobs in Government. We all saw the struggles faced by Conservative Ministers who had to deal with these issues over many years; indeed, we are still struggling because we have not got to the position that we would all like to be in.

I want to comment on the many reports produced by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee in the last Parliament and the one before, when I was privileged to chair the Committee. We produced two reports after Grenfell, following Dame Judith Hackitt's initial report on the issues to the Government. We also did pre-legislative scrutiny of the Building Safety Bill, followed up with a report, did quite a lot of work on things like construction products, and had correspondence with Ministers on those subjects. Every one of our reports was agreed unanimously by that cross-party Committee, and I am pleased that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), has indicated the Opposition's support for the general approach to these matters; we all want to see building safety carried out on all the buildings in our constituencies in a timely and proper manner.

As I was looking back at Dame Judith's report and deciding what I should say today, as well as picking out one or two bits of the Select Committee's work, something struck me. She said that it was about not just building rules and regulations but culture. The Grenfell report clearly sets out that there needs to be an overall

comprehensive review to avoid the gaps in regulations. That is absolutely right, and the Government will no doubt follow that through and report on what they are going to do, but Dame Judith said that there was a "race to the bottom" culture in the building industry—that it was about how cheaply could things be done. That was shown in Grenfell, as there were examples of cheaper products being substituted for others.

In the end, the safety of individuals was put behind financial returns. Unfortunately, that is far too common in the construction industry. The Minister may even struggle more with that fundamental reform to attitudes and culture than she does with the review of building regulations, which will be a struggle enough itself. That has to be borne in mind right the way through. Nevertheless, we look forward to the Government's response to all the recommendations of Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his inquiry.

The Minister said in a written answer to me the other day that about 4,000 homes still have dangerous cladding on them. After all this time, that really is quite shocking. I wonder whether the Minister might consider updating that figure regularly—maybe placing it in the Library every three months—so we can all look at whether progress has been made quickly enough. She might even like to provide a list of all the buildings, their owners and their developers so we can start to see who the guilty parties are. Some have legitimate reasons for not having made changes yet, which we want to know, but others simply are not interested in getting on with the work that is their responsibility.

There are some other problems and challenges that the Minister might also like to address. My attention was drawn to a particular block that could access the building safety fund for the removal of cladding, but not for other safety work that needed to be done, including replacing missing firewalls and dangerous fire doors. That is okay when developers are involved, who should be pushed to put right their wrongs of their construction, but in this case, the developer had gone bust and the building was owned by its leaseholders. Where did they go in that situation? Well, actually, the building work just stopped.

We ended up with a building safety fund that is not comprehensive—the Select Committee recommended it cover all aspects of building safety work—and covers just cladding, and because other elements of building safety are not covered by the fund, there are situations where buildings are left unsafe and there is no one really to point the finger at and say, "They're responsible." The Minister probably cannot give me an answer to that point today, but I hope she will think about it. If we can start to identify precisely where these buildings are, many more such situations may emerge.

Where there are recalcitrant developers and owners, how can the leaseholders get help? As has been mentioned, they are often faced with high insurance costs and enormous worries about what happens next in their life. The Select Committee talked to people who were in despair, and that was a few years ago; they are probably still in despair now because nothing has changed in their situation. On top of that, they can be faced with legal costs to challenge the developers and owners. Can the Minister give us some assurance that her Department and officials will stand ready to offer all assistance possible to leaseholders in that situation, who are really struggling and desperate in many circumstances? The

Leasehold Knowledge Partnership has done good work in providing assistance, but the technical and legal advice should really be coming from her Department.

I wanted to mention one or two other key issues, although if I tried to go through all the building safety issues that came up in the Select Committee, I would be here for a lot longer than today's debate. Skills have been mentioned. When the Committee looked at the Building Safety Bill, we recommended a national system of third-party accreditation and registration for all professionals working on the design and construction of high-rise buildings. That did not include all the people who work on buildings, such as labourers and those with other skills, but all those involved with professional skills—whether it be architects, those overseeing construction work or building safety managers—should be properly accredited, and there ought to be a national system. It is clear that there are gaps in that regard.

As for those who work in the trades involved, it is a disgrace that under building electrical safety regulations, it is still the case that the only rules relate to “competent persons”. In a high-rise building, an electrician who does work in a kitchen where there is water, or in the garden where there is water, will not be covered by any building safety regulations. An electrician who does work in the bathroom will be covered, but will have to be part of a competent persons scheme—which does not mean that the person doing the work must be competent; it simply means that the company must be registered as having someone who is competent to sign off the work at the end of the day, even if the person never sees the work that has been done. The Committee reported on that several times back in 2015 and never got any further with it, so it needs to be looked at.

Construction products were clearly a problem at Grenfell, and I welcomed the comments about that in the Grenfell report. We called over and over again for a comprehensive review of the testing of products and their safety. We called for the publication of information not only about the products that had been tested and found to be safe, but about those that had failed. What Dame Judith Hackitt found initially in her review was that companies were going from one testing house to another with their products until they found one that passed them. No one was ever notified of the failures, and that cannot be right. Sir Martin Moore-Bick has called for more transparency over product testing, so can we ensure that failures are reported, as well as successes?

In all the costs of Grenfell, while developers are being held to account to some degree, not one construction product manufacturer has been asked to pay a single penny towards the cost of building remediation, although many of them are clearly responsible for some of the problems. Why is that? We pushed the then Government about it. We last wrote to the relevant Minister in March last year. The Government commissioned a report by Paul Morrell on construction products and safety, but never responded to it in detail. Will this Minister now look at it and give a response? Will she look at the testing and categorisation of products, and at how manufacturers can be made to pay some of the costs that should not fall on leaseholders or on social housing providers?

I am pleased by the recommendation in the Grenfell report that building control officers should always be appointed by an independent third party. The developers

should not be choosing—in some cases—their own friends to sign off a building. In the case of the highest-rise buildings, the building safety regulator is now responsible for appointing building control officers.

Jeremy Corbyn: Let me compliment the hon. Gentleman on all his work on this. Does he agree that one of the problems is the systemic underfunding of local authorities—leading to the inadequacy of all their inspection regimes, building control in particular—which has had such a devastating effect on the quality of building in so many parts of the country?

Mr Betts: Yes, I do. The Committee has made many recommendations in many reports about the whole issue of local authority funding and the squeezing of resources in respect of services of this kind, given the priority that authorities have to give to social care in all its forms and, now, temporary accommodation. As well as the question of resources, however, there is the question of independence. The building control officer will be beholden to the developer, whoever the developer is, because the developer will say, “If you give me a difficult time on this building, I will not give you any work for the next one.” That must be stopped. The last Government would say that they did so in respect of the highest-rise buildings, but it needs to be stopped for all buildings, and I am pleased about what Sir Martin said about that in his report.

Let me now return to the issue of social housing. I am sorry, but I must tell the Minister that I am not going to let it go away. Both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister made comments about the discrimination against and bad treatment of social housing tenants. For a long time we have had the attitude that this is poor housing for poor people who do not really matter. We must challenge that, because they do matter. Landlords in the social housing sector, housing associations and councils, will always do their best to make buildings safe, and in some cases—because there is no access to the building safety fund unless they can show that they cannot do the work, and they can always find some money to do it—that will mean squeezing the headroom in the housing revenue account or housing associations' business plans. That squeezed headroom would otherwise be available for the building of new homes.

If the Government want to build 1.5 million new homes—and I fully support that; I think it is one of the best commitments that they are making—they will not be built by the private sector alone. A substantial number of social houses will have to be built, and that requires HRA resources and resources in the housing associations' business plans. The more we squeeze them with other responsibilities that are not financed by the building safety fund, the less money will be available to build new social housing.

Emily Darlington: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point about the impact on the HRA. We had two such buildings where the council had to deal with compartmentation with no support from the Government, and had to rehouse 300 families in just under a year, per best practice. Does my hon. Friend agree that the pressure on councils has been much greater than it has been on private developers to move quickly on remediation and removal?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I must remind Members that contributions are made through the Chair, so it is important to make eye contact with the Chair rather than with the Minister on the Front Bench.

Mr Betts: I am sure you appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I always want to make eye contact with you. [*Laughter.*] I probably will not be called again for a long time after that.

Of course I agree with my hon. Friend that while social landlords in particular should take their responsibility seriously, and I think that most of them do, many are struggling.

My final ask of the Minister is this. Given the urgency of the issue, will she agree to meet me—together with Kate Henderson, the chief executive of the National Housing Federation, and the representative of the local council who recently produced an excellent report about funding for council house building—to discuss this issue and the extra challenges that it poses to both housing associations and councils at what is a difficult time?

Let me end by thanking all my colleagues who were involved in the Select Committee in the previous two Parliaments. Its new Chair is to be elected today, and I offer to help and support whoever it is in any way I can, because I am sure that this issue is one that the new Committee will want to address.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.57 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Let me begin by congratulating the Minister and welcoming her to her position.

As we have already said in this Chamber, the Liberal Democrats welcome the final Grenfell report. We want to record again our thanks to the families of the victims, and, of course, the survivors, for giving their testimony, their experts and their statements to the inquiry; we know how difficult that will have been.

Much has already been said today about the issue of cladding, so I will not say anything about it in my speech. As other Members have pointed out, this is not just about the remediation of cladding; there are many other fire safety issues in buildings that need to be remedied. This is a debate about building safety, and we must discuss other matters.

There are various fire safety issues in various buildings in my constituency, particularly—I am sure that other Members will have correspondence about this in their inboxes—the need for fire door remediation. Either the fire doors were inadequate when they were installed in the first place, or they were installed incorrectly. That needs to be fixed, but the developers, the building owners and, through them, their management companies are not taking responsibility for it. Indeed, they are trying to pass the buck and make the leaseholders and the tenants pay for the replacement of the doors where that is necessary, and using defects periods that may well have expired as an excuse for not taking up those issues and not paying for remediation. In one instance, one of the leaseholders commissioned a survey before

the expiration of the defects period, which identified problems with the fire doors, but the developer is still claiming not to be responsible for replacing all the fire doors in the building, although they are of identical design, and the developer has accepted responsibility for these particular doors. This is an example of where the construction industry is, unfortunately, not taking responsibility for the issues that it has created, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

There are other fire safety issues, which we will all have seen in our inboxes. Some of them will be things that we in the construction industry—I have worked in it for many years—describe as patent defects, which can be seen. When someone comes across a patent defect, they can see that something does not work, but there are many latent defects, which are hidden in the depths of a building and cannot be seen by the naked eye. Those defects become apparent much later, and we need to provide a way to help leaseholders by ensuring that they do not have to shoulder the financial burden of rectifying them. Such defects are fundamental to the building—for example, there are safety issues around gas pipes that have been incorrectly installed. In some cases, it has been found that there is inadequate shielding around the pipes, as happened in a building in my Chelmsford constituency. I could go on and on about other fire safety issues, but I know that other hon. Members want to speak and I have quite a few things that I would still like to say.

There is a huge backlog of issues that need to be remedied, and the Minister talked about the number of buildings that need to be remediated. I spoke to a fire safety expert from a local authority—not one in my constituency—who is responsible for looking at all the buildings in the authority's housing stock. They had to put together a report that had to be submitted by the deadline, which I believe was earlier this year. When they tried to submit it to the Health and Safety Executive, the HSE said, "Whoa, hang on! Don't submit it now—we can't cope. We'll let you know when we want to receive those documents. It may well not be until 2029." So I would say that the number of buildings the Minister talked about is definitely an underestimate, and I urge her to discuss this issue with the Health and Safety Executive to see what other resources it might need to be able to move more quickly. Let us remember that people are living in buildings that they have officially been told are not safe. Every single night, they go to bed knowing that their families and children are sleeping in buildings that are not safe.

We do not know the full extent of the problem, and there are many recommendations that can come out. We can talk about how the construction industry operates and so on, but let me talk briefly about the planning system. When we are talking about fire safety, it strikes me as very strange that the fire services are still not statutory consultees on planning applications for high-rise buildings over 18 metres. Of course the fire services are experts in fire safety, yet we do not make them statutory consultees. That feels very strange to me, and it feels like a big oversight. I urge the Minister to look into that.

Members have talked about historical issues and the need to remedy them. I point out to the Minister and everyone present that these issues are not just historical. I am aware of buildings less than two years old that have fire compartmentation problems and missing

firestopping. This is an ongoing issue. As one fire safety expert put it to me, “After everything that happened with Grenfell, developers are still getting away with it.” This is a systemic problem, and there are many reasons for it. It is partly driven by finances and other things, but as the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, it is also a cultural problem. There is a lot that we need to work on.

I will briefly admit to a slightly guilty pleasure: I quite like watching the programme “Air Crash Investigation”, which might seem a bit macabre. I do not want to give the impression that the airline industry is perfect, but I big up those in the airline industry. The industry investigates issues and crashes, works out what went wrong, and then does not point the finger of blame, no matter where the fault lies. It looks at how such issues could have been avoided, and how it can make sure that they do not happen again in the future. If only we could make the construction industry do the same and change the culture, rather than shrugging our shoulders, saying, “Well, it’s not my fault,” and blaming the subcontractor, the manufacturer or whoever. Having worked in the construction industry for a long time, I know that that happens a lot. If we could change the culture to be more like how the airline industry investigates problems, I would be very happy to see that.

There is another industry that the construction industry could learn something from. I have just mentioned fire safety issues and things that need to be remediated, and I am sure that many people in the Chamber have been issued with safety recall notices, whereby motor manufacturers have to recall cars and fix the safety issues. If there is a problem with the brakes, or anything in the engine is a safety issue, they recall the car and fix it at their expense. I would like to see something similar happen in the construction industry, so that people take much more responsibility.

I come back to leaseholders, because it is incredibly important that we remember the implications for them when there is delay and things are not fixed. Not only is there a fire risk—as I mentioned before, we have people who are on 24-hour watch. Other Members have mentioned the difficulty with getting mortgages. At the moment, many leaseholders cannot sell their properties and move on. That has implications for the housing crisis, because it means that there is less churn in the housing industry, as fewer people are able to move out of their flats and allow other people to move into them. That is exacerbating the crisis. As others have mentioned, there is also the problem of insurance.

Like other hon. Members, I am concerned that social landlords are not eligible for Government funds to remediate buildings, leaving many of the most vulnerable people at risk. I urge the Government and the Minister to listen to the National Housing Federation, which represents hundreds of housing associations, and the End Our Cladding Scandal campaign on these issues. I remind the House that the Liberal Democrats have been calling for the removal of dangerous cladding from all buildings, and we need to make sure that leaseholders do not have to pay for it.

To reiterate what I said earlier, this should not be just about cladding. There are other serious issues, particularly firestopping. Fire doors are incredibly important. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) said to the Prime Minister just last week, we need the Government to step in and provide the cash up

front to carry out the remediation in some circumstances, and then they should go after those responsible. That would alleviate a lot of suffering.

Finally, I would just like to say that fire safety is not a luxury. It should be seen as a right.

3.8 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I would like to put on the record the thanks of my constituents in Kensington and Bayswater, which includes the wider Grenfell community, for the cross-party support last week when the phase 2 report of the Grenfell inquiry was published. We thank the Minister and the Government for making time today and for committing to future time, and we thank the Prime Minister for his statement and heartfelt apology on behalf of the British state for what happened. He spoke for us all, including the Leader of the Opposition.

The Grenfell legacy obviously has lots of dimensions, but one of them is building safety. I urge Members to remember the 72 victims of the fire, whose legacy has to be fixing this crisis. After the report was released, there were three immediate actions that the community wanted me to advocate in this place. The first was about criminal prosecutions, which is not a matter for discussion today. However, as the Justice Secretary mentioned in questions yesterday, it is important that we ensure that the court system is prepared for any potential decisions that come through the Metropolitan police and CPS process, and that court backlogs and the complexity of any potential trials do not result in even further delays to justice.

Secondly, the accountability of the companies is not just about criminal investigations; it is about their role in public procurement and paying for remedial work. We need to continue to push on that. Finally, we are discussing policy changes today to ensure that this never happens again, but the pace of change has been far too slow. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, that is partly due to the culture of how tenants—social housing tenants, in particular—are treated and about their agency and power and respect. There are tens of thousands of people up and down the country who are still going to bed in buildings that are unsafe.

In my constituency—quite incredibly, given the history of Grenfell—we have one of those buildings that is not yet on the Department’s list. It underwent a fire inspection just a few months ago and flammable rendering was found. This is a good example of what many Members have mentioned. It is a building with approximately 50% social tenants and 50% shared ownership leaseholders, who have scraped together the money to get on the housing ladder and have now been hit with a £400 a month increase in their service charge, primarily driven by the dramatic increase in insurance after the fire inspection took place.

I agree with the shadow Minister’s call to look at the insurance market, because in that case there was not a competitive bid for insuring the building. I know there has been a discussion with the Association of British Insurers to see how we can bring down the costs, but I urge the Government to look at this, because in the short term, while we wait for the remedial work to take place, the situation is simply unaffordable for those leaseholders. I certainly think we need to look at the insurance industry. In addition, that building is another

[Joe Powell]

example of the merry-go-round of buck passing that we talked about last week between local government, national Government, developers, freeholders and housing associations.

We need clear timelines to speed this up, and I really welcome the Prime Minister's commitment on that. We need incentives in the system—carrots and sticks—to ensure that we do not have these never-ending situations where leaseholders and tenants are unclear about when the work will be done. As the Minister said, the money is there, so this is about knocking heads together and making sure that, at an individual building level, we get the speeding up that we need. I will write to her about the specific building that I have mentioned.

Speeding up this work is obviously part of the answer, but the recommendations from phase 1 and phase 2 of the Grenfell inquiry are also relevant. They go beyond cladding, as the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) mentioned. I really welcome the Government's announcement last week that residential personalised emergency evacuation plans for disabled people will be taken forward. It is a big frustration for many of my constituents that that did not happen under the previous Government. We look forward to more detail on what those PEEPs will look like. I urge the Government in the comprehensive spending review to look at funding, for multiple years, for social landlords to implement that and at a scheme to ensure that developers and freeholders cover the costs for private buildings.

We are all still digesting the full phase 2 report, and there will be time to go into it in more detail, but one recommendation that I urge the Government to think about straightaway is the streamlining of accountability in terms of ministerial responsibility and the regulator, so that we do not have a dispersed system between multiple Departments that makes it easy for things to fall through the cracks, as Sir Martin Moore-Bick made clear in his report. I hope we will have time to discuss that in detail.

Finally, on the question of who should pay, I welcome the Prime Minister's statement that he will be writing to the companies and looking at exclusions in the public procurement process to ensure that companies referenced in the Grenfell report will not be able to access public tenders. I also put on the record my thanks to the golfer Shane Lowry, who yesterday—belatedly, but he got there in the end—removed the sponsorship of one of the companies mentioned. I will not mention it by name, just out of caution. More broadly, these developers clearly need to need to pay for the remedial work.

The campaigners have done an incredible job, as the Minister said in her opening remarks. Their ask has always been for truth, which we now have from the inquiry; for justice, which we hope will come from the criminal prosecution system; and for change, which it is on all of us in this House to deliver.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Peter Fortune to make his maiden speech.

3.15 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have learned from the potential misstep of the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and I promise to gaze

at you throughout my entire speech. A maiden speech is, by tradition and design, quite light-hearted, and that is how I have fashioned mine, but I want the House to be in no doubt that this debate is on a very serious issue. I welcome the cross-party conversation about the disaster at Grenfell, and I know that my constituents in Bromley and Biggin Hill send their thoughts and prayers to the victims and survivors and their families, and to others who have been impacted.

It is obvious that I represent the finest constituency in all of this great United Kingdom. Before I set out my case, let me say a few words about my main predecessor—noting, of course, those communities we welcome from the constituencies of both Beckenham and Orpington. The majority of my new constituency, however, is inherited from Bromley and Chislehurst and Sir Bob Neill KC. Sir Bob was and is a creature of this House, a magnificent speaker, a bon viveur and a good friend to many in this Chamber. Bob dedicated his adult life to service. He started as a councillor before moving to the Greater London Council. The GLC, of course, met its demise in 1986. Bob, unperturbed, simply hung around until it was reinvented in 2000, when he became the first assembly member for Bexley and Bromley.

In 2006, on the passing of the much-loved awkward squad Member Eric Forth, Bob fought a difficult by-election to become the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. For nearly a quarter of a century, Bob has been part of the fabric of our community, always ready to fight for those who needed a voice. Bob has a deep admiration and love for the law. He has held many positions in politics, but I believe that it was as Chairman of the Justice Committee that he reached his pinnacle. His knowledge and depth of understanding have been of unquestionable benefit to the House, but his love of the law is trumped by a love that is much deeper. It is not West Ham. It is not opera. It is not even Gibraltar, to which I know he has given so much time. His greatest love is for Ann-Louise, the woman, the wife and the friend who has made him so happy. Members will know that fate took a particularly callous decision early on in their relationship, but they will also know that Bob and Ann-Louise faced that challenge with their typical resilience and humour. I thank him for his service, and for the graciousness and kindness with which he has always treated me, and I wish his family well.

Before I move on to making the self-evident case that Bromley and Biggin Hill is the greatest constituency that has ever existed, I want to make a note of another previous Member for Bromley: the former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. As Minister for housing, he took on the responsibility of meeting new and ambitious housing targets. He was not keen at first, writing in his diary in 1951 that it was

“not my cup of tea at all”.

Despite his concerns, he met the inflated target a year early, and changed the lives of families right across the country by presenting them with the opportunity to live in a safe and secure home. I wonder how he would feel—this links to the substance of the debate—if he knew that residents of North Point in Bromley are still suffering due to a cladding crisis that is no fault of their own. This is an injustice that has gone on for too long, and it is vital that the whole House work together to free those who are impacted from the shackles of poor governance and lack of accountability.

Before I talk further about the constituency, I would like to say thank you to the best people I know. I cannot linger here for too long or I shall be reduced to an emotional puddle, but I must recognise my beautiful family, without whom I am nothing. My extraordinary children make me so proud, and I am blessed with the most beautiful, talented, funny and patient wife in Anna-Marie. She is the most wonderful and kindest person I have ever met; I will never be good enough for her, but I will keep trying.

To business. Bromley and Biggin Hill is a long, thin and elegant constituency, which is why it comes as no surprise that its constituents chose me, an uncanny physical manifestation of the place. It is a wonderful place, comprising Sundridge, Bickley, Hayes and Keston, the bit of Darwin that is in the family, along with Coney Hall, Bromley common, Biggin Hill and of course the ancient market town of Bromley. Rather than give a geographical tour, I will demonstrate the amazing contributions from across Bromley and Biggin Hill to the fields of literature, sport, science and politics, and set out how we saved the world.

I will start with literature. If readers have enjoyed exciting stories of time travel or invisible men; or secretly encouraged William, the unruly schoolboy; or empathised with the buddha of suburbia, they have been enjoying a writer from Bromley and Biggin Hill. H.G. Wells, Richmal Crompton and Hanif Kureishi are all connected to the constituency. Enid Blyton was one of the first teachers at Bickley Park school, and academic writers and thinkers, including Sir Anthony Seldon, have spent time scribbling in the constituency, but perhaps the greatest intellectual offering came as a pre-ironic criticism of consumerism and a reflection on the UK's struggling agricultural base, all expressed in musical form. Produced by an epoch-defining philosophical movement from the '70s, the song went:

"Spam, spam, spam...spam, spam, spam, spam...lovely spam", and was set in the fictional Green Midget café in Bromley.

I have a pub quiz question for the sports round. Who can tell me the only English football league club in the constituency of a Conservative MP? It is indeed the mighty Bromley FC, recently promoted and going great guns, clearly due to the sound political stewardship of the constituency—and I look forward to chants of "You've got the only Tory" from Opposition Members when we take on Notts County at home in Hayes Lane later this week.

We have also added to the canon scientific. In 1843, Thomas John Hussey, the rector of Hayes, noticed anomalies in the orbit of the recently discovered planet Uranus. He wrote to the future astronomer royal and talked of

"the possibility of some disturbing body beyond Uranus".

[*Interruption.*] Members are making their own jokes up; stop it. This led to further investigation and discovery, ultimately contributing to our modern understanding of the solar system. What I am saying is that we invented Neptune.

Moving on to politics, while we had our fair share of lefty types, notably anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin, who lived with us for a bit, my favourite local communist has always been Coney Hall's irrepressible Elsy Borders, who led the famous mortgage strike of 1937. Elsy

intentionally defaulted on mortgage payments, demanding that the structural flaws in her newly acquired building be repaired. I cannot but help think how this relates to the substantive issue we are debating.

While I have some Labour Members onside, I can delight them further by informing them that we in Bromley and Biggin Hill also invented the modern income tax—but allow me to win back Conservative colleagues by explaining that the revenue raised was used to fight the French. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I got them back. The tax was introduced by our local boy done good, William Pitt the younger, who was born and resided in the constituency. He was assisted into his political position by his father, William Pitt the elder, another resident. This original political nepo-baby went on to have an extraordinary career, with perhaps the highlight being the conversations he held with his colleague William Wilberforce around a tree in the grounds of the Pitt residence. A Wilberforce diary entry in 1788 reads:

"At length, I well remember after a conversation with Mr. Pitt in the open air at the root of an old tree at Holwood, just above the steep descent into the vale of Keston, I resolved to give notice on a fit occasion in the House of Commons of my intention to bring forward the abolition of the slave-trade"—

evidence that we in this House do occasionally get something right.

Finally, I turn my attention to the wonderful town of Biggin Hill. It is more Kent than London, with its rolling green hills and rural lifestyle, but Biggin Hill has given us so much. I urge Members to visit the wonderful Biggin Hill museum and chapel, hear the stories of "the few", and imagine those young men strapping themselves into their Spitfires and Hurricanes, accelerating down the runway at Biggin Hill, gently pulling back on the stick and gliding free from the bonds of Earth. Imagine the cognitive dissonance that must have arisen from the exhilaration of floating in the blue Kentish sky, and the terror of the strife awaiting them across a freezing channel.

This Sunday, 15 September, is Battle of Britain Day, when we remember the service and sacrifice of those who gave their life so that we can debate the issues of the day in this place, and be both safe and free. They delivered this freedom with a bravery and selflessness that I can never begin to repay. As the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill, I recognise the honour and responsibility of forever remembering them, and I know that my privilege of serving the whole constituency was delivered by the sacrifice of those who were so much better than me.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That speech has set a very high bar. The next maiden speech is from Josh Fenton-Glynn.

3.26 pm

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) on a valiant attempt to pretend his is the best constituency in the country. I say to him: come back when you have two Nobel prize winners and a poet laureate.

I rise to give my maiden speech about the constituency of Calder Valley, where I was born and brought up, and where I now raise my family. I have had some time to consider this speech, having been elected at the fourth

[Josh Fenton-Glynn]

time of asking. I have stood that many times because I believe that the voiceless in our society need a voice; we have particularly heard that in today's debate.

As is customary, I would like to start with a few thank-yous. I thank my local Labour officials, who for a decade have stood by me and, frankly, put up with me. I also give thanks to the campaigners who gave up so much time to something bigger than themselves; to my agent Marie Wright, who I trusted with my campaign; and to my agent at the three previous elections, Steve Sweeney, a fine councillor and a better human being, who, sadly, is no longer with us to hear this speech. No series of thank-yous would be complete without those to my family, from Calder Valley's two smallest leaflet deliverers and door-knockers to my amazing wife and all the other family members who have given me emotional and practical support over many years. I owe so much to all of them, and I only hope that I can live up to their expectations of me.

Calder Valley, as I know to my cost, is a bellwether constituency, having gone the same way as the Government in every election since 1983. It consists of a string of towns that are all unique, but have a common heritage in the wool trade, and there is a commonality in the way they have faced the world since that trade has died away. To win in Calder Valley and represent it, a candidate has to be able to speak to different people in different communities, and successful Governments should always do so. Donald Thompson, the first MP for Calder Valley, in his maiden speech for the predecessor seat of Sowerby in 1979 referred to the shift in the use of our mills, saying:

"Not all the mills now spin and weave...Dozens of them house new industries".—[*Official Report*, 19 June 1979; Vol. 968, c. 1156.]

Perhaps the story of the modern Calder Valley is how we have adapted to that change.

The towns of Calder Valley run along the River Calder. That river has brought beauty, and supported the textile trade that once made our community world-famous, but it also brought the floods that hit our community particularly hard in 2012, 2015 and 2020—a visible sign of the impact of climate change, which will define many of our coming years. However, the towns have been able to rebuild, relying on an incredible community spirit and a way of being with the world that Chris McCafferty, Calder Valley's MP from 1997 to 2010, described in her maiden speech as

"bloody-minded, proud, pernickety and independent".—[*Official Report*, 21 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. 573.]

I would demur from saying that myself, but I certainly recognise it in many of the people I represent. When I was 15, Chris was good enough to accept me on work experience in her office.

Each town has its own history and traditions, guarded proudly. The town of Todmorden is the traditional county boundary between Yorkshire and Lancashire, with Yorkshire governance, an Oldham postcode and an accent somewhere in between. It was home to the famous Radical parliamentarian John Fielden, who changed the law to reduce the number of hours that children could work to 10 hours a day. Over the years, the town has boasted an astonishing two Nobel

prize winners and is the birthplace of Incredible Edible, which pioneered growing vegetables in community spaces.

Moving down the river, the town of Hebden Bridge was once famous for fustian trousers and the first worker-owned co-operative mill. That mill is now home to Calrec, which makes state-of-the-art mixing desks. Other mills house a thriving creative community.

From Hebden Bridge, a short hop down the Rochdale canal takes us to Mytholmroyd, the birthplace of poet laureate, and scourge of GCSE English students everywhere, Ted Hughes.

The mid-valley includes Elland, a market town once of such importance that the ground of Yorkshire's largest football club is named for the road that leads there. Elland is now home to great businesses and even better people. I am proud to be a member of Elland round table, and our annual bonfire raises thousands of pounds for local good causes. Round tables across the country offer a lot of charity work, but they also give men an opportunity to do things alongside each other, creating an intentional community of friends that has been vital to men's mental health over the years. I pay tribute to them.

Elland will soon be improved by a new train station, on which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will hear quite a lot from me in due course.

Our rural communities include Ryburn and Greetland—I will pass both spellings to *Hansard* later—where farmers continue to reinvent themselves. From BSE and foot and mouth to political shocks such as Brexit, the life of a small farmer is never straightforward. However, they should not be underestimated as custodians of our landscape, nature and biodiversity. By supporting small farms, we can answer many of the problems we face in other places.

The biggest population centre in the constituency is Brighouse and Rastrick, famous for its brass band that has the dubious honour of the longest-running No. 2 in British chart history. Over the years, Brighouse has produced everything from biscuits to valves, and it perhaps typifies the story of our changing industry as much as anywhere. The mills do not spin and weave, but they are now home to new industries.

On to me, I was born and raised in Calder Valley and am keen to continue the campaigning tradition of past MPs from John Fielden to Chris McCafferty, who was a tireless campaigner for women's rights. Despite my severe dyslexia, I got a good education at Calder high school, thanks to great teachers like my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner). It was the first purpose-built comprehensive school in the north of England.

Although no one in my family has chosen politics as their path, it would be untrue to say that they are not political. Indeed, going back to my great-great-grandfather, my family have been Labour supporters. Said ancestor, John Hughes, was agent to Joshua Ritson, the first Labour MP for City of Durham—one of 142 Labour MPs elected in the 1922 cohort, but the only Josh. The 2024 intake saw a 2.9-fold increase in the number of Labour MPs and a sevenfold increase in the number of Joshes. I hope that both numbers continue to hold strong.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Hear, Hear!

Josh Fenton-Glynn: I am the fourth MP for Calder Valley, and the fourth with local government experience. In general, local government is a good grounding for working here, but nowhere more so than Halifax town hall, which was designed by Charles Barry, who designed much of this place too. Halifax town hall was his final building, so we like to say that he practised on Parliament but perfected his work in Calderdale.

My predecessor, Craig Whittaker, served twice on Calderdale council, where he had the job of cabinet member for children and young people. He was also a Whip in this place. Although he and I may not agree on many issues, we have a shared love for Calder Valley. He is a committed public servant who, between the council and Parliament, gave two decades to his community.

My council career culminated in taking the role of cabinet member for adult services and wellbeing, which included social care. It is perhaps fitting that I have been elected for a party that wants to get to grips with this issue in government. While it is easy to talk about the health service and delivery, I found the difference that good care workers make to people's lives can be even more impactful.

When I look at the areas on which I have focused in my career, it is the less glamorous topics that draw me. I spent a lot of my career looking at the welfare system and how it can alleviate poverty. I have worked at Oxfam, the Child Poverty Action Group and Church Action on Poverty. A proud trade unionist, I also supported often low-paid workers with the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and the Public and Commercial Services Union. I have always believed in getting benefits right, in supporting people into work rather than punishing them for not being able to find work, and in supporting with dignity those who simply cannot work—that is one thing we can do to make our economy stronger and people happier in work and life.

At PCS, I had the honour of working with many committed public servants in often unseen but absolutely vital jobs, including public safety, which remind us of the topic of today's debate. Many of those roles were unthinkingly closed in the bonfire of the quangos, and we must always remember that our actions in this House have a larger impact elsewhere.

My more recent career as council cabinet member for social care and my day job at the General Medical Council have taught me similar lessons, as well as giving me a glimpse of the amazing, committed people working in the caring professions. It is only a shame that the unreformed care system places a different value on the work done inside and outside the NHS. I hope that a national care service will recognise that care work is skilled work, and should be supported in the same way.

I conclude by thanking my community of Calder Valley for the faith you have shown in me over the years. Our towns sit like unique pearls in the Pennines, formed from Yorkshire grit and bound together by the history of the textiles we once produced. I will always keep in mind our diversity and uniqueness, as well as the common threads that weave together and unite us. I promise always to listen and to do my very best to be your voice in Westminster.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Zöe Franklin to make her maiden speech.

3.36 pm

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I begin by congratulating the hon. Members for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) and for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) on their excellent maiden speeches, which gave a real flavour of their constituencies and their constituents.

Today's debate highlights once again the wider issues of building safety and poverty. The safety of the buildings that house people and their families should not be subject to their economic status, and we must work together across the House to level the playing field to provide safety for all in this country. There is clearly much work to be done to achieve this, and I am grateful to the Minister for noting that we will have an opportunity to further discuss this issue at a future date.

It is with immense pride that I can say that in July, on my third attempt, I was elected to represent the residents of the Guildford constituency, the place that has been my home for the past 25 years. In my speech at the count following my election, I made a commitment to my residents that I will be an MP for everyone in my constituency, including those whose voices have gone unheard for too long. I reiterate that promise today.

I first stood for elected office in 2008, driven by a love for my community and a deep frustration that my area of Bellfields and Slyfield was being failed by the Conservatives. I dedicated myself to helping those at risk of losing their homes, working on community projects and being the voice of my community fighting for change in the council chamber. Some 16 years later, I am here in this Chamber because of my frustration following 14 years of Conservative failure that has, once again, left communities across Guildford and the whole country struggling.

I am also here because the people of Guildford felt that too. They said, "Enough is enough", and felt that I could be their voice for change in this great Chamber. I am honoured by the trust they have placed in me. We are here as MPs to serve our residents, our constituencies and our country. I hope that will always be at the forefront of our minds as we fulfil our work as MPs, and particularly as we speak in this Chamber and as we vote.

Speaking of service, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank my predecessors, Angela Richardson, Anne Milton and Sir Paul Beresford, part of whose former constituency is now part of the constituency of Guildford. Angela and Anne served Guildford, its residents and businesses with determination for 14 years. I thank them on behalf of our constituents.

Now, on to my wonderful constituency. Guildford is an ancient town. The earliest human activity in the area was in the mesolithic era and it is mentioned in Alfred the Great's will from 880 AD. The name Guildford means golden ford, which comes from the golden banks at the river crossing below St Catherine's chapel, but that was not the only golden watermark in this election. In June, we saw a golden tide of Liberal Democrat MPs, with 72 elected across the country, including six of us in Surrey. This victory is a message of change for our country and I am very much looking forward to working with my fellow Lib Dem MPs, particularly on the issues of special educational needs and disabilities and Thames Water.

[Zöe Franklin]

As an MP, I am especially committed to addressing the cost of living crisis that continues to push too many people into poverty, trapped by a crisis not of their own making. We must lift people out of hardship, ensuring that everyone has access to the services they need, without draining their pockets. I am sure that colleagues throughout the Chamber will agree that the fact that over 3 million people across the UK rely on Trussell Trust food banks alone in 2023-24 is a disgrace. It is a blight on our country and it must end.

Guildford is not only a historic town but a modern hub of innovation, often referred to as the Hollywood of the computer gaming industry, and home to many high-tech businesses at the cutting edge of envirotech, defence, space and more. Our town is a tech hub that draws on the legacy of our constituency: Ada Lovelace, the mother of computing, lived at Horsley Towers in my constituency for many years, and Alan Turing, whose genius continues to be honoured through the Alan Turing Institute at my alma mater, the University of Surrey, had his childhood home in Guildford.

My constituency is also blessed with breathtaking natural beauty, from the stunning RHS Wisley to the Surrey hills and our many National Trust properties, including the River Wey navigation, which the National Trust also manages. As MP, I am committed to balancing the continued evolution and success of my town and surrounding villages with protecting the natural beauty of my constituency for generations to come.

That is why I will be championing in the House the cause of cleaning up our rivers. The River Wey, which flows through the heart of Guildford town and through the villages to the east of my constituency, has been the lifeblood of Guildford for centuries. It is central to Guildford's identity, its history, residents' leisure time and its future. The levels of pollution being recorded in our river month after month are disgusting, and that is impacting the health of nature, animals and residents. It is time to clean up our rivers and bring to an end the stories I hear too often on the doorsteps, about residents becoming unwell after going in the water. As one example, I met the coach of a children's cricket team earlier this year who shared how, in 2023, his young team went for an end of season celebratory dip in the River Wey. Every single one of those children became ill after going in the river.

I will end with two final thoughts. The first comes from my time studying music at the University of Surrey. It taught me the importance of harmony, both in art and in life. It is my sincere hope that together in this Chamber, over the coming years, we can create a symphony of voices, change the divisive rhetoric of the last few years and restore public trust in politics and politicians. If we do not, I worry about the future we leave for future generations.

Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my friends and family, particularly my husband, Chris, and my sons, Reuben and Josh, who have supported me every step of the journey to this place and continue to walk it with me. Without their love, encouragement and occasional campaigning skills I would not be here today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Oliver Ryan to make his maiden speech.

3.44 pm

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Please allow me to start by congratulating the hon. Members for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) and for Guildford (Zöe Franklin), and my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) on their quite fabulous maiden speeches. I am sorry to have to correct all of them, but my constituency is in fact the most beautiful and the most brilliant in the country.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): Has my hon. Friend ever been to Burnley?

Oliver Ryan: Slanderous!

I stand here, honoured beyond belief, to represent the great towns of Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield—towns that are part of the story of our nation. This is the land of dramatic sandstone avenues, of hills and skies, of romantic scenery in the shadows of Pendle Hill. This is the land of regimented urban landscapes, of terrace tops and towers nestled among chimneys and waterways, cushioned by villages, farms, country pubs and proper pints. We are England and Lancastrian, and we are proud.

Burnley, the “meadow by the Brun”, first recorded in the 12th century, has long been a hub of culture and commerce. We have a 13th-century market, the 14th-century Towneley Hall plays, and the 15th-century St Peter's church. Indeed, coming over the moors from the wrong side of the Pennines, Charlotte Brontë visited Gawthorpe Hall in Padiham, Wordsworth wrote of the site of Pendle Hill, and Burnley's most prolific poet, Henry Houlding, led a literary renaissance for northern towns in the 19th century.

Once the epicentre of the global cotton trade, the workers of our towns built this country. It was said at its height that Burnley's cotton industry had clothed Britain by breakfast and the rest of the world by dinner. We are a birthplace of movements, too—suffragettes such as Margaret Aldersley, and fighters, leaders and thinkers. Non-conformists are we—radicals and reformers—and once the seat of a Labour leader no less in Arthur Henderson.

I say all this because I want to stress that our story did not start or end with the mills. Looms for a long time were our tools. In our hands was the industrial world made, but now we are so much more. We do not buy the standard story of decline. We are a place determined, with eyes focused on the future, hungry to play our part.

By the way, we have no greater example of Burnley endurance and enterprise than Burnley football club. Yes, sometimes in the face of emotional trauma—at times extreme—they are twice champions of England and one-time winners of the FA cup. Let me say, I believe for the first time ever in this House, “Up the Clarets!”

As towns, we are now a thriving, dynamic, multicultural symbol of renewal and creativity. To be made in east Lancashire is to be a benchmark of quality, particularly in our manufacturing, aerospace sciences and cultural industries, with world-beating, amazing, innovative companies putting us on the map. We are also unusual politically, in that the constituency has been represented

by all three major parties in the past 10 years alone, although I hope to bring a very lengthy period of stability in that regard.

Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield are so often painted as towns with problems and extensive poverty, which is true, but to end our description there is to misunderstand our mindset, our mission, our sense of history and community. Our fight is not in trading narratives as to how we got here. We have problems, yes, but we do not simply retreat to the warm nostalgia of our history. We know that that way lies only stagnation. Our fight is in creating solutions for tomorrow. Less interested in rhetoric, storytelling and ideology, towns such as mine want outcomes. For us, one's ability to deliver solutions means a lot more than the colour of a rosette. Outcomes are what matters. What is good is what works. In our public services, that means dependable quality, transparency, choice, the interests of users coming first and an approach that challenges every vested interest in the public interest.

Reflecting on this mantra and the debate today, I want to talk a little about our housing stock. First raised by my predecessor, Peter Pike, in his maiden speech of 1983, the once proud regimented sandstone avenues that I spoke of earlier—once a step up for families—are now in a poor and worsening state. Too many of my constituents live in substandard, under-insulated, cold and mouldy homes. Low land values lock out investment, but, more critically, lock out families from the decent accommodation that they deserve and write off whole communities as just not worth the investment. If we are to continue to thrive, we need more housing, newer housing, more social housing and a decent retrofit programme not seen on a scale since the last Labour Government. It is only through that growth that we can achieve the sort of improvements in our public services that we need. That is the only way that we will attract the secure jobs and dynamic workforce of the future.

Too many of our young people are stuck in a generational cycle of worklessness, which holds back entire families, because of a lack of opportunities, skills, connectivity and, actually, confidence. We will only truly grow as a country when people in places like ours feel that growth touches them; when prosperity reaches the doorsteps of our terraces; when we break the cycle and say, “If you have the will, we will give you the way. No one left behind.” In my time here, I hope to represent to the best of my ability those values and ambitions.

At this juncture, as is tradition, I pay tribute to my predecessors: in Burnley and Padiham, Antony Higginbotham; and in Brierfield and Nelson East, Andrew Stephenson. Both very decent and hard-working men, they campaigned on many local issues in their years in this House, and had many friends across the House, which was testament to their character. I genuinely wish them both well for the future.

I am the great-grandson of Irish immigrants, from Dublin and across Ireland, who made their life in Manchester. I was aged two, and one of two kids to a single mum, when Labour took office in 1997. It is because of that Government that my mother was supported through illness to raise us, by an NHS with the time and resources to care. Schemes such as Building Schools for the Future, first praised by my predecessor Kitty Ussher in her maiden speech in 2005, gave me this future, and I am one of many. We stand on the shoulders of giants in this place, but I was able to climb on to those

shoulders only because of a supportive family, who are watching from the Gallery, and the ladder that that Labour Government provided for kids like me and families like mine, from towns like mine. I know that this new Labour Government will strive to do the same, and I for one am enormously proud to be a part of it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Sarah Gibson to make her maiden speech.

3.51 pm

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this building safety debate. I congratulate the hon. Members for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) and for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) and the hon. Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) on the love that they have shown for their constituencies.

My first contribution to this House was in the Prime Minister's statement on Grenfell last week. We must not forget in this debate that that tragedy was also a fault of failing building safety and Government accountability. Having worked in the construction industry as an architect in Spain, and having run an architectural practice in the UK for most of my professional life, I have seen far too often the construction industry fall foul of silo-working and cost-cutting. Value engineering is what we call it in the trade, but Members should not be fooled; it adds no value and is very rarely engineered.

Many families in my constituency, and indeed across the UK, are bearing the effects of poor building safety in various ways. Homes are suffering from mould and damp, as the hon. Member for Burnley mentioned, with complaints to housing associations, letting agencies and landlords often falling on deaf ears. I urge the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in its proposed review of the building regulations to introduce stronger measures to protect the most vulnerable residents from mould and damp. Everyone deserves a safe and comfortable home to return to.

However, I do not want Members to leave today's debate thinking that the only notable point of the beautiful constituency of Chippenham is that it is damp, although there is no doubt that the west country is beautifully green for a good reason. Chippenham sits in Wiltshire, in the south-west of England, and we have a proud industrial heritage too, with mills originally reliant on the River Avon, and later on the Great Western Railway, with its many impressive tunnels and viaducts. That railway currently stops only in Chippenham, so I will spend the next few years demanding that Corsham and Royal Wootton Bassett are also in receipt of stations.

Quality employment and prosperity came with the railway when it was built. Access to transport is equally important to the growth of the area today. It will play a vital part in my constituency's future as an innovation hub. We are currently home to some fantastic cutting-edge businesses, from the renewable energy sector through to the health sciences. They are complemented by the provision of excellent technical education—namely that provided by the Wiltshire college and university centre, whose campuses in Lackham and Chippenham will be critical to the growth of dynamic young companies in the future. I intend to be a strong voice championing skills, employment and opportunity in that part of the world.

[Sarah Gibson]

My father, who unfortunately died very young, instilled in me a passion for technology and innovation. But he also left me with a very special interest in vintage cars and all things mechanical, so I am incredibly lucky now to be married to David, who built the very first electric Austin Seven some 30 years ago. Slow, old cars are the perfect way to drive through a constituency that hosts some of the most beautiful towns and villages in the country—contrary to the views that some colleagues have expressed today. Many of those places will be familiar to the House. The town of Corsham is home to free-ranging peacocks and, surprisingly, can be recognised in “Poldark.” The town of Calne—rightly called “the town of discovery”—was home to Joseph Priestley, who discovered oxygen, while Laycock, with its picturesque abbey, was home to William Fox Talbot, the inventor of the photographic negative, and appears in more films than I have time to mention. Royal Wootton Bassett, with its proud connection to RAF Lyneham, was granted royal status thanks to the community’s important role in the repatriation of those killed in the service of this country.

The recent boundary changes mean that I have inherited the honour of representing those communities from both Michelle Donelan and James Gray. James will be known to this House for his chairmanship of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which has done wonders to ensure that we gain an insight into the lives of those who have committed to serving in our military. Michelle Donelan has been a strong advocate for Chippenham town centre, and her work in that area will not be forgotten. Before Michelle and James, Chippenham was represented by my Liberal Democrat friend and colleague Duncan Hames, whom I thank for his advice and support in what has been a hectic start to life in the Commons.

Over the past weeks, many people have asked me if I have had a restful recess. I have found myself raising an eyebrow and explaining that it has been the busiest period of my life. Not being on these Benches over the summer has meant that I have been able to hit the ground running at home and raise specific concerns about a lack of NHS dental provision and access to GPs across the constituency. I have also been able to meet campaigners and lend my support to important issues in the constituency, such as Chippenham’s “One Plan,” Bassett’s proposed active travel network, and the campaign for a new health centre in Calne. In backing those projects, I intend to ensure that there are careers for young people in my area, and options for those hoping to change career in later life. Like many Members, my own career has taken a dramatic change of tack recently. I hope that the House will not mind if I briefly explain how I find myself here today.

I was lucky enough to be born into a family that cared deeply about my education. With their support, and a grant from Wiltshire council, I was able to study architecture at Kingston and at University College London before registering as an architect in Spain. Some years later, I returned home to Wiltshire and became a town and unitary authority councillor. It is from that perspective of positive experience in local government that I felt I could do more to promote the interests of my community here in Westminster, and I am honoured that they thought so too.

I end my maiden speech by wishing my brother, Luke, a very happy birthday, and by thanking my mother, who has been a great source of strength to me. She canvassed tirelessly on my behalf throughout the election campaign, even in the pouring rain in what we now all know to be a rather damp constituency. Finally, I give my thanks to my constituents. Whether they voted for me or not, I promise to work hard and champion them all in everything I do.

4 pm

Mike Amesbury (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): I congratulate the new hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) on a brilliant maiden speech—it was quite emotional at the end there—and all hon. Members who have made maiden speeches today. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) is still a young lad now, but he was an even younger lad when I had the displeasure of campaigning with him in Burnley—he had shorts on, but he still managed to win. It is great to see him in his place and it was a pleasure to listen to his maiden speech.

This debate is obviously about a very serious matter. My thoughts, and the thoughts of everyone in the Chamber, are with the 72 people—men, women and children—who lost their lives in the Grenfell fire over seven years ago. It was an appalling event and the survivors and the community are yet to see justice. That might mean criminal prosecutions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) rightfully highlighted—I know he is urging for that to happen at pace, as he did yesterday during Justice questions—or, in regard to the broader building safety crisis, ensuring that buildings are made safe at pace.

Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s phase 2 Grenfell report and recommendations make for difficult reading. In fact, digesting them will make us angry. We all have to channel that anger, collectively and responsibly, to ensure that the victims of Grenfell and previous fires, such as Lakanal and in Kirby, are responded to by the body politic and the new Government—my good colleagues and hon. Friends now on the Front Bench. Just think about this: each and every one of those 72 people who lost their lives should still be with us today, enjoying the life that we enjoy and having the frustrations that we have.

As the report says, the event was entirely preventable. It was entirely predictable. But the lessons from history, whether that be Lakanal or the earlier fire in Kirby, were not learned. They were not acted upon by successive Governments of all political persuasions or by industry. I will not name the companies referred to in the report for obvious reasons to do with the court case. Government, product manufacturers—you name it, Grenfell was the result of organisations and individuals, as the report says, being systematically dishonest. Dishonesty was hardwired into the construction and building industry, putting profit before people’s lives.

We cannot escape the fact that this was a political decision, driven by ideology. The coalition Government are referenced in the report: their time in office was basically a bonfire of red tape. It was deregulation—build them high, build them cheap and refurbish them cheap—and the consequences are all too clear. Indeed, residents of Grenfell alerted the council of the day, regulators

and the powers that be that this was an accident waiting to happen, and it did happen, with all those consequences for all to see.

Of course, some of this has continued. We have had companies gaming tests of products that were put on high-rises—products that should never have been there. Let us be frank: those products are solidified petrol. Thousands of them were put on high-rises up and down the country—high-rises insulated by solidified petrol. This country is quite unique in the fact that it greenlighted those products through deregulation. It is no coincidence that we had fires such as Lakanal and Grenfell.

Marie Goldman: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned the gaming of the system and the tests. Was he as appalled as I was to read about the way in which those tests were gamed? It is said that those products, which were designed not to burn, failed the tests, so the companies went back a second time. One of the issues with the tests was that the temperature had to not rise too much, so the companies insulated the temperature gauges rather than admit that they had a product that ultimately was not fit for the purpose they were trying to sell it for. Is he appalled as I am that that practice was allowed to happen, and does he agree that the testing houses need to shoulder some responsibility for the fact that it was allowed to happen?

Mike Amesbury: Absolutely I am appalled, and as I have said, those products are still with us. My hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Margaret Mullane) will refer to a recent incident in Dagenham where they were trying to remediate the problem.

Margaret Mullane (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): In September 2020, an external wall survey revealed that the cladding on the Spectrum building in my constituency was not compliant with building regulations. Works to remediate that building were not actioned until three years later, in July 2023. The building was then engulfed by flames a few short weeks ago, with only 20% of the remediation works still outstanding. Does my hon. Friend agree that urgent steps are needed to massively scale up the process of remediation?

Mike Amesbury: I agree with my hon. Friend. She has demonstrated how alive and kicking this issue is, and the need for the new Government—who have not been in power very long; less than 10 weeks now—to step up and step in on the issue of regulation and remediation. I know that they will do just that.

Because of campaigners—whether it is Grenfell United, the all-party parliamentary groups on fire safety and on leasehold, the cladding action groups, or hon. Members in this place—we now have stronger regulation in the form of the Building Safety Act. As the new shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), has said, there was considerable cross-party work over that period of time, and I was the shadow housing and planning Minister throughout that 13-week process. We certainly have a stronger regulation framework now to remediate those buildings, and as the Minister mentioned, a considerable amount of money has been committed—billions of pounds—but the Act undoubtedly has some holes.

Remediation is not done at pace—it is incredibly slow—and it is cladding-centric, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), which means it does not cover the broader fire safety issues that it should cover. The new Labour Government and the ministerial team have quickly discovered—they are crystal clear about this—that the remediation process is incredibly slow, and they are going to turbocharge it. Seven years on from Grenfell, only 29% of buildings have been fully remediated. I think the Minister mentioned that up to 7,000 buildings have been identified, so the task in hand is incredible. It is alarming, but following the Grenfell inquiry phase 2 report, I know that we will step up and move things on at pace.

Members have mentioned insurance premiums. I find it somewhat bizarre that in a number of remediated buildings the insurance premiums are going up. The shadow Minister referred to that. How can that be? If something is safer, surely the risk has gone down. I think there are some fundamental questions to ask there. There are certainly issues about commissions being passed on to management agents and freeholders, and a plethora of other things are causing insurance premiums to go up.

Ministers certainly need to ensure that there is intervention on things being passed on in service charges, such as insurance, so that we can bring down costs. It may be that we should have a similar model to that for flooding. With Flood Re, the Government have become an underwriter to help bring costs down. I am not going to get overly party political, but interventions by the previous Government did not work, so collectively we have to move things forward.

There is a plethora of issues. We have talked about insurance, and the previous Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who is not in his place at the moment, referred to issues with mortgages. He also mentioned the lack of parity in funding between social housing providers or housing associations and the private sector. Again, that needs to be addressed by the Government. There is a lot of money out there, and a lot of people with responsibility for this mess need to pay.

Some leaseholders in buildings such as the Decks in my constituency are beyond the scope of the Building Safety Act. They do not have protections, but are what are called the excluded leaseholders. Yet if those individual flats are not remediated, it means the whole block is not remediated. It also means that many are facing bankruptcy and cannot sell on. Again, there is a bit more homework to be done at pace by the new Government to ensure that there is justice for leaseholders, who are innocent in this whole toxic mess.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater mentioned one of the key recommendations in the phase 2 report about the regulator, and I will conclude on this point. At the moment, the Building Safety Regulator is in the Health and Safety Executive and, as he said, I am not convinced it is resourced as it should be. That adds to the mix of confusion around accountability, as does the fact that there are several pots—four or five different pots—of finance. We need one single regulator, accountable to a Minister, to get a grip and provide the drive to remediate such buildings at pace.

[Mike Amesbury]

Finally, justice is certainly about ensuring that all those buildings up and down the country are safe, but it is also about ensuring that those responsible for this—those responsible for Grenfell—are brought to account through criminal prosecutions.

4.14 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate. I compliment and congratulate the Members who have made their first speeches: the hon. Members for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune), for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), for Guildford (Zöe Franklin), for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) and for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson), which is the town where I was born.

This debate, about building safety, comes on the back of the report by Sir Martin Moore-Bick on the Grenfell fire, which should be sobering reading for anybody who has any sort of public duty or is in public life. It catalogues how privatisation, underfunding, inadequate surveillance and inadequate supervision led to a vulnerable group of tenants being left in a desperate situation in which a large number died. He concludes in his report that every single one of those deaths could have been avoided, had there been proper regulation and protection. His proposals are far-reaching, and I look forward to the Government responding in detail, in the near future, on how they will ensure proper regulation and supervision and, above all, a role for local government as the local inspectorate of all buildings to ensure that they are all safe and that all the materials are correctly put together. The idea that deregulation can bring about safety is obviously nonsense, and this report has shown it to be such.

Sarah Gibson: Recent changes to building regulations require approved inspectors to be certified. That is welcome, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the original scheme, under which supervision was by local authorities, which were not financially tied to the contractor, developer or employer, was considerably safer than this deregulated system with approved inspectors? Perhaps the Government should look carefully at changing that.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Member is absolutely right. The watchword has to be independence, of both inspection and regulation. The idea that developers can mark their own homework has to be got rid of sharpish, because it is a dangerous precedent, and we can now see the results of it.

This horrible fire at Grenfell did not come from nowhere. There was the Knowsley fire and the Lakanal House fire. There were constant references to the dangers of inadequate or inappropriate cladding, the lack of fire equipment, and the fire risk that goes with that. This has to be the most massive wake-up call there has ever been. It also shows that communities, such as those in Grenfell, were treated with contempt by their local authority, regulators and others. They simply did not care. In Grenfell, there was a mixed group of working-class tenants living in a dangerous place. On the day that the report came out, one of the residents was asked about it, and he said that the cladding might as well have been made of firelighters, given the danger it presented to them all. Something quickly needs to be done about that.

We must look at how we deal with the need for remedial action. When the Grenfell fire took place, inspections were immediately made of buildings all over the country; that was the right thing to do. By and large, local authorities responded well and removed cladding. In my local authority, Islington, cladding was discovered on one local authority building, Fyfield House, and that was immediately removed by the authority. However, I find that buildings in the private sector and other buildings in which leaseholders live have not been dealt with in the same way or with the same efficiency, and tenants, residents and leaseholders are paying the price for that. To give an example, there is a nice leasehold development in my constituency called Highbury Square. It was apparently well built and has good facilities. The problem is that it has cladding that has not been certified or approved, so the insurance costs are very high. The developers do not want to pay for the remedial work, and despite numerous meetings being held with Ministers in the previous Government and so on, no action has been taken. The families living there cannot sell or move. They cannot do anything. They are absolutely stuck.

I said in my intervention on the Minister that those who have had to incur huge insurance costs just to remain in their flat should be compensated, and the stress among people who live in such places should also be recognised through compensation. If there is a huge dispute about who will pay for all this—I am quite sure that many companies will try to take legal action against the Government—surely it is the Government's responsibility to step in, if necessary, and do the work. They can charge it to the owners of the freehold or leasehold who are the cause of the problem. In the case I mentioned, Aviva pension fund is responsible. In the case of the Drayton Park development in my constituency, which the Ministry is well aware of—I had several meetings about it with Ministers under the previous Government and many officials—it is Galliard Homes, which seems to be trying to evade its responsibility to ensure that the work is carried out.

I appeal to the Minister to look carefully at the excessive delays caused by endless arguments with developers and the owners of freeholds. Those delays have put people at risk and have led to enormous cost for them. I come across other developments all the time that seem to be in the same situation, including some of those at the former Arsenal stadium site. This debate is about all that.

In this debate, we also recognise how communities respond, and how they responded to the Grenfell fire. I went there the day after the fire, and met the firefighters who, unbelievably bravely, had been trying to deal with a fire the likes of which they had never seen before. They did not really have the wherewithal to deal with it. Their bravery was enormous and their stress was huge. Some of them received abuse from our media and others, who tried to put the blame on them. They are the last people who should be blamed. I also saw how the community came together. I have been on every one of the silent walks for Grenfell that take place every year on the anniversary, usually in the company of the former Member of Parliament for Kensington, Emma Dent Coad, who did a fantastic job, not just at the time as the MP, but since then, campaigning for safety and justice for the victims of Grenfell. It needs to be recognised that

the community came together to support and to demand, and they expect answers from this Government, so that they can live in a place of safety in the future.

The last thing that I want to say—I know that others wish to speak—is that fundamentally this debate is about housing and how we treat people. We have had market domination of the principles of housing. We have gone away from the principle of housing as a human right and instead to a market solution to it all. We can see the results: several thousand people rough sleeping every night; tens of thousands of people living in grotesquely overcrowded conditions; and many people—in my constituency, a third of them—living in the private rented sector, which is largely unregulated, insecure and very expensive.

I have been leafing through the Renters' Rights Bill just produced by the Secretary of State. I welcome much of what I have read, but unless the Bill addresses the fundamental issue of the cost of private renting, instead of leaving it to the market to set the cost, areas like mine will suffer from social cleansing for a long time to come. Working-class families will be moved out because they simply cannot afford to stay.

We want to maintain the communities in our inner-urban and city areas in all parts of the country, so we need rent regulation, as well as security of tenure and all that goes with it. That means public intervention, building more council houses and taking the market element out of how planning decisions are made on building council housing. Instead, we should say, "The priority for all our community is a sufficient supply of good-quality, well-designed council housing."

I finish on this thought: we have the potential to build some wonderful places, but also to take over many empty properties and convert them into some form of council or social housing. We need to ensure that housing is well designed, with sufficient open space and good room sizes. When developers are creating a home for someone to live in, they should think it through—changes in life, disabilities that may occur and everything else—and ensure that we have the highest possible quality social housing design for the future. This report could be a great turning point in the way that we deal with housing in our society—or it could be shelved and forgotten in a few years' time. The people of Grenfell, who suffered and are still grieving the loss of others, will never let us forget it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Chris Curtis to make his maiden speech.

4.25 pm

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune), my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), the hon. Member for Guildford (Zoe Franklin), my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) and the hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) on their fantastic maiden speeches. It is great to start my time in this place by proving no fewer than five colleagues wrong about their constituency being the best, because obviously that is an award that belongs to the people of Milton Keynes North.

This is such an important debate on an issue that affects many of my constituents and those of other Members representing Milton Keynes. I am glad to hear that this Government will work to ensure that everyone feels safe in their home. As the brother of one of our brave local firefighters in Milton Keynes, I echo the comments of many colleagues who paid tribute to those in our emergency services who have dealt with such incidents. I hope that they have to deal with far fewer in future.

It is an immense honour to stand here today as the new MP for Milton Keynes North. I am deeply privileged to represent not just the new city of Milton Keynes but many of the beautiful villages and historic towns around which it was built. In my constituency lies the old market town of Olney, where 250 years ago the timeless hymn "Amazing Grace" was penned. There is Wolverton, which boasts the oldest operational railway works in the world; Stony Stratford, where I am told the term "cock and bull story" originated—thankfully not something we are known for in this place—and Newport Pagnell, which for over half a century hosted the headquarters of Aston Martin.

Next week marks 60 years since the release of the film "Goldfinger", in which the most famous car in the world, the DB5, made its debut. Last week, I had the pleasure to visit Aston Martin to see the home of that historic car and where some of "On Her Majesty's Secret Service" was filmed. Can I promise that my contributions in this place will have the excitement, glamour and the adrenalin of those films? No, I cannot, but as the MP representing towns with such fascinating pasts, I promise that I will fight to give them all an even brighter future.

I start by paying tribute to my predecessor, Ben Everitt. He worked tirelessly to try to secure a much needed women's and children's hospital for Milton Keynes. As we now have some of the longest NHS waiting lists in the country, it is an important campaign, and I will be sure to take up its reins. He also chaired the all-party parliamentary group for housing market and housing delivery, which looked at how we fix the broken planning system—some of the issues have been discussed today. I hope that this new Government take forward many of the recommendations that emerged from that work as we strive to build the 1.5 million new homes that this country needs.

I would like to take a moment to mention my Labour predecessor and friend, the late Brian White. Brian was a true champion of Milton Keynes. He saw the potential in our city long before it was fully realised and, as an MP, local councillor and later mayor, Brian was a tireless advocate for our community. He was never one to shy away from a hard battle, as those of us who knew him can attest. One of those battles was the successful fight to keep the laws in this place written on vellum. Unfortunately, we have since moved to a compromise position where only the front covers of each Act are printed that way, but since the only remaining vellum manufacturer in the country, William Cowley, is based in my constituency, I will fight with everything I can to keep what is left of this important 175-year-old tradition.

As the first MP for Milton Keynes who was born, and grew up, there, I would like to talk about the many men and women who built the new town—now city—that I call home. One in particular is Fred Roche, the man

[Chris Curtis]

who led the Milton Keynes development corporation with a bold and uncompromising vision. The mantra that everybody on that team lived by was, “Make no little plans”. Fred was a streetfighter, who more than anything else was willing to do what was needed to achieve something that many others have considered impossible: getting money out of the Treasury. Allegedly, he insisted on constructing the outer roads of Milton Keynes first, making it harder for the budget to be cut later—a scheme that those working on HS2 wish they had thought of. He also once marched into Whitehall on Christmas eve and refused to leave until his budgets were approved. I just mention to the Government Front Bench that those are tactics I will not rule out using in the future. [Laughter.]

For Members across the Chamber who have, shamefully, not yet visited Milton Keynes, what Fred and his team built was nothing short of a masterpiece. At times when families right across our country were living in substandard conditions—many would echo some of the comments we have heard today—and many were living without even an indoor toilet, Milton Keynes offered a beacon of hope. High-quality homes were built for tens of thousands of new residents and, at its peak, 10 families were moving in every single day.

In just a few decades, what was once a vision on a planner’s desk had transformed into one of the UK’s most dynamic economic powerhouses. Today, we are home to Santander UK, one of the biggest banks in the country, and Red Bull Racing, the fastest Formula 1 team on the planet—when I spoke to Aston Martin last week, it told me to take out that line. [Laughter.] The city of pioneers and innovators creates more start-ups than almost anywhere else, boasts a growing tech sector worth over £3 billion and ranks as one of the most productive places in the country. For every pound that Fred did manage to squeeze out of the Treasury’s tight grasp, we have repaid it many, many times over. And while it may be known for its concrete cows, it is far from a concrete jungle. Some 40% of our city is comprised of green spaces. Alongside those are our beautiful lakes, rivers and canals. Every child, including me, grew up within a five-minute walk of a park or green space.

It is said that planting a tree is one of the greatest acts of altruism. We dig, we plant a seed and, with that small act, we shape the world for many generations to come. Fred Roche and the team planted more than a fair few trees. In fact, Milton Keynes boasts over 22 million trees, more than 80 per person. But I would argue that building a new town is an even greater act of altruism. Fred passed away a few years before I was born, but I stand here today as a member of the first generation that truly benefited from his vision. Thanks to Fred’s design, my young parents were able to scrape together enough to raise me and my brother in a spacious house with its own back garden. The dream of home ownership became a reality for them, providing us with the security and stability needed for the best start in life. The parks and green spaces they created back then may one day be enjoyed by my own children.

Now, I will not pretend that we do not have our share of challenges, ones I will work tirelessly to address in this place, but Milton Keynes was built on that new town promise of good jobs, public services that were

there when you needed them, and, most importantly, affordable and high-quality new homes. It is a place that gave me the opportunities, so that I could one day be standing here, giving my maiden speech in the House of Commons. I mention that because in my short time in politics I have noticed that too often people search for excuses to oppose new developments. There is a view, or has been a view, that it is more politically convenient to be a voice that yells no, rather than a voice that searches for ways to say yes. And while the acronym “nimby” may be a modern invention, the sentiment is not. Glancing through *Hansard* of the ’60s and ’70s, we find countless examples of opposition to the building of my hometown. But there are consequences to that short-term political thinking. If it was not for Fred and the Milton Keynes development corporation team’s ambition, backed by the 1960s Labour Government, the two-bed end of terrace that my brother and I grew up in would never have existed.

As a proud son of Milton Keynes, I can think of no mission more important for this new Government than to build the new towns and new homes that this country needs. It will require us to embrace the spirit of Fred Roche—visionary, unyielding in the face of opposition, and making no little plans—but it will allow us to build a future where every child in Britain has the opportunity to thrive in a home and a community that nurtures their potential, as mine did for me.

4.35 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a pleasure to address the House on the critical issue of building safety. Before I get to the meat of my speech, may I congratulate the maiden speakers we have heard today? They have taken us on a tour of Britain—or, perhaps more particularly, a tour of England—that would send the newly reconvened all-party parliamentary group on publishing into an excitable frenzy; I hope some of those words find themselves in the publications of the future. I particularly congratulate the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) on his maiden speech, and thank him and his brother for their service to his constituents and to those imperilled by the risk of fire.

The cladding and fire safety scandal that underpins this discussion is a national issue that impacts residents in almost every constituency across the country, but which does so highly unevenly, with different geographical intensities, and which, for those who are unaffected and unimpacted, can go almost entirely unobserved. For those who do feel the direct effects, the results can be devastating. My constituents have made this point to me in the most vivid terms. To find yourself resident in a building caught up in the cladding and fire safety scandal is to find yourself locked in a bewildering series of revelations and disclosures beyond your control and often beyond your understanding, each one of which undermines your confidence in the safety of the place in your life and the life of your family that should be a sanctuary: your home.

Unlike more urban areas, my constituency of Surrey Heath has not been especially hard hit by the scandal, but neither has it escaped it all together. My constituents living in the North Court development in Camberley, our main market town, have lived through the trauma of finding that their building poses serious risks to them

from unsafe, flammable cladding and fire safety failures that have been present in the building from the point of construction more than 15 years ago—risks and threats that should never have been there, covered up by plasterboard and panelling, and which were only brought to the surface in the months and years following the tragic loss of 72 lives in the Grenfell Tower fire. Despite the efforts of inquiries to ensure that such a tragedy is never repeated, according to figures that I have seen, there remain in the UK today 4,630 buildings with unsafe cladding. Of those, 3,287 are awaiting remediation; and of those, 2,331 have yet to even start the process. According to the building safety register, that leaves around half a million lives still at risk.

We must also remember that the Government's figures relate only to mid and high-rise blocks—those above 11 metres in height. We have no data to understand how the building safety crisis is affecting many tens, hundreds and thousands of blocks that do not meet that height threshold. Clear and urgent questions remain about if, when and how the Government plan to gather and publish that data. We cannot hope to resolve the issue if we have no clear or quantifiable grasp of the scale and scope of the problem. Where action is taken, it must be robust, efficient and informed by the best expertise available. Given the potentially fatal consequences of inaction, maintaining the highest standards in future building safety measures is essential.

Recent disputes, such as that between Barratt Homes and the residents of Royal Artillery Quays over combustible panels left on escape stairwells during remediation works, raise serious questions about whether current approaches to remediation are sufficiently robust. We must also question the capacity of the new Building Safety Regulator to investigate such issues. A recent report states that, as of February 2024, the regulator had only 10 regulatory leads and eight caseworkers—a situation described as “chronically under-resourced”.

Residents of buildings undergoing remediation works have urgent questions and concerns that need to be addressed. I have been contacted by many constituents sharing their distress and anxiety about a process that leaves them feeling powerless and prisoners in their own homes. As I speak here today, the residents of North Court are living amid scaffolding, plastic sheeting and constant noise while the flammable cladding that once wrapped their building is removed. The recent fire in Dagenham underscores the risks associated with such projects, and we cannot allow a repeat of that to occur. Residents across the country are not unaware of these risks, and live with the constant uncertainty that they pose.

The House should commend the extensive legal reforms enacted after Grenfell, including the Fire Safety (England) Regulations 2022, the Building Safety Act 2022, and the establishment of the Building Safety Regulator. However, I have yet to see the regulator actively enforce the regulations through prosecutions. We cannot allow, nor can we afford, laws passed in this place to go unenforced, whether owing to a lack of political will, insufficient funding for regulators or poorly drafted legislation. As I have already mentioned, the victims and families of Grenfell have not yet received the justice they deserve, and I cannot allow my constituents to suffer a similar injustice. I look forward to seeing those who violate regulations in the residential property sector held accountable without further delay.

While time is of the essence, I want to ask the Minister and, indeed, the Government to take a few key actions. First, I ask them to act with “more haste, less speed” to ensure that safety is not compromised in the name of expediency. The relevant data must be gathered and published, regulations must be robust, and regulators must be properly resourced. Secondly, I ask them to convene a building safety crisis taskforce to help shape the resolution of the building safety crisis, drawing together industry leaders, residents, local and national politicians, civil servants and third sector stakeholders. Thirdly, I ask them to undertake a full and holistic review of current and proposed building safety regulations in order to understand what works, how those regulations interact with one another, and the enforceability—and the willingness to enforce—the regulations currently written into law. The safety of my constituents in North Court, and that of others throughout the country, depends on such action.

4.42 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I commend all the maiden speeches that we have heard today: I feel as if I have been on a tour of England following the descriptions of so many constituencies. May I associate myself with what was said by the hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) about his predecessor, Bob Neill? I now represent part of Bob Neill's former constituency, and I know from talking to people during the recent general election campaign that he was held in high regard by his constituents. I wish him all the best for the future.

I am sick and tired of coming here and raising the issue of Master Gunner Place in my constituency. It has been in need of remedial work for a very long time, and still nothing has been done. It was built by Countryside Properties, now Vistry Group Ltd, and we understand that it is about to be handed over to a company called Samnas, although that is yet to happen I have written many times to the managing agent, Rendall and Rittner, about issues that have been raised with me by my constituents, but to no avail.

I was approached by one of my constituents who lives in Master Gunner Place. He had tried to sell his property on four occasions; at the final attempt he had one bidder, whose bid he accepted. However, the bidder was refused a mortgage owing to the size of the service charge. The charge for 2022-23 rose by 107% in 2023-24, to £6,100, and such charges are now trapping people in homes they are unable to sell. Under section 22 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, the leaseholders are entitled to demand from the freeholder or the managing agent an explanation of how those charges were arrived at. When the residents of Master Gunner Place asked for that, they were given only partial information, and on several occasions the managing agent failed to meet the requirement to respond within 30 days. In the end, the agent flatly refused to supply the missing information. When my constituent complained to the managing agent, it did not answer; it just got its solicitors to respond and threaten him with a county court judgment. As a result of that, my constituent had no option: because of the terms of the lease, he had to pay up; otherwise, he could have been in default. He ended up paying the service charge, plus nearly £1,250 in legal fees and interest for being two months late with his payment.

[Clive Efford]

The residents tried to mount legal action but, ironically, they feared that if they were to take on the freeholder over the costs, they would risk the freeholder adding the cost of defending the action to their service charges, because of the terms of the lease. They are absolutely trapped in a situation whereby they need the information to be able to legally challenge the freeholder, but the freeholder and the managing agent are withholding the information that is needed to undertake the action. That cannot be a fair situation for the residents to be left in.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is also about insurance? I have a constituent in a similar situation who has had to pay £2,500 in insurance costs.

Clive Efford: Yes, insurance costs are driving up service charges. I have heard of 60% increases in service charges that are attributable to insurance costs. Insurance companies are gouging prices and making money on the back of this situation. Given what has brought us to this debate, it is absolutely appalling that they are behaving in that way.

Remedial works are ultimately the responsibility of freeholders, and contributions from leaseholders should be capped. Management companies are obliged to provide the detail of what they intend to spend on such work but, unfortunately, they are withholding that information. The managing agent should not be able to charge residents anything until the information is supplied. The cap should be spread over 10 years, and no more than one tenth of the cost should be charged in any one year. In the absence of the relevant information, leaseholders cannot check whether the charges that are being imposed on them are reasonable. If they do not pay them and they challenge them, they risk being in default of their leases and receiving a letter from solicitors. The reality is that the terms of leases prevent people from being able to get justice.

The outstanding safety work in the block in Master Gunner Place is simply not being done. A survey was done at the end of 2019, and it was clear that the work needed to be done. In the intervening years, none of it has been carried out. The developer, Vistry Group, is supposedly in the process of handing over the freehold to Samnas, but because the legal documents have not been signed, the leaseholders have been left in limbo and are unable to progress any of the work. The leaseholders engaged lawyers to write to the developer in order to get a reply on the scope of the work that needed to be carried out, and they were informed that the work was due to start in August 2024. Here we are in September, and nothing has been done. They still have no idea about what work is in scope or what contribution the residents will have to make. There are three blocks involved in the development and, to date, none of them has had any of the remedial work done.

It is now time to draw a line under all this. It has gone on for too long. We know that the work needs to be done, we know who is responsible for it and we should not be allowing them to drag their feet any more. It is time for the remediation acceleration scheme to put a rocket under those developers and freeholders. We should

be ensuring that they carry out this work, and that if they refuse to do so, they are fined. Only fines will make these people see reason; it is only if they are hit financially that they will change their ways. The remediation acceleration scheme must also include compensation for leaseholders for all the unreasonable charges they have been forced to pay because the management companies and the freeholders have withheld the information needed to ensure accurate fees and charges and that the cap is being properly applied. Where those companies have not done that, we should be making sure that they are fined.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Melanie Ward to make her maiden speech.

4.50 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I congratulate all the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches in today's debate, and in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) who made a witty and ambitious speech giving an ambitious vision for his area, which I fully support and congratulate him on.

It is the honour of my life to have been elected to serve and represent the people of the Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy constituency in this Parliament. To each of my constituents, I say, "I will do my very best to serve you, regardless of who you voted for." I pay tribute to my predecessor, Neale Hanvey, who represented the area with passion and a particular dedication to casework—a crucial part of an MP's role that is too often overlooked.

I am only the second woman to represent this fine constituency, the first having been Lesley Laird. Lesley, like me, is a passionate advocate for women's equality. I am proud to be elected to a Parliament that has more women in it than any before, and I give grateful thanks to the women who fought for our right to be here today and to be here in significant numbers—women such as Jenny Lee from Fife. We stand on the shoulders of these sisters, and I pledge today to continue to work for our equality with men. Progress of any kind is often hard fought, and that is a lesson I will keep hold of. Nevertheless, we persist.

My constituency enjoys widespread name recognition because our former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, is another of my predecessors. No pressure, then! Gordon's contribution to our communities, our country and our world is deep and lasting. More than anything, I take inspiration from his absolute moral clarity over why he was in politics and what he used power for—namely, to tackle poverty. Gordon's first speech in this place was an excoriating exposé of unemployment under the then Conservative Government and the poverty it had created locally.

Today, in one part of Kirkcaldy, one in four children are growing up in poverty. The last Labour Government lifted almost 1.5 million children out of poverty, and we will ensure that this one does similar. Unlike some, I do not believe that the purpose of politics is simply to ensure better opportunities for those we are here to serve. It is also about bettering their outcomes, because every child in my constituency should be able to fulfil his or her potential.

As we have heard this afternoon, it is not surprising in a first speech to say how lucky we are to represent such a beautiful part of our United Kingdom, but in my case it is definitely true. My constituency takes in towns and villages including Dysart, Kirkcaldy, Kinghorn, Burntisland, Aberdour, Dalgety Bay, North Queensferry, Inverkeithing, Kingseat, Crossgates, Auchtertool, Cowdenbeath, Hill of Beath and Lumphinnans, as well as the islands of Inchcolm and Inchkeith. We have some 19 miles of glorious Fife coastline, stunning beaches and rolling fields. One end of the engineering wonder that is the Forth bridge, a UNESCO world heritage site, rests in North Queensferry. Hon. Members who may wish to take a train across it to visit us would find much to enjoy, from the Links market in the Lang Toun, Europe's longest street fair, to Burntisland highland games, the second oldest highland games in Scotland, and many wonderful galas—I greatly enjoyed parading in the excellent Cowdenbeath gala day this year—as well as a multitude of events at Aberdour festival, and so much more besides.

However, it is a different kind of beauty which truly marks my constituency as special: the beauty of community solidarity and looking out for each other in difficult times. Today, our food banks and so many amazing community organisations such as Max's Meals, the Cottage, the local YMCA, Greener Kirkcaldy and Nourish are doing work that they should not have to do to stop people going hungry. Just as we on the Labour Benches recognise the beauty of this community solidarity, we work for the day when nobody has to rely on it.

Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy helped to power the industrial success of this country, as mining was once a booming industry. People worked incredibly hard in often dangerous conditions, as the tragedy of the Seafield colliery disaster showed. I am proud to be a trade unionist, and indeed unions have a proud history in Fife because of our mining heritage. We have a proud industrial history too, of openness and connection to the wider world, where once we were a world leader in linoleum production.

It is well known that economist Adam Smith was born locally and wrote his hugely influential text "The Wealth of Nations" in Kirkcaldy. His book "The Theory of Moral Sentiments", written over 250 years ago, is less well-known but made significant observations about empathy between human beings, including between those in countries far apart. A lesson in our common humanity could not be any more important in today's deeply dangerous world.

The people of Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy are rightly proud of our industrial past, but we know too that pride in the past does not allow our children to reach their potential. What my constituents want is a future to look forward to, with work that pays fairly, and it is the job of those of us elected to this House to make that possible.

Fife has a housing emergency. I contrast our new UK Labour Government's programme to build 1.5 million new homes in England with the unacceptable fact that we simply do not have enough homes for all of the people who need them in Scotland.

Today, the NHS, which is under so much strain, is our biggest employer locally, and I pay tribute to the staff at the Victoria hospital in particular. Mine is a family indebted to the NHS, as so many across this

country are, but this Labour Government—and hopefully a Labour Scottish Government from 2026—have so much to do to repair it.

My constituency is also home to a significant Polish community, whose presence was established by brave war veterans unable to return home after fighting the Nazis in world war two. Those who seek to sow hatred and division in this country would do well to remember that many of us simply would not be here without immigration; my own great grandfather was a Polish immigrant. The Polish community in my constituency is an example of the way that immigration so often enriches our communities.

In my previous work leading international development and humanitarian aid charities, I met thousands of people forced to flee their homes for survival. Among crowded Syrian refugee camps, parched Nigerian internally displaced persons camps, and the unbearable horror being inflicted on Gaza, I have seen the impact of humanity at its worst. I have hugged other mothers, each of us with the same desires for our children, but each of us also with vastly different chances of ever achieving them simply because of an accident of birth—there, but for the grace of God, go I.

I have witnessed what happens when international law is ignored, seen how climate change ravages humans' ability to survive, and observed the impact of mistakes made by this House. I have seen the worst of humanity, but I have also seen the best. I thank those I was lucky enough to serve alongside, especially the Nigerians, Lebanese and Palestinians, each of whom I was privileged to learn from. I particularly want to name my former colleagues from Gaza: Fikr, Mahmoud, Mohammed, Motaz, Wasim, Ahmed, Rasha, Asma, Nawraz, Amal, Moe, Mahmoud, Ali, Haitham, Tarneem, Afnan, Khaled, Heba, Saeda and Ghada. They are the best of humanity, and they desperately need a ceasefire, justice, freedom and dignity.

My life and political beliefs have been shaped by the experiences of my brother Ross, who is disabled. Like so many, my family, and my mum in particular, have had to fight incredibly hard with and for Ross to access the support to which he should be entitled from our education, health, housing and social security systems. Disabled children and their families should not have to fight so hard. There is a fundamental flaw in our state that it requires the parents of a disabled child to make it their life's work to access the services that should be their right. This must change.

It is of enormous sadness to me that my dear dad is not here to see me become a Member of this House, having been taken from us by cancer, as too many still are. I was a schoolgirl when he first brought me to this place, and we never imagined then that I might one day sit on these green Benches. I know he would swell with pride if he were here today.

I thank my whole family and my friends for their love, and I thank everyone who has supported me along the way. Most of all, I thank my amazing boys. To my husband and children, I say that I hope I will make you proud. You are the greatest gift I could ever have asked for.

In the general election, Labour promised an end to chaos and division. I know that many of my constituents are weary of a Scotland that has been divided on the

[Melanie Ward]

constitution for too long. Instead, people want us to focus on fixing our broken but beloved country, bringing people together and building a better future. I will do all I can towards this goal.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Markus Campbell-Savours to make his maiden speech.

5.1 pm

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I congratulate everyone on their maiden speeches. It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), for Burnley (Oliver Ryan), for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) and for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), and the hon. Members for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune), for Guildford (Zoe Franklin) and for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson).

I represent the new constituency of Penrith and Solway, which takes in parts of the old Carlisle, Copeland, Workington, and Penrith and The Border constituencies. I therefore follow some truly great parliamentarians: Willie Whitelaw, a pillar of strength behind the Thatcher Government; David Maclean, Lord Blencathra, who now excels in the tradition of likeable nuisances in the other place; Baroness Sue Hayman, a champion of farming and rural affairs whose skills will be put to good use on the Labour Benches; Sir Tony Cunningham, a family friend; my father, a fine mentor; Rory Stewart, who now entertains Members, at least on the Labour Benches; Dr Neil Hudson, who has been re-elected as the Member for Epping Forest; and Mark Jenkinson, who represented Workington from 2019 to 2024—I may have profoundly disagreed with him, but I must confess that he worked hard for his constituents. I find myself slightly in awe at those Members whose predecessors have disappeared into the sunset. I will be seeing mine on a regular basis, but I promise to take any advice from them with grace.

Like the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), I have the privilege of representing a constituency in which I grew up. My grandfather brought my family to Cumbria in the 1950s, and his work as an engineer saw him on the platform for the opening of Calder Hall, the world's first full-scale commercial nuclear power station. My family's love of Cumbria and the Lake district has endured ever since.

I have had the pleasure of representing my home of Keswick on town and district councils and, more recently, on the new Cumberland unitary authority. I stepped down from that council knowing that my former colleagues will do their best to ensure that a challenging local government reorganisation is a success.

As I begin my time in this place, I leave behind my work in the electrical contracting industry and my career as a contracts manager—a role that saw me work with many people in leasehold block management. It therefore seems apt that I make my maiden speech in this important debate. As a former electrician, it is not lost on me that the tragic events that unfolded at Grenfell Tower were triggered by an electrical fault. It is now imperative that the sequence of events that followed set the ground for long-lasting reform that ensures these

things can never happen again. I commend the decision to create the Building Safety Regulator, with its focus on high-risk buildings. While many Members rightly push for reform of the leasehold system and extending the right to manage, I hope the new regulator acts as a defence against those whose only concern is keeping building management costs down.

Winston Churchill once said:

“If you put two economists in a room, you get two opinions, unless one of them is Lord Keynes, in which case you get three opinions.”

When it comes to the interpretation of British standards affecting electrical safety and fire safety, my view is that if you put two electricians in a room, you will get two opinions, but if you put the bill payer in the room with them, you will only get one. The regulator should ensure that any new rules are unambiguous and can be applied consistently.

I have heard a number of maiden speeches and do not wish to get into the unwinnable debate about whose constituency is the most beautiful. I will just take it as given that my constituency that takes in the Solway Coast national landscape, part of the North Pennines national landscape and, not least, the north Lake district, including the Borrowdale valley, for which I have a deep love, is undoubtedly in the top 10.

However, the real beauty of my constituency is not in its architecture, coastline, lakes or hills; it is in the people. When I was first elected as a councillor, I was taken aside by an experienced and recently retired parish clerk, who had a message for me: “It isn't politicians who run things around here; it is the community.” She was right. I am in constant awe of the tireless efforts that volunteers show in my community every day: the mountain rescue teams, who keep us safe on the fells; the Maryport Rescue volunteers, who run the independent lifeboat service on the Solway coast; the flood action groups, who hold our flood authorities to account; our community-led housing trusts, who excel in delivering homes in rural communities, where larger housing associations fail; the community groups in Ireby, Hesket Newmarket and Nenthead, fundraising to save vital community facilities at the heart of their villages; our food hub volunteers; Churches Together, the Lions, the Rotarians and all the other groups that give so much. They inspire me, and this politician's job must surely be to help them flourish.

I head back to my constituency for the conference recess knowing that I have many issues to tackle. The Old Court House in Cockermouth, already half collapsed into the River Cocker, lies empty, with little progress being made by its owner and other authorities to make it safe. Residents of Penrith have been plagued for many years by a revolting odour from a local meat rendering plant. The infamous “Penrith pong” has been particularly strong over the summer months.

Rural homes, many lacking modern home insulation, are in desperate need of Government investment to help permanently bring down energy bills. Farmers are in despair, as trade deals have failed to deliver and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs struggles to implement its new payment schemes. The local health service is struggling to recruit the vital staff my community needs to thrive. I am here in their service and to rebuild broken Britain, just as we promised we would during the election.

5.9 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours) and everyone else who has made their maiden speech today and welcome them to their place here.

I rise today with a heavy heart as we remember the 72 lives lost in the Grenfell Tower fire—an avoidable tragedy fuelled by systemic neglect, corporate greed and an ideology that prioritised profits over people.

I begin by sharing the call of Grenfell United for the removal of flammable cladding from buildings now, for sprinklers, for the Hillsborough law, and for speedy criminal prosecutions of those whose negligence, greed and dishonesty killed 72 people. But there is something more here, which I urge hon. Members to understand. The Grenfell Next of Kin group call this report “10 kg of words on pages” rather than justice. The anger that Grenfell survivors have expressed is an anger that many of us feel—that in Britain today, working class people are treated as expendable.

Less than a year before the fire, the Grenfell Action Group warned that their “dangerous living conditions” would cause

“a catastrophic event...an incident that results in a serious loss of life.”

They predicted their own deaths, because they knew how little anyone in power cared about keeping them alive. That is the inescapable conclusion of this report.

Building firms engaged in “systematic dishonesty”—that is what the report says—to profit without ensuring safety. Some of them knew that their insulation was a “raging inferno”, but they kept selling it anyway.

After the earlier fires at Knowsley and Lakanal and after large-scale tests warned of the dangers of cladding, neither the British Government nor Kensington and Chelsea council came to help the residents of Grenfell. Then, after the fire, a former Secretary of State responsible for housing, Lord Pickles, loudly told the inquiry to not take up too much of his time.

Nobody seriously thinks that the residents of London’s wealthier streets would be so ignored, so derided, treated with such contempt for decades and left to die. Let us tell the truth about the society in which we live: when two billionaires drowned on a submarine voyage to see the Titanic, powerful countries united in a global rescue effort, but when poor people and persecuted people drown in the English channel or burn in Grenfell Tower, we do not mobilise every single resource to save their lives and bring them to safety. That is a kind of class war—a war on exploited and persecuted people wherever in the world they are born.

Grenfell Tower was named after Sir Francis Grenfell, a general who carried out colonial violence in Ireland, Sudan and South Africa. When the British ruling class wants cheap labour from places like those, it houses workers in an unsafe building named after a man who may have killed their ancestors, and then ignores their warnings and leaves them to die. That was Grenfell Tower.

Residents have spoken up beautifully in recent days of the community in the tower, and of how people stuck together and looked after the weakest among them. They share the working-class values that we all should and they are entirely alien to the values that, unfortunately,

rule in this society. The dead and the living deserve safe homes for all. They deserve corporate and state accountability and a different kind of society. Grenfell’s 72 dead are forever in our hearts. Thank you.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Alex Ballinger to make his maiden speech.

5.13 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow so many excellent maiden speeches today, in particular that of my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway (Markus Campbell-Savours), whose constituency is definitely in the top five or top 10 most beautiful constituencies.

I am pleased to deliver my maiden speech today during this debate on building safety and resilience. After the tragic events at Grenfell Tower, the safety of our buildings has never been more important. Many residents in my constituency live in tower blocks, and they will be pleased to see the Government taking practical steps to ensure that they can live in safety.

I am honoured to have been elected to represent the people of Halesowen in Parliament. I thank them for putting their faith in me. However they voted, I am here to serve them.

I would first like to thank my family, and in particular my wife, Nida. They have been incredibly supportive and patient as I have gone through this campaign and my first weeks in the House.

I am pleased to follow my predecessors, James Morris and Dame Sylvia Heal. James was the MP for Halesowen and Rowley Regis for 14 years. He was a hard-working constituency MP who championed mental health in Parliament and sought to protect the heritage of the town. He also sported a distinctive hairstyle, and was affectionately known in the constituency as Professor Snape. While we have our political differences, I think James was, like the “Harry Potter” character, one of the good guys in the end.

From 1997 until 2010, Halesowen and Rowley Regis was represented by Dame Sylvia Heal. A passionate campaigner for her constituents, Sylvia was easily recognised as she canvassed the streets of Halesowen in a bright red jacket. She also served 10 years as Deputy Speaker, and had the dubious honour of being in the Chair when, for the first time in 400 years, protesters stormed the Floor of the Commons. The last time that happened, they were led by King Charles I, but unlike in the 17th century, Sylvia restarted the debate after only 20 minutes, and even allowed the protesters to escape with their heads. She was well loved by her constituents, and they still remember her fondly.

Judging by the puzzled looks on many Members’ faces when I introduce my constituency, I think that it is fair to say that not everyone has heard of Halesowen. Well, Halesowen is a wonderful market town on the edge of the Black Country, and includes the once influential Halesowen abbey. In the 13th century, Halesowen was larger than Birmingham, and the abbey ruled over lands as far away as Wednesbury, Walsall and Warley. While the abbey’s lands are now diminished, Halesowen remains a juggernaut in the west midlands.

The whole constituency was at the very heart of the industrial revolution. Cradley Heath, Cradley and Quarry Bank were the centres of chainmaking in the 19th century,

[Alex Ballinger]

but conditions for workers were terrible, and in Cradley Heath in 1910 Mary Macarthur led women chainmakers on a 10-week strike against starvation-level wages. Her campaign led to a doubling of women's pay and helped to establish the principle of a minimum wage in the UK. Mary would later stand for Parliament in Stourbridge, and nearly became the first woman to sit in the House of Commons. Mary Macarthur's campaigns for women's rights and better working conditions will be remembered this Sunday at the women chainmakers festival in Cradley Heath.

Newer to the constituency is the lovely green suburb of Wollescote, which was home to the 19th-century industrialist Ernest Stevens. Ernest made his fortune manufacturing kitchenware in Cradley Heath, and donated several parks to the people of the area: Stevens Park in Wollescote, Stevens Park in Quarry Bank, and Mary Stevens Park in Stourbridge. Ernest was well known for his philanthropy, if not his imagination. I mention him because at the start of the century my great-grandad was one of his drivers. I like to imagine him travelling across the constituency, taking his boss to work each morning.

It is not just through living in the same community that I have followed in my ancestors' footsteps. My great-grandad, like generations after him, served his country overseas. Wilfred Ballinger fought at the Somme in 1916 before being wounded by shrapnel and being evacuated back to Stourbridge. His son, Frank Ballinger, served in the Navy, and landed to take part in the Italian campaign in 1944, and my dad, Robert Ballinger, spent 35 years in the Air Force, serving in Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq. When both my brother and I followed in their footsteps and were sent to Afghanistan together in 2006, we felt like we were continuing the Ballinger family tradition.

At the start of that tour, I perhaps did not realise the reality of conflict. I was reminded of it during the election, when I met Sue Crookes, the mother of the marine Jonathan Crookes, in Halesowen. I did not know Jon, but he was a Halesowen hero, who served in Afghanistan and was tragically killed protecting his comrades. Having served alongside brave servicemen and women like Jonathan Crookes, I want to use my time in this House to ensure that we are doing everything that we can to support our armed forces, and the friends and family they leave behind.

When I left the marines, I became an aid worker, helping to deliver supplies to Syria, and helping refugees to rebuild their lives in neighbouring countries. In what felt like coming full circle, three years ago I played a part in the evacuation of Afghanistan when it fell to the Taliban. My team evacuated hundreds of vulnerable people out of the country and to safety over the border in Pakistan. Many of them had worked alongside the British 10 years earlier, and many were at risk simply for who they were. I particularly remember helping the dozens of young women from the Afghanistan youth football team, fleeing punishment at the hands of the Taliban. I am pleased to say that they are all now safely here in the UK, rebuilding their lives. I know that debates on refugees can become heated in this House, but I hope to use my time here to advocate for all victims of conflict, whoever they may be.

I know that the people of Halesowen will stand up for the vulnerable, because I have seen it myself. When I visited Lifecentral church, I was humbled to see the help that it gives to struggling young people, asylum seekers and the older generations. I am honoured to know members of the Halesowen and Dudley Yemeni Community Association, whose voluntary service was recently recognised with a Queen's award. I have visited hard-working volunteers manning food banks at Cradley Heath Community Link, Manna House Pantry, and Holy Trinity in Old Hill.

That is just a snapshot of the charitable work happening across the constituency, which is full of passionate people dedicated to serving their community. As I begin my time in this place, I know that I want to continue that tradition of service—the service that my family has given in uniform, the service that the people of Halesowen have demonstrated to their community time and again, and the service that this Government will deliver as we rebuild the country. I thank the people of Halesowen again for electing me as their representative. I have served my country for the past 20 years, and I will serve them as their Member of Parliament with the same dedication.

5.20 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): May I also pay tribute to the Grenfell families at this very difficult time, following the recently published report? My thoughts are also with the families of those affected by the fires in Slough and east London.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) and others for their excellent maiden speeches today. I thank the Minister for her explanation of Government policy, and for the reassurance that she has given us. The issue of building and fire safety is important to Reading residents, so I will mention a few local matters and ask the Minister a few brief questions.

In the years since Grenfell, I have been constantly reminded and aware of the awful briefing that I had from Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service immediately after the tragedy. It was sobering and will stay with me for many, many years. I was told of the scale of the problem in our county, not just in Reading but in other towns such as Slough, Wokingham and Bracknell. What I heard from the fire service about the scale of the problems that it was uncovering, and the serious threat to human life from building safety issues, was incredible.

To give the House some idea of the problems, which relate to cladding and other issues, the fire service explained that it had discovered holes in what should have been safe partition firewalls, and dangerous cladding in buildings across the county, and that it would take a very long time to carry out assessments across the whole of our county—just one English county—to fully understand the risk to residents, not just in taller buildings but, as hon. Members have mentioned, in lower-rise flats below the limit set for some of the measures. The service set out other problems, including wooden cladding, poorly designed fire doors and the need for waking watches. Incredible work followed on those issues over a number of years. It has taken a huge amount of work locally and, I am sure, across the country to tackle that awful legacy.

There have been significant delays in addressing many of the problems. Although they were uncovered some years ago, it took a long time to tackle them under the previous Government's watch. In many cases, local residents were left waiting several years for remediation to privately owned or housing association blocks. I welcome the measures that the Minister outlined to speed up that work and continue to press forward.

Some issues were linked to local supply-chain problems. I thank the many responsible owners who took early action, including a number of housing associations, and indeed some responsible private owners, in my constituency. However, like other hon. Members, I have discovered continuing, often very serious, problems with some overseas owners and management companies. I have had some truly awful casework involving residents who have spoken in graphic terms about the pressure that they have been put under because of these issues. There were young couples who found it difficult to get to sleep at night because they knew that they were living in a block in which there was dangerous cladding. The overseas management company was not taking action to tackle it quickly enough. To make matters worse, they could not sell their property and had to live there, in some cases facing very high costs to remove the cladding. I welcome the Minister's action on all those things, but I wish that the previous Government had sped up their measures to tackle this huge problem across the country.

I have questions for the Minister. I appreciate that other Members have yet to speak so I will be brief, but I want to hear more from her about action to tackle management companies based overseas, and how she plans to roll that out. I appreciate that might be difficult. I hope to hear more about the action that the Government will take to tackle manufacturers of dangerous cladding, though I realise that in many cases they are overseas companies.

I welcome the Minister's action, and the vigour with which she has pursued this issue in a short period of time. I recognise her very genuine commitment, and know that this problem is serious in her constituency in inner London, too. I thank our new colleagues again for their excellent maiden speeches.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Peter Lamb to make his maiden speech.

5.25 pm

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I am grateful to be given the opportunity to speak on such an important topic. Much like everyone else, I have enjoyed the various maiden speeches given today. They have certainly given me a detailed lesson in local history and geography. I was startled to discover just how many constituencies apparently think they are the best. We will see if that survives the next few minutes.

I begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Henry Smith. Henry and I had many areas of profound disagreement over the many years we sparred together, but one surprising area of overlap was that we are both vegetarians. Animal rights was clearly an incredibly important topic to him, and his parliamentary record shows that he served that cause diligently throughout his many years in Westminster, pursuing it at every possible level. In my time here, I hope to pursue my policy priorities just as diligently.

I also pay tribute to my Labour predecessor, Laura Moffatt. I have known Laura for many years. In fact, the first time I ever entered the Chamber was when I was a 15-year-old student at Holy Trinity, on work experience; I sat in that far corner, which I understand was not correct procedure. The support Laura has given me over the years has been incredibly significant; it contributed greatly to my being here today.

After many years of hard work, this year we had an amazing win for the reds in Crawley—I am of course speaking about Crawley Town's league two play-off win. It was a fantastic result. For me, as one of the town's foremost cheerleaders, it was great that for one day, we were absolutely everywhere. If people typed "Crawley" into Google, fireworks popped up in their browser.

Crawley is my home. It is where I was born and where I went to school. It is where I have fought on behalf of my community for the last 14 years as a councillor, council leader and now as an MP. I honestly believe that Crawley is not only the best constituency in the UK, but the best town outright. Our economy is a powerhouse, delivering one of the greatest concentrations of employment in the country. We are one of the UK's most visited constituencies, even though, frustratingly, every time we are asked where we are from, we still have to add, "It's where Gatwick airport is."

Crawley was home to Mark Lemon, who during his tenure as editor of *Punch* magazine inspired fear on both sides of the House. We were home to pioneering electrical engineer Dame Caroline Haslett. More recently, Crawley has given Britain one of our leading journalists in Dan Walker, one of our most influential bands in The Cure, and the nation's favourite—or at least most ubiquitous—comedian in Romesh Ranganathan. It has given us Gareth Southgate, England's greatest football manager since Alf Ramsey, and victorious Paralympians Jodie Grinham and Katie-George Dunlevy.

Thanks to the long history of municipal socialism in the town—our early fathers and mothers include Alf Pegler, Bert Crane and Brenda Smith—we are blessed with fantastic facilities, such as K2, the Hawth and Tilgate Park, home to many of my happiest memories, including marrying the love of my life. I feel privileged to live in a town that has so much to offer. However, before Members pack in their constituencies and move down to mine, let me say that Crawley is not without its challenges.

Despite so many accomplished Crawleyites, social mobility in the town is the lowest in the south-east. I often have to get into real arguments with northern MPs to demonstrate that Crawley has some of the lowest social mobility in the country, far lower than most of the north. Over recent years, rising deprivation has meant that exceptionally high levels of employment have done little to assuage poverty in the constituency, and over a third of Crawley's children are now growing up in poverty. Earlier this year, Crawley borough council became the first council in the country to declare a housing emergency. I love my town, and I am here to fight for it and solve those and other issues facing the constituency.

If there is one issue that I intend to prioritise above all others during my time in this House, it is housing, which is not only essential to solving Crawley's immediate challenges but part of the history of the town. I fear that this part of my speech may echo many of the sentiments expressed earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for

[Peter Lamb]

Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis). Crawley is mentioned in Domesday Book and we are home to an Anglo-Saxon church, but the town as it is known today began in 1946 with the passage of the New Towns Act, an amazing achievement that I believe rivals Labour's creation of the NHS. It had been intended that Crawley would be the first of the post-war new towns, but unfortunately, Stevenage pipped us to that title following a last-minute legal challenge to the development—some things never change.

In creating the town, planners drew inspiration from the garden city movement, designing each neighbourhood to be its own self-contained village incorporating a neighbourhood centre with its own school, GP, community centre and shopping parade, and fostering a strong sense of neighbourhood identity. At the centre of the town was a modern town centre, and to the north was one of the country's largest industrial estates, located away from residential areas where pollution might affect people and providing skilled employment in light industry. Across the town, those planners built comprehensive infrastructure, green urban space and high-quality council housing, ensuring that residents from every walk of life could move to Crawley. If you talk to that first generation of new towners, they talk about being able to walk down the street and pick out which of the houses they wanted. Imagine if that were the case today! They could do that because the new town development corporations were granted the power to buy land cheaply at agricultural prices, and the ability to grant themselves planning permission to deliver at pace.

I believe that the model that worked almost 80 years ago remains the most effective means through which new housing can be delivered, in terms of quantity, quality and affordability. Indeed, the only period over the past century in which the growth in housing supply exceeded the growth in demand was when the UK was building the new towns. The lesson of history—certainly recent history—is clear: no matter how easy it is to get planning permission, builders will not build housing if that will result in a drop in house prices. Direct delivery can overcome that obstacle.

I was proud to campaign in the election on a Labour platform championing the development of new towns as an alternative to the high-cost, low-quality urban extensions and infilling that we have all too often seen. I am pleased that the Government have already announced their first site, and I hope that many more will now follow, using the same mechanisms developed and deployed by Nye Bevan to bring an end to the appalling housing conditions that the country faced in 1946. Is that not what today's debate is about? In 1946, the country faced not only a shortage of housing but cities filled with slum housing in the most appalling conditions. A failure to learn the lessons of history has resulted in far too many homes today posing a danger to those living in them, from the horror of Grenfell Tower to the mould that eats away daily at people's health.

The steps needed to address those risks to life are urgent and necessary. We must put residents' safety back at the heart of housing, but we cannot forget that—now as in 1946—for too many, the choice remains between dangerous housing and no housing at all. With an intense programme of housing construction based on the new town model

of the 1940s, we have the chance to bring an end to the housing shortages that affect so many of our constituencies, mine included. In the process, we can once again ensure that everyone has the dignity of a safe place that they can call home.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Tracy Gilbert to make her maiden speech.

5.33 pm

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me in this extremely important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Crawley (Peter Lamb) and for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) on their touching and moving speeches. I really am proud to be one of the Scottish delegates.

In the tradition of maiden speeches, I begin by paying tribute to my immediate predecessor, Deidre Brock, who represented the constituency for nine years—the first woman to do so. I wish her and her team well in their future endeavours. I would also like to pay tribute to Mark Lazarowicz, who represented the seat from 2001 until 2015, and who continues to advocate for human rights, asylum seekers and the environment.

The newly extended boundary once again includes Muirhouse, part of the constituency previously represented by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine). This part of the constituency holds a special place in my heart as it neighbours West Pilton, where I lived and where my stepchildren went to school and attended Greater Pilton childcare centre during the 1990s. It is a groundbreaking facility providing families with access to affordable, flexible childcare—a model that I hope we can learn from and replicate.

When we lived in West Pilton, our flat was riddled with damp. We had to run a dehumidifier constantly, and it would produce litres of water daily. Our children's health suffered, and painting over black mould was normal. We were lucky: we were eventually able to move. However, the flat is still there, and I would suggest that the issues remain too. Housing resilience must be a priority when building and retrofitting homes. Access to safe and secure homes is a fundamental right, and although it is a devolved issue in Scotland, we must learn lessons and work together across Governments to deliver affordable, healthy, energy-efficient homes for all, which must include the removal of unsafe cladding.

I also place on record my sincere thanks to Malcolm Chisholm, who helped us at this time. He represented Edinburgh North and Leith in this place from 1992 to 2001, when he moved to the Scottish Parliament, before standing down in 2016. He is why I joined the Labour party. His reputation and integrity, his achievements and his passion for the people of Edinburgh North and Leith are rightly still recognised, and indeed he remains an inspiration to me and many others in our community and beyond.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I think the record may have to be corrected as I have heard many hon. Members from across the House making an error by declaring that their constituency is the greatest in the country. They are of course mistaken. As many of those who have already visited will know, Edinburgh North and Leith can surely claim that accolade. From our amazing

shops on Princes Street, George Street and the new St James Quarter, as well as our fantastic independent stores, we have the best retail across the country. We have world-class restaurants, cafés and bars—from the Johnnie Walker whisky experience, which I was pleased to visit over the summer recess with my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, to the Lind & Lime gin distillers, where my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was welcomed, and the Port of Leith Distillery, the country's first vertical distillery. I extend a welcome to all my hon. Friends to visit and join me for a dram.

Edinburgh North and Leith is steeped in history from Calton hill to the New Town, another UNESCO world heritage site, and onwards to Stockbridge, the home of Golden Wonder crisps; Newhaven, with its harbour and proud fishing history; and Western Harbour, reclaimed from the sea. We are home to the Royal Yacht Britannia and the Royal Botanic Garden in Inverleith. Leith links has claims to be the birthplace of golf. And although the stadium is just outside the boundary, the identity of our football team, Hibs, is Leith to the core. I can confirm that, as the song suggests, there is indeed much "Sunshine on Leith", although not always on match days.

Our famous Port of Leith—yes, the bar, but also the port itself—has seen the comings and goings of ships from all over the world, bringing with them stories, goods and people that have shaped our identity. The historic landmark reminds us of our rich heritage and the importance of preserving it for the future. This is evidenced through our proud industrial and political history, being where Rose's lime juice was invented to prevent sailors from getting scurvy, and where Salvesen had a whaling business. In the present day, our port is reinventing itself for the next generation, with the green energy jobs of the future and with businesses such as Vestas and nearby Nova delivering wind and tidal energy.

Stitched into our community are so many sites of natural beauty, with the Water of Leith flowing through the heart of our constituency and being hugged by the firth of Forth. With the world's largest arts festival on our doorstep, we house the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Leith theatre, Customs House, North Edinburgh Arts, Edinburgh playhouse and the new Dunard concert centre, which is currently under construction. Alongside our film and music studios, we are home to many authors, artists, musicians and poets. I could go on, and I possibly have for too long already, but this is by no means an exhaustive list, and it does not even begin to recognise the wealth of talent and diversity in our community.

I have yet to mention what makes Edinburgh North and Leith truly great: simply, it is our people. Being elected to this House to represent my home and my community is truly the honour of my life. I would like to thank everyone who trusted me with their vote. For those who did not, I hope that during my time in this place I can evidence that I will champion our home.

I understand that there is so much work to do to ensure that all can prosper as, sadly, for far too many people, Edinburgh is a tale of two cities. Too many have been left behind and suffered through decades of neglect. Poverty remains stubbornly high and is a reality for so many children. In our city, food banks have become the norm, where people already struggling to feed themselves, struggle to feed those who have even less than them.

We have a housing emergency with more than 3,000 homeless people, many of whom are families with small children living in hotel rooms with no kitchen, resorting to cooking meals each day from a kettle. The scourge of addiction is etched on people's faces, clear for all to see. While our public services are underfunded and broken, our communities are resilient. I think of people such as Pauline Bowie, recently honoured for her work, and the compassion of all the unpaid volunteers and low-waged carers who work tirelessly each day for our community. Our strength lies in the people of Edinburgh North and Leith, who are known for their warmth, compassion and determination. Changing people's lives by offering hope was why this Government were elected, and it is why we must deliver.

My journey started, like all of us, before I was born. I was born in Rottenrow maternity hospital in Glasgow. Yes, the House has not misheard me: there was a maternity hospital called Rottenrow. When I was a baby, and before I had a voice, decisions were made that would change and shape my life forever. I was lucky then, as I am now, to have people who loved and nurtured me. Although my mum, dad and gran are no longer living, they would be very proud, as well as very surprised, that I am in this place, as I left school at 15 with few qualifications and left home not long after. It took me many years to find my place in this world, and I am so grateful for the love of my stepchildren David and Zoe, for Zak and for my wife Melanie, for her love and support every day. To me, they are home. I thank all my friends, party activists, colleagues and loved ones who have supported me in my life and on my journey leading to this place.

As a child growing up in the '80s in a council house in a mining town, with hindsight it seems inevitable that I would end up as a proud product of the Labour and trade union movement. In my working life—from a youth training scheme in the city council to being a housing officer and trade unionist, as well as through my voluntary work on the Children's Panel, in drug and alcohol and mental health—advocacy has always been my passion. I have learned through life that when others give up on you, it is easy to give up on yourself. My promise to everyone in Edinburgh North and Leith is that I will not give up, and I will fight for everyone's right to thrive. I will be their voice in this place, and as is Leith's motto, I will always persevere.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Richard Quigley to make his maiden speech.

5.42 pm

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): May I associate myself with the previous remarks regarding the Grenfell disaster and send my sympathies to all those affected?

I congratulate all the other Members on their eloquent and informative maiden speeches, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert), with whom I will happily share probably more than a dram of whisky as we argue over the first two places for best constituency, which is, obviously, Isle of Wight West.

First, I pay tribute to Annie Caddick, who won silver in the mixed doubles sculls at the Paralympics. We are all very proud of her. I also pay tribute to my predecessor

[Mr Richard Quigley]

Bob Seely for his seven years of service to the Isle of Wight as MP for the then largest constituency in the country. His interest in all things Chinese and Russian is legendary on the island.

My dad was not a toolmaker, but he is a Conservative councillor. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh."] I have got the sympathy of everyone now, apart from those on the Conservative Benches. While we do not agree on politics, he and my mum's many years as councillors did teach me that politics is about service. It is also the reason I am stood on this side of the Chamber, although there is rather more room on the Opposition Benches on most days. My grandad Dennis, a lifelong Labour supporter, would be very proud that I am stood on this side.

From being the largest constituency, the Isle of Wight is now two of the smallest constituencies: Isle of Wight West and Isle of Wight East. I stand here as the very proud Member for Isle of Wight West and the first-ever Labour MP to represent the island. I look forward to working with my colleague, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) to improve the lives of all islanders, although it would appear he has got the early ferry home today, so he is ahead of me.

It turns out that the island is pretty good at firsts. In 1660, Freshwater resident Robert Hooke developed Hooke's law of elasticity. In 1843, the UK's first amusement park opened at Blackgang Chine, and is still open today, albeit, for those who know it, much smaller, as it is slipping into the sea—that is not part of the attraction, by the way. Marconi established the first wireless station on the island in 1897, and Saunders-Roe built the first ever hovercraft in East Cowes in 1958. We still have a hovercraft service to this day.

The first Isle of Wight Festival was in 1968, but in 1970 the crowds were so large that the following year an Act of Parliament was passed banning such large-scale gatherings. The first consumer electric cars—the Enfield 8000—were built in Cowes. In 2009 four-year-old Daisy Morris discovered a new species of dinosaur—not in the council but actually on Atherfield beach—known as the pterosaur. We even have our first prize-winning alpaca named Hip Hip Hooray at West Wight Alpacas. I am also the first owner of a chip shop to become an MP. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] There will be free pickled eggs for hon. Members when they come to the island.

Of course, we are also known for sailing. A special thanks to the RNLI and independent lifeboats that put their lives at risk to save ours.

The island is home to some fantastic produce that graces the menus and tables of some great eating establishments across the country—many will have tried them without even realising. There are fantastic tomatoes from Isle of Wight Tomatoes, asparagus and sweetcorn from the Arreton valley and Harvey Browns farm, beef from Cheverton farm, cherries from Godshell, and our own cheesemakers.

We also have industry. We make blades for Vestas wind turbines, we make aircraft parts, and the Thames Clipper boats that hon. Members see from the Terrace are made at Wight shipyard in East Cowes. We have a thriving arts culture. The Trinity, Quay Arts and Apollo theatres, where a young Anthony Minghella started his acting career, are still very active.

But it is the people who make the Isle of Wight. It is community that makes it a special place to live and the envy of towns and villages across the country. Whether it is the Saturday morning tea and cake in Niton, the regular events in Yarmouth, the community-run sports centre in Freshwater, the warm space in Northwood, the volunteers at Cowes food bank, the model train enthusiasts who open up to the community, the amazing work of Pan Together in Newport or the inclusivity of East Cowes, as well as the many charities—a special mention to the Ellen MacArthur Cancer Trust—community is the heart of the island.

When I made it to this place, Isle of Wight West was referred to, along with many others, as a "bonus" seat—that appears to be code for "Oh, f—fair play, you won!" But we won due to the hard work over the past five years of 120 volunteers, returning me as the only Labour councillor and now the first Labour MP for the island. I would like to thank every single one of them, but special thanks must go to my agent Phil Attfield, whose commitment was second to none. Extra special thanks must go to my wife Leah and my two children and grandchildren for their unwavering support and for putting up with me over the last few years.

As rosy a picture as I paint of our wonderful island and how much we contribute to British life, we have all the same problems as coastal and rural towns, including poor access to NHS dentistry, GPs and adult social care, SEND education in crisis and a severe lack of secure and adequate homes. Those problems are exacerbated by our being an island. Imagine being charged between £50 and £300 every time you drove to a neighbouring county—travelling from Derby to Nottingham, from Southampton to Salisbury or from Oxford to Aylesbury would become prohibitive.

Ferry travel across the Solent has become unreliable and ferociously expensive in the last few years, so much so that it is now a barrier to opportunity. Having to rely on expensive, privately run ferries means that school trips do not happen and NHS appointments on the mainland are missed, or patients are so worried that they travel the night before and pay for a hotel. My predecessor mentioned ferries 23 times in seven years, but ferries are such a huge issue to me and my constituents—I am guessing my hon. Friends have not realised this!—that I have promised to mention ferries and cross-Solent ferry travel at every opportunity, regardless of the topic. I might even get past 23 times in this speech. [Laughter.] I hope the House forgives me if I do.

I am a husband, dad, grandad, walker of our three dogs and an enthusiastic visitor to island pubs. My focus while in this place will be on finding solutions to the issues that I have outlined. My job as MP is to champion the island in this House, to ensure that I represent all my constituents and that the island is no longer a forgotten outpost and gets its fair share of support from my Government, as well as action on ferries. [Laughter.] I extend a warm invitation to everyone on the estate to visit the Isle of Wight, and I make a plea to Ministers to visit.

I spent some time in the first few weeks talking to the Doorkeepers and security and restaurant staff. I explained that I found this place to be one of the friendliest workplaces I have ever stepped foot in—bearing in mind I am self-employed. The response was that this has changed as a workplace very recently. When asked

how recently, they all replied, “The fifth of July.” I am extremely proud to stand here today with my colleagues as part of a Labour Government dedicated to service, and I look forward to being part of a Government who build a future for the Isle of Wight and the country.

5.50 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her speech. We have heard fantastic maiden speeches today, especially from my comrades, my hon. Friends the Members for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert), and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley). Parents always want better for their children, and he achieved it by joining the Labour party. *[Laughter.]* A slow burner.

I want to start by paying tribute to the victims and survivors of the Grenfell fire, as well as the wider Grenfell community. I thank the brave firefighters who go to work every day all over the country to keep our communities safe. Theirs is a genuine public service and their expertise and selflessness deserve more than just respect, starting with funding and investment to see them properly resourced at their work. The contributing factors to the Grenfell tragedy can be seen in constituencies and communities all over Britain. We see them every day when local authorities have their budgets cut and the services they provide are negatively impacted.

Of course, it is not just local authorities that feel the pain of budget cuts. Our emergency services are no strangers to savage underfunding. In Scotland, more than 1,000 Scottish fire and rescue staff have left the service in the last decade. The Scottish Government have called on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to find £36 million-worth of savings by 2027—savings being the more palatable, yet misleading, name for cuts. Credit must go to firefighters and their union in Scotland, because they are protesting against the cuts that will see hundreds of jobs lost and fire appliances taken off the run. This relentless underfunding, whether to essential public services or in building regulations, leads to immiserated and impoverished communities that face heightened danger.

The topic of this debate is highly relevant to an issue in my constituency, as 102 domestic properties in Clackmannanshire have been identified as having reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, including roughly 2% of the council’s housing stock. Last October, 30 homeowners in Tillicoultry received a knock on their door informing them that they had just two hours to gather their belongings and evacuate their property. I can only imagine the stress that those people must have felt. Understandably, the confusion they felt at such news meant that many left behind important documents such as driving licences and passports, as well as personal belongings and precious family heirlooms on which, frankly, a monetary price cannot be put.

Nearly a year on, those homeowners still have not been granted access to retrieve their possessions. Among the residents impacted by RAAC, I met a couple who had lived in their flat for 40 years. This hard-working couple had achieved the dream of home ownership; when they finally paid off the mortgage on their ex-council flat, they described it as a moment of immense pride and achievement. Those emotions have been replaced

with anxiety, despair and, in no small measure, anger—anger at the insurance companies that told residents that there was no obligation to cover such things, as they said that RAAC is not a named peril or insured cost.

After evacuation, some of the homeowners found themselves placed in hotels. Some chose to stay with family or friends. Some had to present as homeless and be relocated to Clackmannanshire council’s temporary accommodation. Some were relocated to bed and breakfast accommodation in Kirkcaldy in Fife, a town 31 miles away from Tillicoultry. What a situation to be in for those homeowners who work locally, have children in school or look after elderly relatives.

Nearly a year on and those constituents live a life in limbo: some are leading a nomadic existence, going from property to property; some feel like a burden on their friends and family; some tell me their physical and mental health has suffered; and some have told me that they are staring into the abyss, that their golden years of retirement have been snatched away because of the financial impact of what has happened to them. But all of them are united by the anguish of not having somewhere to put down roots and call home.

The ever-reducing budgets provided to local authorities are likely to mean that the solution my RAAC-impacted constituents will have to be a collaborative effort. To reiterate, Clackmannanshire council, like so many local authorities, as well as the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, know about budget cuts. With housing being a devolved matter and the Scottish Government announcing half a billion pounds’ worth of cuts only last week, I fear the Scottish Government will not right this wrong either. I say that with no criticism of the Scottish Government. My constituents do not want finger-pointing; they want action. I warmly welcome the resetting of the relationship between the Scottish Government and this Labour Government. This new positive working relationship is exactly the approach my constituents from Tillicoultry will need for them to receive the equitable solution and justice they deserve. With that, I hope the Minister will meet me to discuss possible solutions to the benefit of my constituents.

5.56 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I congratulate all colleagues who have made their maiden speeches today. It is a massive relief once you have done it, so congratulations to them all.

This is a really important debate not just for the constituents of colleagues who have spoken already, but for my constituents too. I want to echo many of the points that colleagues have made so far. I will speak briefly.

The Grenfell Tower inquiry published last week criticised a “poorly run”, “complacent” Government Department that had “failed to act”. There are 93 leaseholders at No. 1 London Road in Newcastle-under-Lyme who are living in constant fear that history may repeat itself. Back in 2022, leaseholders at No. 1 London Road were made aware that an external survey had highlighted significant fire safety concerns over the building’s cladding and that urgent action was needed. The site was approved for Government-funded renovations, but over two years later, the previous Government had failed to act to protect the safety of my constituents.

[Adam Jogee]

It gets worse. On top of living in constant fear of a fire breaking out, the leaseholders have been left to foot the bill of premium insurance costs due to the building's safety concerns. Five years ago, the insurance premium was £20,000. Today, it has risen to £570,000. As a result, leaseholders at No. 1 London Road in Newcastle-under-Lyme are being forced to borrow money and some have declared bankruptcy.

I am sure the Minister will agree with me that this situation is completely unacceptable and cannot go on. I hope he will find time to meet me—I know other colleagues have sought such meetings, too—because we need to ensure that this Government act where the previous Government failed.

5.58 pm

David Simmonds: With the leave of the House, I will close this debate for His Majesty's loyal Opposition.

It has been a very constructive debate, with a wide range of contributions from Members. I congratulate all Members who made their maiden speeches. It was striking that they covered a huge range of different issues which have been debated and will be debated in this Parliament. I was particularly struck by the expertise shown in areas as diverse as local government, housing, electronics and support for refugees, all of which, I am sure, will play a significant part in the future. I would also like to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) for his very entertaining maiden speech.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) made some observations about the Hackitt review and the liability of construction material manufacturers for the consequences of significant problems in the buildings in which their materials are used. As the Minister said, the £5.1 billion building safety fund, which was put in place in the previous Parliament, is a significant step towards addressing those concerns, but it is clear that that is just one example of the many issues that need to be addressed. I have a list of points to put to the Minister, and I hope we will be able to work constructively together as we take forward a variety of legislation.

A couple of Members touched on personal evacuation plans. A consultation took place in 2022, in which a wide variety of stakeholders were invited to express their views. A key concern raised by the Local Government Association—I declare an interest as a parliamentary vice-president of that organisation—was that current legislation implies that there is a duty on local authorities and social housing providers to anticipate, without having to be asked or informed by residents, the needs of those who may require special arrangements for evacuation in the event of an emergency. It is clear from feedback across the sector that, where there is no expectation that a tenant or an occupier will advise a particular individual or authority, that presents a significant challenge. I suggest to Ministers that as they bring forward the Government's response, that issue is addressed with a high degree of clarity, so that everybody knows their responsibilities and where they stand.

I was struck by observations made by a number of Members about particular challenges, including issues with fire doors and latent defects in buildings, which

may not be spotted at the time of a building regulations inspection. I have personal experience of working in a local authority that commissioned a school; we discovered afterwards that the fire doors, which looked robust and solid, only went up as far as the suspended ceilings that had been installed by the contractor. In such an example, the individual doing the building inspection may need to have a significant part of the building taken apart so that they can carry out their duties and see what needs to be done. We need to ask ourselves how we can ensure that that enforcement is seen as reasonable by contractors and can be resourced effectively by local authorities, so that latent defects in items such as fire doors and fire stopping do not arise and create risks that simply cannot be effectively managed for the future.

A number of Members made reference to the longer-term history of the current set of building safety challenges. I am well aware, having been in local government throughout that period, that the approach taken by the previous Labour Government was to create arm's length management organisations for housing. Some Members, including the hon. Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan), made particularly positive references to the last Labour Government's retrofitting programme. I simply urge Members, as they begin to think how they would wish to resource some of this work in the public sector building stock, to ensure that we do not see a return of that approach: "Let's create arm's length management organisations, load them with the debt so it isn't on the Government's books, and then expect them to carry out the work."

The number of arm's length management organisations has diminished. There was a time, under a previous Labour Government, when local authorities could not access that funding unless they set up an arm's length management organisation. A small number of those organisations remain, but the vast majority of local authority areas have determined that it is more efficient to do this work directly and in-house. Having a higher degree of control, visibility and accountability for that work is a step forward, so I urge those who might be tempted by the view that arm's length bodies are the way to leverage additional funding into the sector without it appearing directly as a cost to Government to avoid that approach. We should be absolutely clear about the route for the provision of those resources, and about the accountability for them.

In her maiden speech, the hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) made reference to flooding as an example of an additional issue that gives rise to building safety and resilience challenges. Although it was not touched on in today's debate, we also need to reflect that this House has in the past had to get to grips with issues such as the impact of legionella and the significant building regulation changes needed to ensure that very vulnerable residents are not placed at risk by a failure to carry out the proper inspection of building safety systems, and has had to ensure that building regulations and installed systems are functioning as they should to keep people safe from that particular risk.

This wide-ranging debate has touched on many different elements of the building safety and resilience world, and I hope that that will inform Ministers' thinking. However, I have a particular question on which I want to press them for an answer. At the beginning of the debate, we heard from the Under-Secretary of State for Housing,

Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), about the decision to return to, or enable, the use of the EU standards relating to construction materials. I know that mention of EU standards has a triggering effect on some Members; it does not have that impact on me, because I am a strong supporter of close co-operation with our neighbours.

I think that the Minister was probably referring to the written ministerial statement of 2 September, in which the Government announced the decision to remove the end date that had previously applied—the date by which CE-marked construction materials could be sold within the UK market—and to allow those products to continue to be supplied to that market with no end date. That strikes me as a reasonable decision, but I should like to have a specific assurance on one point. The EU regulations on the fire safety of construction products date from 2015, and those are the relevant regulations applying to products that meet the CE-marked standard. That was, of course, before the Grenfell Tower disaster occurred. UK regulations were updated in response to the disaster by the previous Government, in 2018, and took account of the specific risks relating to construction materials that were identified in the initial phases of the report.

May I ask the Minister to assure the House, from the Dispatch Box, that following the Government's decision to set aside the end date by which only the CE mark was required and to allow UK standards to be effectively set aside, the standard of the products that are imported to the UK meet at least the 2018 UK post-Grenfell fire safety standards? Otherwise, there is a risk that products that we would not be satisfied to see installed in buildings and that have given rise to serious concerns in the past may continue to be supplied to the market because they meet those EU standards, even though they may not meet the new UK standards.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Many of my constituents are extremely concerned for their safety. They are living in constant fear because of building safety and resilience issues. I am sure the shadow Minister agrees that the pace of remediation has been too slow in the seven years since the Grenfell tragedy. Does he also agree that firm action needs to be taken by developers, freeholders, manufacturers and other organisations, and that the Government must push to ensure that the pace of remediation is quickened?

David Simmonds: I entirely agree about the need to ensure that this work happens apace. During the debate, the contributions from the likes of the hon. Members for Sheffield South East and for Runcorn and Helsby (Mike Amesbury) demonstrated the complexity of some of the issues with which Governments of all parties have wrestled over the years. I have the insulation material that was identified in the Grenfell report in my own home, because in certain applications it is considered to be within building regulations. We know that this is not a straightforward process, and we need to ensure that building regulations have the absolute clarity that local authorities require. That is why I press the Minister on this point: can we, as a House, be confident that the consequence of that written ministerial statement will not be a risk of materials that do not meet the standards that we imposed in 2018 being imported and sold into the UK market?

It is clear that there will always be a debate, not just in the context of housing but in the context of any complex public service in this country, between those who think that the best approach for regulation is to specify the outcome that we want to see—we want the resident to be safe in their home, we want the child to be safe in the children's home and we want the patient to be safe in hospital; that is very similar to the approach taken in the aviation sector, which was mentioned earlier—and those who argue that the best approach is for Parliament and other relevant authorities to specify the precise safety features that we wish to see installed.

Each of those approaches has strengths and weaknesses. The previous Government, particularly in the early years, were keen to focus on the safety outcome that was being pursued rather than to specify individual measures that had to be taken, partly out of concern that those individual measures might not be as effective in practice as they needed to be. It is clear from the contributions by Members of all parties that they understand the complexity of this debate. The Minister will have to make decisions as we consider the future of building regulations. Does Parliament specify that there has to be a sprinkler system in one building, but a mister system in another? Are we going to specify that there has to be a dry riser in one type of building, and a wet riser in another type of building? Or are those simply matters that we prefer to leave to local building control services, while specifying the level of safety that we expect to achieve? All of these are important elements in this complex debate.

As I said in opening for His Majesty's loyal Opposition, we are determined to carry forward the work that we did in the last Parliament, largely in partnership with Labour Members, on fire safety and building safety. Those pieces of legislation inevitably require the current Government to provide guidance to local authorities, building control services, builders, construction firms and other parts of the sector. By working together constructively to support the effective implementation of those measures and provide absolute clarity on the expectations, we will achieve our shared aim of ensuring that all our constituents know that the buildings in which they live and work, and in which they are educated and receive medical treatment, meet the relevant safety standards and are environments and places in which they can safely go about their daily business.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Minister.

6.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): This has been an important debate on the safety of our residential buildings and, more importantly, the safety of the residents who call those buildings home. The final report of the Grenfell Tower inquiry sets out the appalling failures of the industry and successive Governments. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister set out in his statement to the House, we apologise on behalf of the state to each and every one of the bereaved families and survivors, and to the immediate Grenfell community.

We will demand responsibility for building safety—responsibility from this Government and responsibility across the industry. Too many buildings still have unsafe

[Alex Norris]

cladding, and the pace of remediation has been too slow. Like many colleagues in the House, I was in this Chamber seven years ago. Had we said to ourselves then that we would still be in the same situation seven years later, I think we would have considered that we had failed. That is very much the case, and this Government intend to address the failure. As I say, too many buildings have unsafe cladding, and the funding is there. There is no excuse for a building owner not to enter a cladding scheme for which they are eligible. We will accelerate efforts to bring all remaining buildings into remediation schemes, and empower regulators and local authorities to act, including by considering new legislation.

For good reason, much of this debate has been about safety rather than resilience, but as the Minister with responsibility for local resilience, I want to make the point that we are looking very closely at resilience at both national and local levels in response to the Grenfell Tower inquiry and the inquiry into the covid pandemic. We are looking at ways in which we can respond to crises, and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is leading a review of resilience, which will include work with the devolved Governments, regional mayors, local leaders and local resilience partnerships. Again, the reports have said that we ought be doing that. We are looking at the recommendations very carefully, and making sure that local areas are empowered and have the capacity to respond in times of crisis.

Zarah Sultana: I thank the Minister for giving way on the point about resilience. Obviously, firefighters and the FBU are key stakeholders in resilience work. I want to ask a question that I asked earlier about the statutory advisory body in response to Grenfell: what is the Government's timetable for developing that and getting it on board?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the hon. Member for her question. I was the shadow Fire Minister before the election, and I was very proud to get into our manifesto the commitment to get the fire family in the same room and drive standards. I cannot give her the exact date today, but I can tell her that dealing with this issue is a priority for the Home Office and we are getting on with it.

This has been a slightly odd debate, because its substance is exceptionally serious and rooted in one of the nation's greatest tragedies, but we have also had the joy of a dozen Members making their maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) said in his eloquent speech that he hoped those watching would understand why it has been this way. I will pay due respect to those colleagues by reflecting on some of the things they have said.

I start with the hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill. Everything he said about his predecessor, Bob Neill, was true. Bob is so respected on both sides of the House, and the way the hon. Gentleman started was very much the way that Bob finished, which was very encouraging. He mentioned the brave pilots leaving his constituency to go to war, and their sacrifice so that we can hold debates today. That represents the spirit that we should all hold to, every day that we are here. His point was well made. He also bravely said that the only football league team that had a Conservative Member of Parliament

was his team in Bromley, and that Notts County fans might remind people of that at the weekend. As a Member of Parliament for Nottingham, I will let my Pies-supporting friends know, although I think the language might be more choice than the suggestion the hon. Gentleman came up with.

My hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) has shown incredible persistence in getting here. As he said, this was his fourth time standing for election, and that says a lot about him, because others might not have bothered. It is really hard to run for election, certainly in the face of disappointment and, in 2017, of an incredibly narrow loss. Others might have looked for alternative seats, but he loves his community. Calder Valley and he are one and the same, so it does not surprise me that he stayed on, and it is a source of great joy that he is here. He talked about the longest running No. 2 in the charts having originated from Calder Valley. He was No. 2 for a long time, but now he has reached No. 1.

Similarly, the hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) she said that this was her third attempt to get elected, and she has shown similar persistence. She said that she brought with her a message of change. She mentioned special educational needs and water quality; this Parliament—and indeed this Government—will be measured by the progress made on those two issues.

Like me, my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) is proudly one of the 43 Labour and Co-op Members of this Parliament. We join 11 Mayors and more than 1,000 councillors as Labour and Co-operators. It is a great joy to see him in his place. I was struck by what he said; it made me feel similarly about my community. He talked about the proud heritage of his town, but also its ambitious future. He said that the industries might change, but the principles will be the same. As Minister for towns, I give the commitment that I will work closely with him to make that a reality, although I thought he was brave to say that a Labour leader had come from his constituency very early on; I saw the Whips making notes straight away.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: I thank the Minister for his kind words. I am sure he will agree that towns are the centre of a lot of our communities. I hope he will support the continued efforts to rejuvenate town centres—efforts seen in communities such as mine in Calder Valley, and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan). We need to make sure that our towns continue to thrive in the coming century, and reinvent themselves, just as the mills reinvented themselves in my community.

Alex Norris: I absolutely can give that commitment. I think the model will change—well, I know the model will change. We want to get rid of the beauty parades, and move to a more allocative model of funding based on local priorities and local leadership, in order to rejuvenate our towns and drive our economy forwards.

The hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) confessed that she was previously an architect. I hope that she will bring her insight to the Department's work, particularly on housing. Our door will be open. Possibly not uncommonly, she says that she will fight for more train stations for her constituency. I suspect that many will join her.

There was a beautiful irony in my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) saying that his constituency is the home of the cock and bull story, because although he is always very modest about this, he has a significant public profile in an industry that is about anything but cock and bull stories. It is all about very hard polling. On many occasions, when I have had an idea that I think is brilliant, he has disappointed me by finding a way to say on Twitter why what I propose is not right or desirable in the eyes of the public. But he has always been a friend to me when I have asked him stupid questions about polling, and I appreciate that.

Chris Curtis: Will the Minister give way?

Alex Norris: I will in a second, but I have not finished with my hon. Friend just yet. He is a very well-known pollster, but people do not know just how much he loves Milton Keynes; he loves it to the point of perhaps going on about it a bit, but not today. There is great experience from Milton Keynes on the subject of new towns and cities, and I hope that he will help us in this Parliament.

Chris Curtis: My background in polling taught me that we need to listen and speak to people from across society, as we did in that industry, and make sure that there is nobody who does not get listened to. That is very important in this debate, because a lot of the problems addressed in it are caused by communities and housing bodies not being listened to. That has resulted in a lot of these problems not being brought to the forefront. Does the Minister agree that across politics, and on all the issues that we discuss in this House, we need to be make sure that we listen and speak to everyone in society, as pollsters do?

Alex Norris: That is right. That is a well-expressed sentiment, in the context of this debate. It is our job, of course, to express what we think, and all of us will have strongly held views, but it is so crucial that we be tribunes for our community and give voice to those who are least heard; that is such an important role.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I was pleased to hear the Minister make reference to new towns. My constituency of Central Ayrshire benefits from the new town of Irvine, where I was born. Just recently, Irvine was part of the Government's long-term plan for towns programme, and secured a commitment to £20 million to help us bring Irvine back to its best days. I hope that the Minister agrees that new towns are essential to economic growth and development, both in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Alex Norris: I could not agree more. New towns were a feature of our manifesto, and there is a deal of public excitement about that.

Mr Dhesi: The Minister knows that I have a great deal of time and admiration for him. I have risen to my feet on the subject of building safety because many of my Slough constituents, particularly leaseholders, are fed up of being fleeced. The Labour party manifesto committed to leasehold reform, so will the Minister say exactly what actions the Government will take to assuage the concerns of my constituents?

Alex Norris: As always, my hon. Friend gives great voice to the people of Slough. We have heard clearly the message on leasehold reform, and we are looking at it very closely. I will cover a little of what we are planning to do in the substantive part of my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) made important points about her fight, and her predecessor's fight, for women's equality. So much progress has been made, but we are well short of an equal Parliament, as we are every time. We should all reflect on that, as a collective and in our political parties, and on how we can change that. It will change in our lifetime, but the pace is far too slow. My hon. Friend has the enviable, but perhaps daunting, task of following not only Gordon Brown but Jennie Lee, two giants of the Labour movement, but the passion and conviction with which she spoke augurs well, as does her work for Medical Aid for Palestinians recently; she spoke very movingly about her colleagues and the work they do.

Melanie Ward: My hon. Friend will have noticed that in my first speech, I mentioned that in Fife, we have a housing emergency. I draw his attention to the fact that in March, the SNP Scottish Government cut the affordable supply programme budget by almost £200 million. The new UK Labour Government are having to clean up the mess left by the Conservative Government—their black hole of £22 billion. In Scotland, the SNP has been in power for 17 years and has no excuse. Fife council had hoped to build 1,250 new council homes over the next five years, but that is now under threat. Too many people in my area, as I said in my speech, do not have a safe, appropriate place to call home. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is about time the SNP took responsibility for its financial mismanagement? I note once again that SNP Members are not present in the Chamber for this important debate.

Alex Norris: This is perhaps the defining issue of this generation. All political leaders have to demonstrate that they understand the frustration and pain caused by the lack of decent housing in this country. We are talking today about some very direct and fatal consequences, but across the country, there are other ways in which housing problems limit aspiration, health and opportunity. We were elected on a manifesto promise to deliver change, but colleagues in other parts of the Union have to realise that they also have responsibility. It is time to make fewer excuses and build more houses.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I am frustrated with the SNP Government's slow progress on facilitating the removal of dangerous, flammable cladding. The Scottish Government were allocated £97 million by this place to facilitate the programme, but only £11 million has been used, with only one project being completed to date. Does the Minister agree that the SNP Government need to address this imbalance urgently?

Alex Norris: If anything has come out of the report, and if we have learned anything over the last seven years, it is that getting these remediations done requires really strong political will. We made that commitment in the apology we gave, and we are taking action. We need to see that north of the border, too.

Emily Darlington: On strong political leadership, will the Minister join me in congratulating those councils that, as soon as the new building regulations came out, took immediate action to put in a waking watch? I am talking about the wider regulations—not just the ones about cladding, but the ones about compartmentalisation. In Milton Keynes, within a year, we had emptied two tower blocks that had compartmentalisation, rehoused more than 300 families, and then demolished the towers, whereas Milton Keynes families in private developments with similar issues are still waiting for remediation work to be done. We often hear that councils are slower than the private sector, but does the Minister agree that councils have responded more quickly and more responsibly than the private sector to these issues?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend is too humble to point to her role in Milton Keynes, but the political will exercised on that and many other housing issues has got results. The Government will display the same degree of political will, and we need to see it in local government, too. Milton Keynes sets a really good example.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): It is troubling that many owners, who, according to the Act, are responsible for fire safety in these blocks, are seeking to establish themselves in foreign jurisdictions, often in tax havens. How can the Government take action to ensure that those who are responsible—often those who were responsible for the defects in the first place—and who are now seeking to evade jurisdiction in this country, can be brought to justice? Will the Government have to appropriate these buildings to do the remediation work that is so badly needed, and not at residents' expense?

Alex Norris: This is on two tracks. First, we have deals with 55 of the biggest developers to do those remediations. The money is there, and they need to get on with it. A significant majority, if not a vast majority, of cases will see that action. That will cover most people. As my hon. Friend says, action is not as easy where firms have gone bust, disappeared or chosen more nefarious options to evade their responsibilities. We have set aside grant funding to ensure people do not suffer as a result of that, so I hope that gives an assurance that, no matter the hoops or the attempts at evasion made by those who really ought to do better, the Government will stand by the people who are most affected.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Alex Norris: An enviable choice of hon. Friends wish to intervene. I give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern).

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; he is clearly very popular. I want to follow up on the compelling point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), who said that a lot of the issues we have talked about today are exacerbated by the fact that the owners of the buildings—the freeholders, in these cases—are not always willing to fulfil their obligations to do right by their tenants. This Government are committed to enacting legislation to bring in the important reforms needed to truly bring an end to the problematic nature of leasehold relationships. Will the Minister be working closely with

others in his Department to ensure building safety is at the heart of those regulations, so we have a joined-up approach to tackling the issue at its root?

Alex Norris: I will come back to what we are going to do about leasehold in more detail in a second, but the principles are exactly as he says. We will be holding those principles in our heads as we consider our response to the report, to ensure our actions, legislative or otherwise, meet the moment.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Alex Norris: I am about halfway through my remarks about the maiden speeches we have heard, but I assure colleagues that I have an awful lot to say on the substance of the debate. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I am keen to take interventions at that point, but it would be a great joy if they could let me finish my remarks about the maiden speeches first.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and Solway was born and bred of his community, and obviously comes from a long line of people who have made a difference to it. His experience around leasehold will be useful for us in government, as will his knowledge of electrical safety, which is at the root of the issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) talked about two predecessors who were distinctive—one for their hair and one for their coat—and I wondered what his distinctive nature might be. Sadly, it will not be his name, as I join him in that already, but I wonder if the distinction will be the extraordinary service in the armed forces that he, his brother and four generations of his family have given to our country. His is a staggering story of commitment to this country. He is now entering a different phase and type of service, in which I know he will excel and that he will find rewarding in different ways, serving his country and his community.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) talked about first coming here as a 15-year-old and, as a result, getting a taste and enthusiasm for the House. I wondered how many other Members came here when they were younger and were inspired. In my case, I was 11, but I suspect that will be true for many others. It speaks to the responsibility that we have as parliamentarians to use the brilliant things that Parliament has to share and promote Parliament and democracy to young people in our communities. I commend my hon. Friend for his brilliant work on his borough council. I am not surprised he has made the analysis that he now wants to come here and fight for his town, because I made a similar analysis. I know it frustrates him when people say, about his constituency, that Gatwick is distinctive of it, but it is an important part of our country, both for holidaymakers and for people arriving for the first time. That first moment is so important to their integration and their lives here.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert) shared her story. I am sure many right hon. and hon. Members would associate themselves with the challenges in childhood that inspired her to be here today. She spoke about housing being a devolved issue and it is right that it should be handled appropriately, but I hope she has taken some succour, as I have, from the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister's attempts to reset relations with devolved Governments. On the

issue of housing, as on many others, we can do good work. She offered us all a visit, as well as the inducement of whisky and the Edinburgh festival.

Brian Leishman: I am sure the Minister will remember from my speech the harrowing story of my constituents from Tillicoultry who have suffered, and continue to suffer, from the horrible mental and physical impact of being evacuated from their homes at such short notice. Will he agree to meet me to discuss possible solutions for my constituents, bearing in mind the resetting of relationships between this Labour Government and the Scottish Government and the fact that housing is a devolved issue?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend makes some very important points about reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, which I shall address shortly. On his request to meet me, let me say that I am always happy to accept such invitations. As I am the Minister with lead responsibility for resilience, it may be better if my hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for building safety takes that meeting. She is very keen to meet colleagues to discuss what support we can offer as a Government.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) may be a proud islander, but I can detect a Nottinghamshire accent from 10 paces—watching “Sherwood” makes my ears go. I know that he is a proud islander, but, like his predecessor, he has that connection with Nottinghamshire. He also has the accolade of being the first chip shop owner to enter Parliament. That again is a very good inducement to get colleagues, and perhaps Ministers, to visit him. We do recognise that life is different on the island, and, as a result, some of the challenges are different. We in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are ready to support him in his work in that space.

I move on to the contributions of colleagues who were not making their maiden speech. That is probably well timed because, judging by the faces behind me, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) is coming to the end of his time as Select Committee Chair. He has shown such incredible leadership; he is a great parliamentarian, and has always been such a good and kind friend to me. I think it is safe to say that Ministers who have been before his Committee have found him tough and hard, but also very fair. He is also a very kind man. His service has been extraordinary.

Let me mention some of the points that my hon. Friend made. He talked about what help can be given to residents who wish to legally challenge recalcitrant owners and developers. Regulators have powers to act against such owners, and we expect them to do so. Our Department is responsible for holding to account developers who have signed the developer remediation contract, so if residents are concerned about the progress of remediation of their building, they should contact the regulator. If they are concerned about the progress of developer-led remediation, they should contact the Department. I hope that addresses the hon. Gentleman's point.

Clive Efford: I do not know whether my hon. Friend heard the example that I gave earlier of a management agency not giving the information to leaseholders to check whether they were being charged the right amount of money or even to seek legal redress. There seems to be no power to force those agencies to give that information.

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend will be pleased with the answer that I have to that question, which, with his forbearance, I will give once I have dealt with the next few questions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East referenced the Morrell and Day report, published last year, to which the previous Government did not respond. The intention of this Government is to bring forward proposals for system-wide reform of the construction products regulatory regime, which will tackle issues both in that report and the Grenfell Tower inquiry report. We think that it makes sense to do that as a collective piece of work.

My hon. Friend mentioned product manufacturers and remediation costs, which the shadow Minister also talked about. We are currently working on identifying how we might strengthen the Building Safety Act 2022 to ensure that such manufacturers can make a contribution. We have been taking action already through the recovery strategy unit to hold those construction product manufacturers to account and to get money out of them for their share of the costs. Where the work has not had the results that we wanted, we have written to institutional investors and encouraged sponsors to reconsider their partnership, which has resulted in the severance of two sponsorship deals, as well as another to which a colleague referred earlier. We know that more may be needed in this space, so we will continue to do that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Alex Norris: I will.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): It is very hard not to have an intervention from Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I outlined the case for the legislation and for building safety and resilience going forward. Does the Minister intend to share the findings with the regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which I represent, so that the appropriate Department in the Northern Ireland Assembly can take the legislative measures forward constructively to ensure safety for us in Northern Ireland as well?

Alex Norris: I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. We will absolutely share the best of our knowledge and insight—I am sure that will be a two-way process—to ensure that we are doing right by everybody across Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for his kind words about my chairing of the Select Committee. I am really pleased that he is now looking at raising some money from product manufacturers; they have escaped their responsibilities for far too long. Might I suggest that he use some of the money raised to help with social housing providers, given the concerns that I raised about their being treated differently in their access to the building safety fund?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend's suggestions often come with a smile but a degree of force. He will know that we are not very far from a spending review and a Budget, so I will not make financial commitments at this point. However, that idea is well expressed, and duly noted as a result. I am grateful for it.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I endorse what the Minister says about our hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). I, too, had the great honour of serving on his Committee many years ago, and at that time the focus was very much on housing.

In relation to building safety in Islington, where we all live on top of each other in flats, in 2021 there were 31 dangerous blocks of flats, which was terrifying for my constituents, many of whom were in fact private tenants, not social housing tenants. We did an audit in my office, and have been pushing. We now have only four blocks left, but it ought to be put on the record how terrifying it was over the years for those local residents, who had to pay for fire watches, could not sell their flats, and did not know what was going to happen. I have not been known for praising the Department over the years, but we are very grateful in Islington South for the support that we have been given by the Department until now.

Alex Norris: The right hon. Lady has put that on the record. It speaks to my earlier point about the importance of political will in this space. If we just wait for something to happen, we are not going to see it. There needs to be political grip at the national and local level, and we will certainly play our role in that. On her point about what her constituents lived with, she would have been sitting on the Opposition Front Bench seven years ago—I was behind her—when everybody said, “Never again. What action can we take? No job is too big or small.” But that is not what happened. It was a huge broken promise to the British people—her constituents and beyond.

Mike Amesbury: On the point about political will, the leasehold system is unfortunately still alive and kicking. I know that many of us look forward to seeing that feudal system kicked into the history books via oncoming legislation. It seems that service charges have become a cash cow for some interesting characters in the industry. What will the Minister and his team do to ensure that we move things forward, and that commonhold is the *de facto* tenancy in this country for flats?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend heard what I said about leasehold, and what we said in the manifesto that we both stood on. I will get to service charges shortly, because both he and our hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) made that point very well. I think they will be glad to hear what I have to say.

Let me deal first, though, with prosecutions, referring particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell). He has the closest stake in this issue, and spoke today with incredible passion. I know that he will be an outstanding advocate for his community, and I am sure that he will bring forward a lot of his frustrations about the pace of change. I think that point was well made. He has made multiple times the point about prosecutions. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out in his recent statement to the House, those affected have waited too long for justice, and those responsible must be held accountable. As the Met police have said, this will take time. It is one of the largest and most complex investigations that they have ever had to conduct, with 180 officers and staff dedicated to it. We fully support the Met and the Crown Prosecution Service as they carry out their investigations. They must be given space to do that.

Emily Darlington: We have been talking quite passionately in this debate, but we often lose sight of the stories of those who were actually affected. I think not least of a woman—she shall remain anonymous—who bought her flat as a way to ensure that she and her husband would be debt-free in their retirement. Unfortunately, her husband has passed away. Although they planned to be able to pay for the insurance and the service charge, those costs have gone up by 600%. She, an elderly lady in her retirement, is now accruing debt that she never wanted to pass on to her family. That is an issue not of cladding, but of wider things. For her, the mess that has been left, and the lack of clarity around remediation, means that her daily life is now a stressful situation. Does the Minister agree that the Secretary of State in the previous Government, who is responsible for this mess and misery, has no place leading any political party in this country?

Alex Norris: Everyone will have been angered by what we saw in the report. All those who played a part and made decisions will rightly reflect on their role and responsibilities in this, and will, I assume, make appropriate judgments in respect of the scale of the issue. My hon. Friend talks about service charges, so I will turn next to that point.

Alan Gemmell: Before the Minister moves on to service charges, I remind the House of something that I said last week, following the Prime Minister’s statement, about a similar fire that took place in Irvine in my constituency in 1999. A fire ripped through a 14-storey block of flats, leading to one fatality. Thanks to the work of my predecessor, Sir Brian Donohoe, building regulations were changed following that fire. I hope that the Minister will consider those building regulations and the Garnock Court fire as he examines what went wrong in the terrible tragedy at Grenfell.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that thoughtful intervention. I can assure my hon. Friend that Ministers are indeed considering that as part of this whole process. We need to learn those lessons.

Barry Gardiner: On regulation, my hon. Friend will know that Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s report made very strong statements about the difficulty of reconciling the role of maintaining standards with the competitive environment. It was when building control ceased to be the responsibility solely of local authorities and became privatised building control functions that things started to go wrong. What action will my hon. Friend and the Government take to ensure that one set of standards is applied in one particular way and is not subject to trading? Saying “We will give you a shortcut if you come to us” is what went on, but it is wrong and needs to stop.

Alex Norris: Throughout the debate, colleagues have raised important and startling accounts of just that—the way in which standards have been circumvented. That speaks to what my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East said at the beginning about how the culture has fallen into a race to the bottom. On the regulatory changes that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) wants to see from the Government, we are looking at the report and have made commitments to come back on it within six months. We will give the

Chamber the chance to discuss the report in greater detail. I hope he can give us the space to come forward with those suggestions and changes, but his points are well made.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): The UK Government have pledged to speed up the process of removing dangerous cladding from English buildings following the publication of the damning Grenfell inquiry report, which set out a series of significant failures. Does the Minister agree that the Scottish Government must start treating the issue with the urgency it deserves? The SNP has already re-profiled hundreds of thousands of pounds from this vital programme to plug the black hole it created in its own budget. This cannot happen again. Building safety cannot be sacrificed to SNP incompetence and financial mismanagement.

Alex Norris: A theme of this debate has been that we will not make the changes we need to make or keep people safe in the way they should be able to expect without really strong political will, at whatever level and whatever point politicians touch the process. It is incumbent on all of us to use all the levers and tools we have to ensure that we meet our responsibilities. Where colleagues have not done so, they really must reflect on that, frankly, and change.

Oliver Ryan: The Minister is being very generous with his time. I wonder whether he will meet me and representatives from Burnley council, which has a very good retrofit scheme that actually makes profit for the council and seems to retrofit street after street of terraced houses in Burnley. I note with interest the comments made by the shadow Minister about arm's length companies used under the previous Labour Government to precipitate retrofit programmes. In areas such as Burnley, including Burnley Wood and Trinity, that approach worked and actually brought a great deal of investment into streets that are, quite frankly, still in need of repair and retrofit. Is the Minister interested in coming to Burnley to meet me on that front, and may I praise him for his kind words about Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield earlier?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that kind offer. Of course I will readily accept a visit to Burnley—perhaps through the lens of my role as the local growth and towns Minister. We could have a very interesting visit and I would be glad to do it.

I am conscious of the time; I am going to run out of it, unthinkable. We may have to pick up any further interventions in a different form, because I want to get to the points about buildings insurance, lending and service charges raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Runcorn and Helsby (Mike Amesbury), for Eltham and Chislehurst and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee).

One thing we know is that there has not been enough change in this space over the past seven years, but there has been change in the insurance bills that many leaseholders have been facing. We understand the financial and emotional impact that extreme insurance premiums have been having on leaseholders. Affected leaseholders have been burdened with paying too high premiums for too long. I assure colleagues that we are working actively to reduce premiums for leaseholders, and we are reviewing how better to protect leaseholders from costs and push for fair premiums for leaseholders in buildings with fire safety issues.

Colleagues have talked about buying, selling or remortgaging homes. We have seen improvements in that space, but we remain vigilant. We will continue to hold particularly the 10 largest lenders to account following their commitment to lend on properties even where remediation is not yet complete. They must keep that promise.¹

On service charges, by law, variable service charges must be reasonable. As colleagues have raised, that has been stretched significantly by some of the practices we have seen. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 contains measures to ensure that leaseholders get key financial and non-financial information so that they can scrutinise and hold to account the organisations that they are working with on service charges. Not all of that legislation has been commenced; secondary legislation is required, but we are working on that actively. We just want to get it right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) talked about the pace of remediation. Again, we accept that the pace is too slow; we have said that throughout, and what we have seen in Dagenham and Slough are horrific reminders of the risk that unsafe cladding still poses to far too many people. The Deputy Prime Minister has been very clear on her intention to drive that forward—again, there is that political will—and to get more action out of manufacturers, freeholders, developers and organisations with responsibility for making sure that buildings are safe. Too many building owners are still not acting quickly enough, so we will investigate, pursue the most egregious actors who are creating unacceptable delays, and hold them to account. The message from this Dispatch Box and from this Government is clear: “Use the routes we have created to get your buildings fixed, and get on with it.”

I now turn to the points made by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) about the inquiry. The right hon. Gentleman expressed concern that the report would be shelved, and the hon. Lady was concerned that it would just be words, so again, let me make the commitment—this speaks to the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner)—that the report's recommendations must be considered with the seriousness that this tragedy deserves. We will look at all 58 recommendations in detail; there will be a debate on the Floor of this House; we will respond in full within six months; and we will be listening to the community throughout the process. We will update Parliament annually on our progress so that we can be held to account, but we will also get on quickly with the things we can do, whether that is speeding up remediation or reforming construction products. The change has not been at the pace that it ought to have been, but it will get better. I can commit that the report will not, as the right hon. Gentleman has said, just be shelved—far from it.

The hon. Members for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) and for Woking (Mr Forster) mentioned buildings under 11 metres. Our approach to cladding remediation has been to prioritise the risk of loss of life. It is generally accepted that the risk to life is proportional to the height of buildings, so the risk to life is usually lower in buildings under 11 metres, and they are very unlikely to need the same costly remediation. Building safety remediation works may be required in a very small

1.[*Official Report*, 7 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 2WC.](Correction)

[Alex Norris]

number of those buildings, but so far, our casework as a Department over the past couple of years shows that of the more than 160 cases that have been raised, only three have fallen into that category. As such, we think that is an appropriate distinction to draw.

My hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) made a point about RAAC. This issue is different in Scotland than it is in England: Scotland has its own responsibilities, which the Scottish Government must work within, and as I said to my hon. Friend, we will work within the best practices too. It is the duty of building owners, including local authorities if they are the owner, to fulfil their duties to manage building safety and performance risks of all kinds—including RAAC—in a proportionate manner.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), talked about personal evacuation plans, or PEEPs. We must ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are protected. On 2 September, through a written ministerial statement, the Government announced that the Home Office will bring forward in the autumn proposals to improve fire safety and the evacuation of disabled or vulnerable residents in high-rise and higher-risk residential buildings in England. Those proposals will be called residential PEEPs. Through them, residents with disabilities and impairments will be entitled to a person-centred risk assessment to identify the appropriate equipment and adjustments to aid their fire safety and evacuation, as well as a residential PEEP statement that says what vulnerable residents should do in the event of a fire. The Government have committed funding next year to begin that important work by supporting social housing providers to deliver PEEPs for their renters.

The shadow Minister also mentioned product hallmarks. We stand by what was said in the written ministerial statement—I would have hoped that gave enough confidence—but for clarity, this is about stronger standards, not weaker standards. I hope the hon. Gentleman can take confidence from that.

David Simmonds: Will the Minister give way?

Alex Norris: Very briefly.

David Simmonds: I would just like to press the Minister for the assurance I am seeking: that the Government have taken steps to ensure that all products that meet the 2015 European standards, and therefore are within the scope of what the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali) said in the written ministerial statement, will also—as a minimum—meet the 2018 post-Grenfell UK standards.

Alex Norris: My colleague and hon. Friend, the Minister for building safety, has heard that intervention. As I say, everything that we have said is about higher standards, not lesser standards, but my hon. Friend will write to the hon. Gentleman about the issue he has raised. Again, I hope that I can assure him that this is about greater standards, not lesser ones.

To conclude, as the Prime Minister made clear, the Grenfell Tower tragedy was the result of unacceptable, inherent and systematic issues and decades of failure from both industry and Government. It is going to take political will to change that, and we offer it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered building safety and resilience.

Speaker's Statement

6.59 pm

Mr Speaker: We now come to the results of the Select Committee Chair elections. The results for the Chairs who were unopposed were announced on Monday. The elections for the contested posts were held by secret ballot today, and 577 Members voted.

The successful candidates are: Business and Trade Committee, Liam Byrne; Defence Committee, Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi; Education Committee, Helen Hayes; Energy Security and Net Zero Committee, Bill Esterson; Environmental Audit Committee, Toby Perkins; Foreign Affairs Committee, Emily Thornberry; Home Affairs Committee, Dame Karen Bradley; Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Florence Eshalomi; International Development Committee, Sarah Champion; Justice Committee, Andy Slaughter; Procedure Committee, Cat Smith; Public Accounts Committee, Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown; Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Simon Hoare; Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, Chi Onwurah; Committee on Standards, Alberto Costa; Transport Committee, Ruth Cadbury; Women and Equalities Committee, Sarah Owen; and Work and Pensions Committee, Debbie Abrahams. The result of the election for the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee will be announced tomorrow as a recount is going on.

I congratulate colleagues who have been elected and thank all candidates who have taken part. The full breakdown of voting in each of the contests is set out in a paper that will be available tomorrow when all the results have been announced. The Members elected take up their positions formally when their Committee has been nominated by the House.

Democracy in Bangladesh

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

7.2 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It was the sitar-loving George Harrison who sang that “Bangladesh...sure looks like a mess”.

He made the observation in 1971, soon after the country's formation, but it applies again since 5 August, after momentous events happened in that country. No one saw it coming, but the previous Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, who had looked so entrenched, was overthrown. Within days, her replacement was Professor Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel prize winner for his concept of microfinance. That did not happen without bloodshed. Hundreds of students were killed in the struggle for the new Bangladesh 2.0, as people have called it, and thousands injured.

Bangladesh's founding constitution—it is only a young country—stressed democracy, secularism and socialism, but in recent years it has become synonymous with corruption, authoritarianism and repression. There were echoes of Saddam Hussein's fall when we saw TV pictures of statues of the first ever leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, toppled, with effigies of him burned and pictures smashed, from the capital city, Dhaka, to Tower Hamlets. It was all because of his daughter, the ex-PM Sheikh Hasina, who had ruled in two bursts for a large percentage of the country's existence. It was she who ensured the omnipresent pictures of her dad across the nation. For me, it had echoes of Tiananmen Square in 1990, although in this case the students won. There may be a fledgling interim Government, but I feel they have very good intentions, and we should congratulate them.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab) *rose*—

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

Dr Huq: I will give way to the new Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Dhesi: I thank my hon. Friend, and I congratulate her on securing this Adjournment debate about democracy in Bangladesh. After the recent upheaval, many of my constituents in Slough and people across the globe are extremely concerned about not just democracy, but the rights of minorities. There have been many attacks, in particular on the Hindu minority community. Does she agree that it is incumbent on the new Administration to safeguard the rights of all minorities within Bangladesh?

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend always makes excellent points. When we are talking about minorities such as Hindus and Buddhists—there are various minorities—it is interesting to look at who is propagating the stories. There have also been pictures of devout Muslim students from the madrasas in their topi defending Hindu homes. BBC Verify has shown that some of these attacks have been on people associated with the previous regime. Sometimes these things are a bit amplified by people with agendas, but my hon. Friend makes a great point.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. She is absolutely right to highlight the issue. Does she not agree that democracy means the protection of human rights and religious freedom? I declare an

[Jim Shannon]

interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. We stand up for those with Christian faith, those with other faiths and those with no faith, the right to religious freedom and the right to practise faith or to have no faith. There can never be true democracy in Bangladesh until a Government and a system are in place that do not penalise people based on how they worship or where they worship, but that offer protection for people's differences. That is what society should be like.

Dr Huq: I totally agree with the hon. Member. The UK has a unique historical role in the colonial histories and as head of the Commonwealth. He does great work on the APPG. We should be vigilant on all these things.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. On the UK's role, is she aware that in May, the previous UK Government signed a deal with the now deposed Bangladeshi Government about fast-tracking the deportation of Bangladeshi asylum seekers, presumably including those seeking political asylum? Bangladesh was deemed a supposedly safe country. Does she agree that something has clearly been revealed to be wrong here, both with the deportation policy itself and with the UK's foreign policy objectives?

Dr Huq: I have checked, and apparently some of those memorandums of understanding are being looked at by the new Government one by one to see if they are carried over. The hon. Member makes an excellent point. Let us have a reset. We have a fresh Government in this country and a fresh one in Bangladesh, so it is time to look at these things through new eyes.

Back in the summer—in fact, it was at the same time as we saw race riots in this country—there was footage of jubilant Bangladeshis marching through the streets of Tower Hamlets, the hon. Member's borough. That confused many people, but it was in happiness; they were not angry ethnic mobs. There is a big global diaspora, with 70,000 in this country, including me. The diaspora can be seen across Europe. In some of the middle eastern emirate states, the diaspora has supplied cheap labour to build such things as World cup stadiums in Qatar. Bangladesh is a place that exports people.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about an important issue. I commend the work of the Bangladeshi community in Reading, who work incredibly hard in our town. They are visible in a whole series of professions and business activities. I thank and commend my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for raising these important matters about the future of Bangladesh. Across the House, we all share concerns about this wonderful country, and we wish it the best with its new leadership.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend is so right. I did not see any demos in Reading, but I do know that in all sorts of European capitals, including Paris and Rome, as well as in Manchester and Trafalgar Square, there were solidarity protests when these things went on. The diaspora has been active.

I am a London-born Bangladeshi. I kind of knew about the country from my parents telling me that it was this paradise of coconut trees and those kind of things.

I only went as a teenager. More recently, as an adult and as an MP, I have noticed the slightly more sinister side, with things like enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Every human rights organisation—Amnesty International and so on—has condemned those.

I try to keep out of this subject—I do not have a very Bangladeshi electorate—but I was jolted when in 2018 I heard from the family of Shahidul Alam, a photographer who was taking pictures of an earlier student protest, that he had been banged up and tortured. Then I had to get involved. I was there as recently as May with the excellent all-party parliamentary group on global sexual and reproductive health rights—it has been reconstituted just today—for a United Nations Development Programme conference. Again, I realised that I was in a one-party police state—it is not quite right.

As one of the diaspora, these human rights crackdowns came into my inbox, and they reached fever pitch in July when hundreds of brave students gave their lives in a struggle. Before we broke for recess, I had a panel discussion, with the panellists including Toby Cadman, a barrister who has defended people from the Jamaat party that was banned by the previous regime—it has just been unbanned—and the head of Amnesty International UK. The discussion, which we had in the Grand Committee Room of Westminster Hall, was so oversubscribed that people had to be turned away, such was the thirst for information. I see the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) in his place. He was there, and I think that his defeat of Jonathan Ashworth may have had something to do with some comments about this subject, but let us not speculate.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Does the hon. Member agree about the positive contribution that the Bangladeshi community has made to our country, which has made it as it is today? I would like to take this opportunity to pay homage to the Bangladeshi community of Leicester South, who are hard-working, entrepreneurial and philanthropic. Their commitment to using the political system to improve their community has made my city as great as it is today.

Does the hon. Member also agree that the riots we saw recently in Southport after the devastating attack and killing of three innocent people emphasise how important it is that we do not single out a community, because that can have devastating effects? Does she agree that both sides of the House should be much more responsible in the language they use to ensure that community cohesion ensues?

Dr Huq: I completely endorse what the hon. Member is saying. We do need to temper our language and be careful. Every Member in this House has a curry house in their constituency, and that will not be an Indian restaurant—it will be Bangladeshis who run it. An enormous contribution has been made to our society. With the things we saw this summer, we should stamp on the misinformation that I referred to in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi).

Again, those Bangladeshi university students showed courage, and they were not just the elitist ones from the capital city; it happened all over the country at public and private universities, with boys and girls. Their demands were initially against corruption but they grew to wider pro-democracy concerns and the overthrow of the

Prime Minister. So far, so predictable, but then in the biggest plot twist since Bobby Ewing in the shower, when all those tensions were coming to a head, we heard that the previous Prime Minister had suddenly scarpered. She helicoptered out. A regime so entrenched that it looked like it would last forever suddenly collapsed like a pack of cards. In January, there was an election in Bangladesh—we hear that 40% of the globe is going to the polls this year—although there were not any other real candidates in it, so that was declared null and void. We now have this caretaker Government who are there to oversee fresh elections. We do not know exactly when those will be.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. She knows that in the city of Birmingham we have an extremely sizeable community that has Bangladeshi heritage, like the constituency of the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam), and the Bangladeshi community in the curry houses contributes some £4 billion per annum to the to the taxman.

Does the hon. Member agree that the recent disorder and killing of students in Bangladesh has impacted the Bangladeshi heritage community here in the UK, especially when we had a lockdown of all telecoms? Does she agree that the next step must be a democratically elected Government and that that must be expedited, potentially with international observers, to ensure that it is free and fair, so that the loss of those hundreds of students' lives was not in vain?

Dr Huq: I agree. Our loved ones were worried, and we did not know that was going on. We are talking about a country that can, at will, shut off the internet so that people cannot communicate with the outside world, or even with each other via phone signal—there was a Digital Security Act that was a bit sinister, and stopped all freedom of speech, thought, expression and assembly. Yes, we must rebuild. The hon. Gentleman made a great point.

The sight of Muhammad Yunus—until recently, the previous regime had tried to lock him up—was baffling but reassuring for many, because he is globally recognised. He was a character on “The Simpsons”; Lisa discovered his microfinance loans to women. Among his friends are the Obamas and the Clintons, and 197 world leaders have signed a memorandum to welcome him to power. He has the in-tray from hell, and a big job to do in repairing democracy. He was here in March, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali) organised a meeting for him with the all-party parliamentary group for Bangladesh, which she then chaired. He is such a modest man; he had 200 different court cases against him, but he did not go on about them—it had to be teased out of him by Baroness Helena Kennedy, who chaired that day. He is known as the banker to the poor.

Nobody saw this coming. Bangladesh is a country of contradictions. It has 175 million people on a land mass the size of England and Wales, and is beset by natural disasters—at the moment, there are the worst floods in 30 years. Youth unemployment is sky high, which partly explains the protests.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Lady on getting this debate. Does she agree that there is also a geopolitical issue surrounding all the

changes in Bangladesh? Hitherto, it adopted a credible non-aligned position, supported the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and tried basically to be a promoter of peace in the region. I do not know any more than she does what the outcome of all this will be, but does she agree that the important thing is that Bangladesh remains independent and not aligned with any other bloc? Otherwise, we might end up with the further problem of a cold war in south-east Asia.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind Members that interventions should be short. I know that you have all just had a master class in very long interventions, but I am sure that Dr Rupa Huq is about to conclude her remarks, so that the Minister has an opportunity to speak.

Dr Huq: There is plenty more to say. We need a fresh start—a reset, as the right hon. Gentleman said, and “in neither Washington nor Moscow”, as the slogan used to be. We need less gerontocracy. Yunus is 84, though he is very sharp. The leader he overthrew is 76, and the opposition rival, Khaleda Zia, is 78.

I have some questions for the Minister. As I said, there is a big job to do. Given our unique role in all this, we should offer support. Apparently, the constitution is being amended and redrafted. Could we lend expertise there? British lawyers have good form on this; we constructed the European convention on human rights. Capacity building is needed to cleanse all sorts of institutions of party people who were in the pocket of the last regime. Hendon police training college is renowned all over the world; perhaps we can rebuild the police in Bangladesh, because apparently there has been a bit of a vacuum there recently. The Stormtrooper-like Rapid Action Battalion force should be disbanded, and the death penalty should be gone. Maybe we could do something about climate finance, because countries in the global south face the brunt of climate problems, and we are in the run-up to COP29. These measures do not even have to cost anything; we could put a polluter-pays levy on some countries.

Lastly, we need to recover some of the assets. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) mentioned foreign Governments' interference. When I last went to Bangladesh, I saw Chinese power plants and Russian flyovers—lots of things like that; I cannot remember what they all were. Money that belongs to the Bangladeshi people was looted and plundered. We need asset tracing to recover it.

I understand that Professor Yunus is coming to the UN General Assembly. It would be great if His Majesty's Government warmly welcomed him—I do not know if they will be represented by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), the Prime Minister or whoever.

We are talking about Bangladesh 2.0 and human rights. When Gandhi was asked what he thought of western civilisation, he famously said:

“I think it would be a good idea”.

Let us make sure that democracy and human rights in Bangladesh are not just a good idea, but a given. People are talking about this as a second revolution. Let us rebuild Bangladesh, so that human rights and democracy are a given. I look forward to hearing what the Minister says.

7.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West):

I am so grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for securing this debate and I commend the commitment she has shown to Bangladesh over many years. As we are aware in this House, Adjournment debates are usually quite a lonely affair, so it is fantastic to have had contributions from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum). My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali) has stayed here on the Government Front Bench following her earlier ministerial duties, because it is such an important debate. The hon. Members for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) and for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), and the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) are all great friends of Bangladesh, and are very active in the all-party parliamentary group for Bangladesh.

The UK and Bangladesh share an historic relationship, with long-standing economic and trading ties built from a strong development partnership. We are both valuable members of the Commonwealth family. Our long-standing relationship is strengthened by our people-to-people ties, with over 650,000 people of Bangladeshi heritage living here in the UK and, as was mentioned earlier, making a significant and highly valued contribution to our country and our relationship. The UK was among the first to recognise Bangladesh after it gained independence in 1971, and has supported the people of Bangladesh since then.

We want to see a peaceful and democratic future for the people of Bangladesh. Democracy, human rights, an independent judiciary and good governance are vital foundations for long-term growth and prosperity. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton outlined some of her ideas for how that can be built in the coming months. The UK is therefore committed to bolstering democracy and human rights in Bangladesh through our sustained support to leaders of civil society, defence of media freedom and championing youth empowerment.

We, like many in the international community, expressed concerns about the elections in Bangladesh in January this year. Democratic elections depend on credible, open and fair competition. Respect for human rights, the rule of law and due process are essential elements. Those standards, sadly, were not consistently met during the election period in Bangladesh and were followed by incidents of violent repression. During the recent protests, we were deeply saddened by the loss of life and injury caused. There are credible reports of the police using tear gas, stun grenades and live rounds. The United Nations reports that 32 children were among those killed. Children were also among those detained during the protests. The violence reportedly left more than 600 people dead, and thousands injured and detained. The former Bangladesh Government severely restricted access to the internet, mobile services and landlines. Those services were only fully restored after 10 days. We raised our concerns about the communications disruption in Bangladesh and the widescale impact it had, including on British nationals in country. We were clear that access to communications must be maintained and not used as a tool to repress freedom of speech.

In July, the Foreign Secretary and I issued statements urging an end to the violence and loss of life. We called for all sides to find ways to restore calm, including by establishing a pathway for constructive political dialogue. We are clear that peaceful protesters must never be subject to violence, and that rights to protest, to peacefully assemble and to express different political views must be protected. During the protests, I reinforced our concerns and messages about the situation in discussions with the Bangladesh high commissioner to the UK. The UK called for a full and independent UN-led investigation into the events, and is supporting its independent fact-finding mission to identify human rights violations.

We welcomed the appointment of the interim Government in Bangladesh, led by Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, in August. The Foreign Secretary made it clear in his statement last month that the people of Bangladesh deserve a peaceful, inclusive and democratic future. The interim Government in Bangladesh have committed to restoring peace and order, ensuring accountability, and promoting national reconciliation, and they have the UK's full support on those objectives. The British high commissioner to Bangladesh, Sarah Cooke, to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude, met Chief Adviser Professor Yunus and other key members of the interim Government, including the Adviser for Foreign Affairs, in August. She and members of the British high commission in Dhaka continue to engage with the interim Government on key priorities, and she will have heard the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton. The high commissioner and members of the British high commission are actively supporting this democratic process, including through the B-CAPP—Bangladesh-collaborative, accountable and peaceful politics—programme. We work with civil society, youth organisations, political parties and other international partners to encourage democratic participation, civil space and accountable governance.

The UK's support to Bangladesh reflects other challenges that the country faces, including the impacts of climate change and humanitarian issues. My deepest sympathy is with the people of Bangladesh, in all its regions, as the nation faces the effects of the recent devastating floods; my thoughts are with all those affected. We have responded to the recent flooding with £483,000 of humanitarian assistance. That is, of course, on top of our long-standing support under the overseas development aid projects. The UK Government are also committed to providing humanitarian support for the Rohingya refugees, and we are very aware that, at this moment of stress for Bangladesh, this is a particularly precious duty that it is carrying out on behalf of the international community. As a leading donor to the Rohingya refugee response, we are providing humanitarian aid, including food, clean water, healthcare and protection services. Over £391 million has been provided by the UK since 2017. Because the current conditions in Myanmar are not conducive to the safe return of the Rohingya refugees, we are working with the interim Government in Bangladesh on continued support to those refugees.

As a long-standing champion of democracy, and as a friend and partner of Bangladesh, the UK will support the country's interim Government in their work to restore peace and order, ensure accountability and promote national reconciliation. We will work with Chief Adviser Professor Yunus and his interim Government as they

chart a peaceful transition to an inclusive, prosperous and democratic future for Bangladesh. As part of this regular dialogue, the UK will continue to raise concerns over the protection of human rights and freedom of expression. We will urge the Government of Bangladesh to ensure safety and security inside Rohingya refugee camps, and will reiterate that peaceful protesters must never be subject to violence. As many of our diaspora communities watch this important debate, I thank my

hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton for her relentless support for Bangladesh and its people, and for bringing this debate to the House today.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 11 September 2024

[DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

Planning Policy: Traveller Sites

9.30 am

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the adequacy of planning policy for Traveller sites.

It is a pleasure to hold this debate with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. My constituents are reasonable people; they totally understand and appreciate people's wanting to live alternative ways of life, including nomadic lifestyles. I have lived all my life in my constituency, and the Travelling community has been part of the constituency for that whole period of time. We respect the contribution the community makes to our society, as long as communities are law-abiding and let other people peacefully enjoy their property, settlements and communities.

The real concern in my constituency is about a number of planning applications, and whether planning policies apply equally to local people and to other communities, including Travelling communities. The basic principle is that there is one law for all, rather than one law for one person and another for another person: the law applies equally to everyone in our communities and society. With some of the applications, there is a real feeling that that is not the case, and that contributes to a feeling that we are moving to a form of two-tier society, which would be a dangerous state of affairs.

Where some applications are being made, our local communities do not understand why planning policy is not being overseen equally, and there is a deal of anger about that. That is the case with a number of applications, including one at Sheriff Hutton, one near Rillington and a number of potential others. The applications are being considered, and in some cases recommended for approval, on the basis not of planning law but of other laws, such as the Human Rights Act 1998, the Equality Act 2010 and the UN convention on the rights of the child, as well as the European convention on human rights, which obviously has other consequences in different parts of our system.

Normal, law-abiding citizens go about a planning application in the appropriate way: they first find a site that suits their needs, before looking at planning policy and probably instructing an agent to act on their behalf, and they then submit an application before doing any work to that site. The application must conform to planning policy, or they will not get consent. They go through the various iterations of the planning process. It may take years to get planning consent for the property development, but hopefully at some point they get it. Most of my constituents respect the planning process and its outcomes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise to you, Dame Siobhain, and to the hon. Gentleman, because I have other engagements and cannot stay. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the delicate balance to be struck between allowing travellers to carry on their way

of life and ensuring that the community around them is not adversely affected relates not just to planning policy but to all policies? We want to foster Traveller communities that feel engaged in and a part of our communities; that can be achieved by building relationships and through a little bit of understanding.

Kevin Hollinrake: As always, the hon. Gentleman is very reasonable. That is exactly the position that my constituents and I take: this is about fairness and applying the law equally. The Human Rights Act contains a requirement to consider the rights not just of the individual but of other people in such situations, but it seems that some applicants' rights are given greater consideration than those of others. That is my biggest concern. This issue has been dealt with to some extent through planning policy, but that has not been sufficient to deal with some of the problems.

I have set out how someone who respects the law and the planning process might set about applying for planning permission. In some applications it has not been done that way. Some applicants purchase a site first, probably a roadside site, with or without access—they might create access. Sites in Sheriff Hutton and Rillington are in open countryside and not in a location where someone would normally get planning consent for such developments. The site is prepared with the access and hard standing, for example, which is not a major contravention of planning policy and not something the planning department might have too big a problem with at the time. There might be an agricultural building on the site, for example, and water and power put into the site. Preparation occurs.

Then one evening—overnight or on a bank holiday weekend when the people who look after these matters might not be in their offices—the site is occupied unlawfully without planning consent. Caravans might move on to the site, along with other equipment, and maybe toilet blocks are built overnight, which happened at one of the sites, and the site is occupied with a view to being occupied permanently. It is not a temporary position; the people occupying the site intend to occupy it permanently.

Then the planning authority has to go through an enforcement process following complaints from local people about the application. The planning authority's wheels turn pretty slowly, which I think the people occupying the site are aware of, and enforcement measures take place. That might take months, during which time the community might experience some disturbance and real concerns are expressed.

When enforcement measures are taken, the owner of the land will submit a planning application retrospectively. Despite the flagrant breach of the proper planning process, the application is then considered as if it were made using the proper process. That is where it fundamentally goes wrong: the fact that the retrospective application is considered on the same grounds as though it were a normal lawful process is what is wrong. The application is made, of course, on the basis of the rights of the people occupying the site. The Human Rights Act, the Equality Act, the UN convention on the rights of the child and the European convention on human rights are all cited in relation to the rights of the occupants—generally the families on that site who need healthcare and education. No one would doubt the

[Kevin Hollinrake]

need of the children and the people in need of healthcare to access such facilities. That is the basis of why the application should be considered, despite the fact that it is retrospective.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for graciously allowing a second intervention. Is he aware of the latest Irish Traveller accommodation strategy 2020-2025? If he or the Minister are not, may I suggest that they access it? It sets out guidelines to provide, in this case, Irish Travellers

“with access to good quality, culturally appropriate housing accommodation which fosters a sustainable, vibrant Traveller community”.

That allows the Travellers to enjoy their own lifestyle but at the same time consider the possibility of integration. Does he agree that perhaps those guidelines, which are from a different jurisdiction, might be helpful?

Kevin Hollinrake: Perhaps understandably, this is not my policy area. I am holding this debate because it is a constituency issue. I am not particularly aware of the Irish rules that the hon. Gentleman mentions. But it is right to say that local planning authorities have a requirement to facilitate the peaceful enjoyment of people who live nomadic lifestyles. I support that totally. North Yorkshire should provide such facilities, and it does. That site is occupied despite the fact that there are available places on a designated Traveller site nearby. That is one of the concerns: there are other facilities available, but the person who made this application does not want to be on them. I believe they are misusing the planning policy. I have no objection to people's right to live alternative lifestyles and to live in different ways in their own communities; what I object to is the misuse of the planning process.

The issue was dealt with, to some extent, by my very fine colleague—sadly, my late colleague—James Brokenshire when he was Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary. In February 2019, he published some new recommendations for planning authorities, stating that the intentional unauthorised development of a site should be considered a material point within a planning application. That is absolutely critical. He was saying, therefore, that the local planning authority had grounds to refuse the application on the basis that there was an intentional unauthorised development. Despite the North Yorkshire planning authority's awareness of that requirement, it still recommended approval on this site, which I find astounding.

I find the whole situation astounding, and so do many of my constituents. It is important that we look at the facts. Members engaging in this debate and people watching it on Parliament TV may look at the application on the North Yorkshire portal—the planning reference is 22/00102/FUL. The things I am saying are based not on local rumours and concerns, but on the actual documented situation with the planning application.

The site in question is on Cornborough Road, about half a mile out of the village of Sheriff Hutton. It is in open countryside, and is outside the development plan. The application is for eight units of accommodation—four permanent breezeblock-built units, and permanent static caravans—and 12 car spaces. It has been occupied for

three years without planning consent by a family with six children. Obviously, we respect their right to go about their lives in a way they feel appropriate, and we have every hope that those children will be properly educated and receive proper public services.

The planning officers, in their wisdom, decided to recommend the site for approval, with one significant condition: occupancy of the site was to be restricted to the family and their dependants—the adults on the site, the owners of the site and their children. Of course, those children will be adults one day, which means that the site could be occupied for many decades. The application also says that there could be a variation in the application for an extended family, for example, which could mean that the site is occupied for a very long time. Remarkably, the agent for the applicant objected to that condition, again on human rights grounds. It is clear that the site will be occupied in the very long term, and that there will be the ability to sell it on to someone else.

I think it is absolutely wrong that people can effectively drive a coach and horses through the planning system. My law-abiding constituents would not go about it in that way. Unless we deal with this situation properly, it will breed a sense of unfairness—the idea that there is one law for one and another for others. Unless we deal with the problem by clarifying the planning guidance, to ensure that anybody who is guilty of a flagrant abuse of the planning system cannot ever get planning consent on a site in that way, we will see more and more such applications, not in just my constituency but in constituencies around the country.

I know the Minister is freshly in the job. I welcome him to his place. He is a good man, and we have dealt with many things in the past, when our roles were reversed, so I know that he will look at this seriously. We have engaged on this particular matter already. Furthermore, my colleague the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), is also experienced in these matters.

I urge the Minister to tighten the rules to ensure that our constituents, law-abiding citizens of this country, feel that we are on their side. Law-abiding people go about the planning process properly, and should not feel that we favour people because of abstract laws, laws potentially imposed on us by the UN convention on the rights of the child or the European convention on human rights—now embedded in our own Human Rights Act—which mean that some people are treated more fairly than others during the process. It is important that we act and that we clarify the planning process, so that people who act in that way can never get planning consent. That is the only way we will stop such rogue applications being submitted.

9.45 am

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for securing this debate on a subject with which I am sure many hon. Members are familiar, although sadly that familiarity does not always come from a good place. Often it is driven by casework.

My understanding of the issues has been enriched by listening to the Traveller community in my constituency and hearing about the problems that they have experienced.

I have heard the concerns about a two-tier system in planning, but it was interesting to hear, in a discussion on a long-standing site run by the council in my area, that they are not eligible for the right to buy, even though some of those families have lived there for 40-plus years. The idea that there is a two-tier system in planning ignores the fact that there is also a two-tier system for this very prejudiced-against group of people.

Too often our familiarity comes from lurid headlines that generate a lot of heat rather than shedding light on the problems experienced by a community facing discrimination and disadvantage across the board. It is important that we bear that in mind when we talk about the issue in the context of the planning system, and it is important that we are honest about the context of those problems. It is difficult to have a sensible discussion about how we best serve Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities when words like “incursion” are used and when groups of Travellers are repeatedly characterised as ruining picturesque landscapes, towns or villages, creating nuisance and disturbance, or somehow being above the rules.

Given that context, we need to be explicit in saying that, far from the invalidation and demonisation of such communities that we often see in the media, the planning system should support this group to live in the way that they choose. There has been an absolute failure to provide adequate sites for those who do travel. Stopping places simply have not been available, so it is no wonder that families are looking for alternatives. Unfortunately, that means a huge shortage of sites and pitches across the UK, particularly in England. As a result, in 2019 some 13% of caravans were on unauthorised land, as the organisation Friends, Families and Travellers reports. What we are seeing is not an incursion, but rather a forced displacement due to the lack of available sites for those who choose to travel.

Kevin Hollinrake: I absolutely agree that sites should be made available, but may I reiterate the point that I raised? For the family I mentioned, sites were available. In fact, the family occupied a site at Tara Park in Malton until they moved on to that particular site, so it is not the case that no sites are available. There are also nearby sites in Osbalwick in York. It is not as if there are no alternatives to occupying the site unlawfully. It is important to understand that.

Olivia Blake: That is why I think it is important that local authorities work with the community to understand their needs. There are many reasons why individual families may not feel able to be on a site. They may also want to create their own space and home, which I completely understand.

Rather than creating more sites, the previous Government moved to criminalise GRT communities through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. Those laws should be repealed, in my view. We should be tackling the root cause of the issue: the failure of the system to support a diverse group of people who already suffer prejudice and discrimination. There is a lack of understanding about the realities for this group.

It is not just that we need new sites and more pitches; the ones that we have are not up to scratch. That is certainly true of the sites in my constituency: they are often segregated from settled communities and suffer

problems with access to services, transport and schools. There is no path to reach the community that I represent, so children have to walk down a 60 mph road to get the bus to school. When the street lights were updated, for some reason the contractor did not realise that the council owned the properties, so the community has been living with poor-quality street lighting rather than LEDs. I hope that that will soon be resolved on the site.

That is the kind of suffering that we see in those communities. They are often seen as other, as different or as difficult to deal with. That is not true, in my experience. If we listen to the concerns of the community, we will see progress and clarity of responsibility, not only from the community itself but from the services that are meant to serve it. Decisions are often made to place sites in unsafe areas next to main roads, refuse destructors, traffic-laden areas, intersections of motorways, busy highways or railway tracks. There are many reasons that people would not want their children to be near those things. That has contributed significantly to the health, education and other social inequalities that we see in the community.

We have to acknowledge that the isolation and segregation are partly due to political pressure. We know that local authorities have not achieved what they should in terms of sites, options and working with the community as best they can. That is why this is not just a technical debate on planning laws; we have to talk about tackling attitudes as well. When the Caravan Sites Act 1968 gave councils a statutory duty to create sites, many people opposed having them in their area. To put it bluntly, the location of many sites today is a consequence of anti-Traveller racism. The site in my area is right on the edge of town, away from many services.

We need more sites and pitches, and we need to end the criminalisation of people living in a legitimate way, but we also need to work with the community and listen to their needs, understanding that they are individuals and have individual rights, as we all do. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton probably disagrees; he alluded to European human rights putting one group ahead of another. I disagree. I think that those rights protect us all and allow us all to have the individual rights and freedoms that we so richly deserve.

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree with the principle. My point is that that is how the European convention on human rights and the Human Rights Act are framed, but it is not how things operate in practice. My constituents cannot occupy a field and build a house on it if it is in open countryside and not within the development limits of a village. They operate on that basis. Why should somebody else from a different community be able to occupy that site and develop it in a way that my other constituents, who work on a lawful basis, cannot? Why should that be the case?

Olivia Blake: The hon. Member highlights an important issue for his constituency that points to the failure in this space. I am not disagreeing, but I think we have to recognise that these rights come to the fore because of that failure, not the other way around. We really need to focus on that in our planning policies. We need to communicate with the community, work with them to understand their needs and make sure that those

[*Olivia Blake*]

needs are being adequately met. We should not hold it against communities that have bought their own land; we should work with them to ensure they can go through the planning process adequately for their community needs and family needs.

We also need better integration within communities of amenities and services, and we need to end the criminalisation. To do that, we need to challenge anti-GRT attitudes and the lurid headlines that drive them. That would be a good start to ensuring that the planning system works for the community. I do not disagree with the idea that the planning system is broken, but I think there is certainly a better way into the conversation that starts with an understanding of all our communities, not just one or the other.

9.55 am

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. Sadly, this is an issue that creates perennial problems up and down the country; we never seem able to fix it. In my previous career as a journalist, I very often had to travel to areas where there was tension between local residents and Traveller groups, because the groups were established in a site that was inappropriate, was not legally designated and did not have planning permission. The local residents felt that it was not appropriate, that their lives were being disturbed, and that the behaviour was not what they were used to and they did not like it.

It still happens. Only this summer, we had an issue in my constituency with a Travelling community who parked close to a local community centre. That caused a great deal of concern in the local community, and it caused tension. It was unfair to both: it was unfair to the Travellers, because there was no designated site nearby—there is an insufficiency of such sites up and down the country—and the local residents had to put up with behaviour that made them extremely unhappy and caused them distress. It was the Travellers' way of life, which they did not understand. That is not good enough. Neither community is right; neither community is wrong. I feel that they often blame politicians for failing to grasp the problem. Frankly, I think they have a point: we do fail to grasp the problem.

As the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has recognised Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities as a distinct ethnic group, protected under the Equality Act 2010. But here we are in 2024 and nothing seems to have changed, so is it enough?

A part of me does not blame communities for being distressed or Travellers for being frustrated, because it seems like a hot potato that is just that fraction too hot to grasp; we would much rather just push it to one side. What that means is that nothing gets done until, as in my constituency this summer, there are problems and tensions. There were complaints about how animals were being treated, about human waste, about fly-tipping and about illegal parking, and then action was taken, but nothing was done beforehand. That should not be the case.

There is a problem with the alternative designated sites. The only option seems to be to wait, which is not good enough. In Scotland there is no specific legislation

that protects people's ability and right to live a travelling lifestyle. Yes, local authorities have powers to move communities on, but only when they have parked somewhere without the consent of the owner, under the Trespass (Scotland) Act 1865, the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978, the Road Traffic Act 1988 or the Criminal Justice Act 2003. However, there is no specific legislative framework and no specific planning permission framework that enables communities in particular areas to feel that their rights and way of life will be protected, or that enables Travellers to feel that their way of life is protected, as it is supposed to be under the Equality Act.

What is the solution? I have heard about the problems in England; they are slightly different in Scotland. In England, as I understand it, councils have to identify sites, but there are no consequences for them if they do not. I believe we need concerted action by the Governments in Holyrood, where appropriate, and in Westminster to ensure that local authorities have the resources, the backing and the legislative framework to provide a network of suitable legally designated sites across the UK with facilities in appropriate places, for the Travelling community to live the lifestyle that is protected under legislation, and for local residents to feel that they are protected from Travellers arriving and parking in an inappropriate place because there is no alternative.

It is time we stopped beating about the bush. We need to stop saying, "We won't deal with it just now; we'll deal with it next summer." The first time I covered this story as a journalist was more than 30 years ago now, but very little has changed. Neither community feel in any way that the situation has been improved for them. It is time our Governments acted to do something about it.

10 am

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on securing this important debate. He spoke about a two-tier society. He spoke about one law for all of us. He spoke about being "on their side"—the side of the law-abiding community. I seek a one-tier society, frankly. I represent all citizens, as we all do in this House.

I declare my interest: I serve on Rugby borough council. All citizens, including the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, have an equal right to their housing needs being met; I have had that confirmed by officers, and I think we are all aware of that fact. Their right is equal to that of every other group within society—every other citizen. We should reflect on that.

I want to reflect briefly on a case that I was involved in, and it talks to some of the issues that have been raised by other hon. Members in this debate. Six applications relating to a site in my constituency came before the planning committee, which I served on. They were rejected, but the context is critical. Rugby borough council had not met its obligation to provide sufficient pitches for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community. They have a statutory obligation to do the surveys and ultimately to provide those pitches. They have failed to do that over many, many years.

They have tried calls for sites, as I am sure colleagues will be aware of, and those resulted in no sites being offered by local landowners. As I said, applications then

come in. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton referred to the case in his constituency. I appreciate that he said that proper sites are available and I accept that point, but in this case there were not.

Inevitably, the local community was very exercised and angry about these applications. The then Conservative-run local council, which had a majority on the planning committee, rejected those applications. I would argue that the rights of those citizens were not respected by that decision. Their rights to housing were not respected, and their additional rights, which have been referred to by other Members, were also not met. In a sense, they became second-class citizens.

Local authorities, such as the one I still serve on, need to be strongly encouraged—required, even—finally to provide the proper sites that the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community need. I would be very interested to hear the views of my hon. Friend the Minister on this. Those sites need to be near amenities and services for education, transport and so on. Those need to be provided because if they are not, the situations that I experienced as a member of that planning committee, and that the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton experienced, will reoccur, and the two communities will be in a continual state of conflict, which is bad for everybody.

Finally, let us listen to the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community and do things in accordance with their needs. Let us not just do things to them—almost as if they were people who can just be dumped in particular sites because of the inconvenience of providing them with proper facilities and places to live—but treat them with dignity. Let us also listen to the settled community, whose needs and views are important as well, and do everything we can to bring communities together. But that simply will not be possible until local authorities, backed—I hope—by the Government, provide pitches and places where the GRT community can live with dignity and as equals within the communities that we, as Members, represent.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for securing this important debate. We need a planning system that respects the rights of the Traveller community but also provides local authorities with the power to support good development, while being able to enforce their planning policy. When I served as a district councillor for 10 years and leader of a district council for five years, I saw the difficulties in securing adequate sites and integrating Traveller communities in areas where they were looking to settle.

I welcome the steps the previous Government took to strengthen the planning system, including passing the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, which extended the period during which enforcement action can be taken against unauthorised development to 10 years in all cases. I also commend the last Government for bringing in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which strengthens powers available to the police to tackle unauthorised encampments that cause damage, destruction or distress.

As my hon. Friend outlined, there are many examples across the country where the careful balance between Travellers, local communities and the environment appears to be incorrect. As a Member of Parliament, I do not

intend to comment on routine planning applications as they are a matter for Bromsgrove district council. However, there is an ongoing case in my constituency that perfectly highlights many of the challenges associated with planning applications for Traveller sites. Travellers bought land and moved on to a rural greenfield site that had long been designated as amenity land, then retrospectively applied for planning permission. The local community are against the proposal and nearby parish councils have raised serious concerns about the suitability of the site, including poor and dangerous road access, loss of biodiversity, and a significant impact on a long-standing public right of way that runs through the land, where local residents are being harassed with antisocial behaviour and are unable to follow their usual route.

More importantly, and to the considerable worry of my constituents, in recent months there has been a large upswing in rural crime. That started in a minor fashion with the theft of chickens from a farm and we have seen theft of items from gardens, a massive surge in general antisocial behaviour and abuse of local residents, as well as the emergence of some much more significant elements of crime. As a result, I have engaged with local police and residents to try to tackle that specific issue, but of course the nub of the issue comes back to the fact that a piece of land was bought and a change of use application submitted, and residents are concerned that the system and public agencies often pass the buck.

This case has been stuck in the planning process for many months now, and the delay in any decision is causing significant further uncertainty and the emergence of community tension. It is clear to me that the system as it currently stands is not working for any of the parties involved, but that is in this specific case. I want to put on the record that I know there are thousands of Traveller communities across the country who are law abiding; they want to identify plots of land that they can occupy with their families and wider communities and where they want to integrate into the areas they are looking to settle.

I was elected on a mandate to protect the green belt across Bromsgrove, and my constituency was formerly 89% green belt. I am deeply concerned about the prospect of losing that green belt, which gives Bromsgrove its rural identity, including in greenfield sites of the kind I have already described. I fail to see how permitting unplanned Traveller sites on the green belt will do anything to protect the identity and cohesion of the rural communities that exist there. It has already been noted by hon. Members that the sites are often far away from local services, become car-dependent settlements, and suffer from a lack of footways and nearby schools. One important topic, which I saw during my tenure as leader of Wychavon district council, is that many of the Traveller families have children that need to go to school and they want their children to be able to go to school, but there is often a lack of local provision already, which puts an unsustainable strain on services and local amenities across our communities.

Those problems isolate communities, which are already remote from the services they access and may have a different social or economic identity relative to the areas they are looking to settle. That is all exacerbated by the broken planning system, which needs to work better with local police and other services to allow for a coherent public response, rather than having, as it seems

[Bradley Thomas]

to residents and as I have already mentioned, different public agencies passing the buck between each other, with no one able to get clear answers on where the responsibility lies for tackling the pressures that arise from the emergence of Traveller sites. Those sites are often outside of the conventional planning process where sites are identified, and problems emerge when new sites are bought and a retrospective planning application is put in.

The current regulations around the sites do not seem to support a culture in which permission is sought. Instead, quite often the culture appears to be one in which an action is taken and the sentiment is more of forgiveness being sought, rather than going through the usual process that the vast majority of law-abiding citizens follow—one in which we do our due diligence, put in a planning application, allow for communities and those affected to submit their comments in the usual way and go through the proper planning process. That is what frustrates my constituents the most. They go about their lives in a law-abiding fashion: if they want to put an extension on their property, they will apply for planning permission in the usual way, if it is not subject to permitted development already. There is a general feeling that a small number of Traveller communities—I stress “small number”—appear to ride roughshod over the system. That is not just to the detriment of affected communities: it really undermines the integrity of the planning system as a whole.

The planning system needs to work better across the board and with public agencies. We need to have a much more joined-up response to how we tackle this issue, particularly the impact of antisocial behaviour and rural crime. Residents and developers must work carefully within green-belt policy in the same way that Traveller communities must. We must get away from this perception that, whether it is because of a retrospective application, just a general disregard for planning policy or even, more broadly, a disregard for the law, people are able to queue jump while providing some of the worst forms of development. I sincerely hope that as the Government review planning policy over the coming months, they will look closely at all these issues and ensure we have a system that promotes good development in the interests of not just existing communities, but those Traveller communities looking to integrate and settle into our existing and quite often rural communities.

10.14 am

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for bringing forward this important debate. I have also listened carefully to the other hon. Members who have spoken today, and I appreciate that in some cases there is a misuse of planning. It is clear that we need the system to work better to tackle those attitudes.

I appreciate what the hon. Member for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake) said, in that this is often seen as a difficult matter to deal with. But that should not be the case, and we need to ensure that sites are put in the right place to avoid segregation and isolation. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine)

spoke passionately about how we have simply not progressed. Neither community feels represented, and we must seek to change that. The hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger) spoke about the risk of the GRT community becoming second-class citizens and the need to find appropriate sites to stop the reoccurrence of conflicts. Let us engage with and listen to the GRT community and treat them with respect and dignity. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) raised his concerns, which I think we all share, about agencies passing the buck and the emergence of tensions.

In the space of a month, I have received correspondence about illegal Traveller sites from concerned constituents in Wincanton and Glastonbury, towns that are at the opposite ends of my constituency. The complaints are a symptom of the fact that Somerset, like most counties in the country, is facing huge challenges in properly supporting our GRT community. Friends, Families and Travellers, a national charity, received a response to its engagement campaign this summer which called for an increase in

“site provision for nomadic people, transient and permanent.”

I do not know if that respondent lives in Somerset but I would not be surprised if they did. Somerset has no transit provisions—none at all.

Members of the Gypsy and Traveller community, like all of us, have to travel across the country to attend funerals and weddings and to see family, but because we have no transit sites, and therefore nowhere for them to legally stay for short periods, the only way they can stop when passing through our sizeable county of Somerset is in the form of an unauthorised encampment. We only need to look at my casework to see that such encampments inflame tensions between my constituents and Travellers—some of whom are, of course, my constituents—and reinforce dangerous stereotypes.

With 91% of English local authorities having some form of GRT presence, we are unfortunately not alone in that, so it is alarming to see the trend growing nationally, either because local authorities are selling off sites or because they simply cannot afford to maintain them. I worry that we could soon find ourselves with huge distances between transit sites, which would make it impossible for Travellers to legally travel. That also harms our relationship with the GRT community, because then the only response that local authorities are left with is enforcement.

Not only do we need more transit sites; we need permanent pitches where members of the GRT community can stay longer than just three months. There are well-known, documented and dangerous knock-on effects of not providing the community with stability. While the community is naturally transient, it needs access to a permanent base. Without a permanent pitch or a brick and mortar address, it can be a struggle to access mental health support and GP appointments, which forces more people to use our overburdened accident and emergency services to access healthcare. It is tragic, but not surprising, that life expectancy for members of the GRT community is 10 to 25 years lower than for the general population and that the suicide rate for Traveller men is seven times higher than for settled men. We also know about the reduced attainment rates for those in education, with only 18% in GRT communities meeting the expected standard in their SATs last year.

Councils could avoid huge additional costs if they did not have to waste officer time dealing with complaints and cleaning up encampments. The case for providing permanent pitches is clear, and local authorities have a quota for delivering Traveller provision, but there is nowhere for them to obtain funding. Funding has recently taken the form of ad hoc grants that are too small and oversubscribed. If we expect local authorities to be able to maintain a constant and consistent number of sites, we must provide them with consistent and adequate funding. The Liberal Democrat manifesto pledged to ensure that all development has appropriate infrastructure, services and amenities in place, by integrating infrastructure and public service delivery into the planning process. This should also include the development of permanent pitches.

I was recently elected vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, which wrote to the then Government in the last Parliament to urge them to increase site provision. That Government failed to deliver sites, but the new Government could. The Liberal Democrats have a strong record of supporting the GRT community, but we want to work with colleagues to bring about an end to these systemic problems.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady is making a very valid and interesting point, but she seems to think that it was central Government's responsibility to provide Traveller sites—I think that is what she said.

Sarah Dyke *indicated dissent.*

Kevin Hollinrake: Okay, I have misunderstood. Perhaps she will clarify that she accepts that it is the local planning authority's responsibility to provide these sites.

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; he misunderstands. I am fully aware that it is local authorities that provide Traveller sites, but the funding is not there for them to provide it. That is my case. As we know, over and over again, many local authorities find themselves on the brink. They are under such pressure at the moment. The crucial point is that they are unable to provide the resources within their remit. That is what was lacking in the last Parliament, and that is what we need to see from this new Government, to ensure that local authorities have the resources and the capabilities they need to provide sites for our Traveller community.

It was confirmed in the King's Speech that this Government intend to reform our planning system. When they do so, they must not treat Gypsy and Traveller provision as an afterthought to bricks and mortar housing. Looking after this community is a housing requirement, not an add-on that can be addressed when there is more time and money. I would like the Government to introduce a statutory duty to provide sites, along with proper funding measures. With a reasonable approach to location and funding, this could be the single most transformative measure for Gypsies and Travellers in England. Our planning regulations and guidance are not fit to serve the community. The guidance dictates what local authorities need to deliver on a site, but it is not properly delivering that provision, which leads to the GRT community being viewed negatively and the community feeling less safe. The Government should make updating those documents a priority.

Finally, not all these problems can be solved with reforms or increased funding. The narrative from the previous Government was not constructive and made it challenging for local authorities to build meaningful dialogue. Over the last decade, Somerset and much of the rest of the country has seen a reduction in publicly owned sites, fewer community liaison officer roles in local authorities, a lack of new private sites, an increase in unauthorised encampments, a reduction in funding for site development, and political inertia slowing down pitch development. We need this new Government to provide real leadership and ensure that the needs of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community are met. We should engage with and treat our Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community with respect and dignity, and provide them with the sites they need to live their lives.

10.25 am

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on securing the debate. The contributions of all hon. Members have helped to illustrate both the complexity of this issue and its importance at community level.

Every local authority has a quasi-judicial role as a planning authority, in that it has to follow planning law and the relevant statutes, and my hon. Friend and other hon. Members have called for everyone to be treated equally before the law for the purposes of the planning process. That is clearly a complex challenge for our local authorities, which also have various statutory duties as housing providers. When considering an application, the local authority has to ensure that planning law is fully upheld, but it also has a role in designating sites on which Traveller pitches and other development may take place. Most of us will have experience of that matter—the situation at Jackets Lane in my constituency is almost identical to that described by my hon. Friend. Like many Members, I am fortunate to have two local authorities with full housing revenue account, local authority-maintained Traveller pitches, as well as privately designated sites.

However, it is understandable that, for the reasons outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas)—I have experienced this in my own home—the sites can cause a great deal of community concern, given some aspects of the behaviour of individuals associated with them. We cannot simply say that the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community is one community. In my constituency, there are settled Travellers, who have chosen to occupy a bricks and mortar home and may require family members who are travelling to be able to stay close to them at certain times of year. There are people with much more ancient lifestyles, particularly among some of the Roma and traditional Gypsy community, whose requirements are very different. All our local authorities need to be flexible, and communities need to be aware of those distinctions, so that the responses that we put in place are appropriate.

We all accept that provision will be inadequate for some individuals, and that there may not be a spot on a local authority-provided site when they arrive. Indeed, the behaviour of some, who may not even be UK residents but who can arrive in large numbers and

[David Simmonds]

undertake unlawful and illegal incursions, can significantly affect the reputation of other members of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton asked an important question in the context of parliamentary proceedings: how can something that is either unlawful or, in some cases, specifically illegal in planning law be rendered lawful by other considerations? If a property developer were to purchase the field and seek to build a mansion, there would be rigorous enforcement against them. If a developer sought to build family homes, or a care home, there would be rigorous enforcement against them. Why is it, therefore, that other elements of our law allow one individual to bypass the statutory planning process and rules, especially when the site may subsequently be sold to another occupier? How can we ensure that those elements do not create a back door to flouting the planning rules? I have personal experience of a developer who cited diplomatic immunity as a reason why the local authority could not carry out enforcement action against structures built on agricultural land.

Given the enormous remediation costs associated with abuses of the planning process, it is not surprising that many local authorities are extremely concerned, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove, with his experience as a local authority leader, described. We can all think of examples. A site may be used for housing development after illegal occupation, or it may, for example, be used for waste disposal. Buckinghamshire council, on the border of my constituency, was faced with having to clean up a site that a group of Travellers had purchased from a farmer and then used to dispose of asbestos and hazardous waste, which was removed at enormous cost—a multimillion-pound cost—to the taxpayer.

In all such cases, there is a common issue: the local authority's inability to use swift and robust enforcement powers. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton said, once a site is occupied and the use becomes established, it is very difficult to change that in the way the community would expect. During the recent general election campaign, I delivered leaflets to properties that formed part of an illegal encampment—because those individuals had been there for so long, they were on the electoral roll. Other residents in the community asked, “How is it that all these processes that are designed to make sure everyone follows the law can come together in a way that enables those rules to be flouted?”

On behalf of the official Opposition, I extend an offer to the Minister, who has taken an incredibly constructive approach to all the issues in his portfolio. Members on both sides of this debate have made constructive contributions and have set out ideas about how we can more effectively address the broad sweep of concerns that arise from this issue. My constituents are affected by an unauthorised encampment in the Hog's Back, and have expressed great frustration that the local authority planning notice that applies to the site has effectively been bypassed as the individuals have moved to another part of the site. Those kinds of things understandably create a public backlash, as people feel that the law is not working effectively and is not on their side.

It is one thing for local authorities to have to resort to section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to deal with illegal and unauthorised encampments that are causing a nuisance, but activity that can become established through the passage of time needs to be dealt with differently. I suggest to the Minister that, as we work together on that, we should also consider the operation of things such as the planning conditions that apply in national parks. My hon. Friend has the North Yorkshire Moors and the Yorkshire Dales national parks near his constituency. It is common to apply to national parks specific planning conditions that do not operate in other areas, such as conditions around the occupation of new homes by agricultural workers. Again, that provides scope for abuse of the planning system. For example, a developer could build a property purportedly for agricultural worker use and then say they wish to convert it to a holiday let or an extended family home.

There is also the wider issue of ancillary uses, which my hon. Friend referred to. When a piece of land is in the green belt, perhaps with agricultural designation, there are always opportunities for a prospective applicant to say that they need a barn for their farming business or a sports pavilion because they hope to use the land for sporting activity. That potentially enables a property footprint to be established. In planning terms, conversion of that—legalisation of the occupation—follows later, to the dismay of local residents, who then question the effectiveness of the planning system. The scope for the use to become established and the property to be sold on for profit in a way that is not available to developers who seek to work within the system remains a significant cause for concern.

I thank all Members who have contributed to this balanced debate, which has highlighted many angles to the way in which this policy interacts with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller and settled communities. I urge the Minister to make the best use possible of the expertise of Members across the House and ensure that, as we move to update planning law, we have effective enforcement powers in place so that all our residents—all our constituents—have confidence that they will be treated equally before the law in the way that Parliament expects.

10.34 am

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I formally congratulate you on your honour—I have not had the chance to do so yet.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on securing this important debate and thank him for the characteristic clarity with which he made his case. I also thank the hon. Members for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) and for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas), and my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake) and for Rugby (John Slinger) for their contributions. Lastly, I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), for his thoughtful remarks, and warmly welcome him to his place. I will certainly take away the specific points that he raised. More widely, I look forward to working with him, as he said, on a constructive basis wherever possible.

I must make it clear at the outset that, while I noted the specific case that the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton raised—and indeed other cases that have been

raised today—I hope that hon. Members will appreciate that I am unable to comment on individual plans or applications due to the quasi-judicial nature of the planning process and the potential decision-making role of the Deputy Prime Minister. I therefore propose to make some general comments about national planning policy as it relates to Traveller sites and specifically the role of local planning authorities, including in respect of enforcement, within that national framework, thereby addressing many of the points that have been raised today, while recognising that this is an incredibly complex area of policy and law, particularly as it relates to individual cases.

Turning first to national planning policy, the Government's approach to Traveller site provision is set out in the planning policy for Traveller sites policy paper, which should be read in conjunction with the national planning policy framework and has the same policy status as it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Hallam, and others, raised a number of wider issues outside the subject of this debate, but I reassure her that the Government's overarching aim is to meet the housing and accommodation needs of all communities in our society, and that we are committed to ensuring fair and equal treatment for Travellers in a way that facilitates their traditional and nomadic way of life, while respecting the interests of the settled community.

The policy paper in question makes clear that local planning authorities should set pitch targets for Gypsies and Travellers to address the accommodation needs of Traveller communities within their area. Specifically on the points made around human rights law, that is often engaged when a proposed development is closely linked to a particular person's interests. In the case of Gypsy and Traveller developments, the right to respect for private and family life under the European convention on human rights, and in relation to the rights of the child, under the Children Act 1989 and the UN convention on the rights of the child, are often engaged. However, such considerations can be addressed by planning adequately for Traveller pitches to meet needs, and that is ultimately through the local plan process.

I think that that touches on a wider issue. In respect of the community that the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton represents, for example, the North Yorkshire emerging local plan is in its very early stages. We need to see local plans across the country come forward in short order. We want to achieve universal coverage, but we need to see those plans progress because they are the best way that local communities can shape developments in their areas.

I noted the points made by the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton on funding, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby regarding the concern, which I do recognise, that local planning authorities do not face sufficient consequences for failing to adequately plan for those pitches. That is a concern raised in other areas, and, typically, as I am sure my hon. Friend will know, the penalty for not having a local plan in place—for not adequately providing for sites—is that a local authority will leave itself open to speculative development or retrospective applications. However, I appreciate that that does not address the specific challenges covered in this debate in the way that it does with more conventional planning applications.

The policy paper also states that local planning authorities should consider the existing level of and local need for sites, and the availability of alternative accommodation, among other relevant matters, when considering planning applications for Traveller sites.

I appreciate that the specific case that the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton raised did not concern a green-belt site—as far as I understand it—but hon. Members may find it useful if I provide some detail on the proposals that we have set out in relation to Traveller sites as part of our proposed reforms to the national planning policy framework and other changes to the planning system.

As hon. Members are aware, we are consulting on a range of policy changes to ensure that our planning system is fit for purpose, supports the right development in the right places, and is able to deliver on the Government's growth agenda. They include changes to green-belt policy to enable the targeted release of low-quality grey-belt land to meet unmet housing and other development needs. Those policy proposals will not compromise our environmental objectives or undermine the overall function and purpose of the green belt, but will support opportunities for development in areas of highest need and deliver tangible benefits to local communities and nature through our golden rules.

We intend that the proposals will address unmet need for Traveller sites and we are seeking views, through the consultation, on how the policy will operate. To be clear, that is a departure from the current policy position on the green belt set out in both the NPPF and the planning policy for Traveller sites policy paper, but we believe that it better supports the development needs of our communities and contributes to sustainable growth.

However, we will consider all these matters carefully and will finalise our position after considering the consultation responses and following targeted engagement with the key stakeholders, including specialist planning consultants, charities representing the interests of the Traveller community and professionals working in this space.

As part of wider changes to national planning policy, we will also consider how planning policy for Traveller sites should be set out in the future, including which aspects need to form part of the suite of proposals for national development management policies introduced in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023.

I now turn to the role of local planning authorities. Although the Government are responsible for setting the legislative and policy framework within which the planning system operates, including the national planning policy framework and the planning policy document for Traveller sites, it is for local planning authorities, who know their communities best, to prepare local development plans and make decisions in accordance with such adopted plans unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

I hope hon. Members appreciate that when it comes to police enforcement of unauthorised encampments, that is a matter for the Home Office and not for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. However, I can certainly pass back some of the concerns and the comments made to my colleagues in the Home Office.

When it comes to enforcement more generally, local planning authorities have a wide range of powers, with strong penalties for non-compliance. As the hon. Member

[Matthew Pennycook]

for Bromsgrove mentioned, these powers were strengthened by reforms introduced in the 2023 Act, which were implemented earlier this year. Those reforms included longer time limits for enforcement action, and action to address a loophole with retrospective development, so that there is only one opportunity to appeal.

On the basis of the available powers, it is for local authorities to decide what action, if any, to take, depending on the particular circumstances of each case. That would include intentional unauthorised development, which would be weighed by decision makers in the determination of planning applications and appeals, as I recall the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton mentioning. Ultimately, however, it is for individual local planning authorities to determine what weight they should afford to a relevant consideration based on the circumstances of a particular case, rather than Government mandating them to follow a particular course of action.

Kevin Hollinrake: I support potential revisions to enforcement powers to give perfect clarity about how enforcement can happen in these circumstances. However, I want to touch on the Minister's last point about intentional unauthorised development. Currently, that is dealt with as part of planning law, through a ministerial statement, rather than being formally in the NPPF—nevertheless, that does apply. Is he happy to maintain that situation, or will he look at that again? It is very important that that does form part of planning policy. Otherwise, planning authorities would have even fewer levers at their disposal to make sure that this kind of development does not happen. The problem is not planning policy; it is people who subvert the policy through other devices.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Member for that point. To answer him directly, on national development management policies, which I mentioned, we stated in the NPPF consultation—which is still open and closes on 24 September—that we were committed to creating NDMPs to provide more certainty and consistency about decision making in a range of areas. As part of that, we will look at all existing national policies, including the policy in relation to unintentional authorised development, as set out in the 2015 written ministerial statement.

I hope that gives the hon. Member some reassurance that as part of bringing in those NDMPs, we are looking at that particular issue, which I do understand. Those NDMPs will have to be consulted on, so hon. Members from all parties will have an opportunity to feed in their thoughts about whether we have got the policy right in any particular area.

I thank the hon. Member again for giving the House an opportunity to discuss these matters, and I thank other hon. Members for taking part in the debate.

I genuinely welcome and look forward to further engagement on this issue with Members across the House. In the interim, I encourage all hon. Members with an interest in how national planning policy relates to Travellers to respond to the consultation on a revised NPPF before the deadline of 24 September.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I call Kevin Hollinrake to wind up.

10.44 am

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the Front Benchers for their excellent contributions. The tone of the debate was generally very constructive. I think we are all on the same page in terms of local planning authorities having to fulfil their requirement to make sure that suitable provision is made for people who live different and nomadic lifestyles. I thank the hon. Members for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake), for Rugby (John Slinger) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for their points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) touched on the key point: we cannot have a planning system where it is easier to apologise than to ask permission. If that is the case, it creates chaos in the system. Everybody can play by those rules, and there will be chaos in terms of planning applications and wider society. It undermines faith in the system. That is the point I want to make. Whatever the protected characteristics of certain communities, it cannot be the case that in our society there is one law for one and another for another. That feeds the perception that we operate a two-tier society, and that cannot be right. It undermines the entire system.

I hope that the Minister will look at two things. As the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) rightly said, we should continue to look at bolstering enforcement powers. I also make it crystal clear that the recommendation for the planning application I mentioned was for approval despite the fact that the written ministerial statement from February 2019 said that intentional unauthorised development should be a material consideration in a planning application. Nevertheless, the planning officers recommended approval, which I think was totally wrong. I congratulate the planning committee who still rejected the application, but that might well go to appeal. I welcome the fact that the Minister is going to look at the full context of this. I hope he will make it even clearer in planning policy that somebody who is guilty of intentional unauthorised development will never be given consent for their application when there is such a clear abuse of process, and that that will not be tolerated.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the adequacy of planning policy for Traveller sites.

10.47 am

Sitting suspended.

Rural Bus Services

11 am

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I will call Sarah Dyke to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered bus services in rural areas.

It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain.

Bus services in rural areas provide a crucial lifeline to many of my constituents. They link communities to hospitals, shops, high street services, and leisure and social activities. They take students to school and college, and they take adults to work. But there has been a worrying trend of decline over the past decade. Research from Channel 4 found that bus provision has decreased by 28% across England since 2011. There has been action from the previous Government, such as investing £3.5 billion into services since the pandemic and introducing the £2 fare cap, but that has been insufficient to arrest the decline.

The loss of services is especially prevalent in rural areas, and it detrimentally impacts those who live there. Rural bus service users travel an average of 47% further compared with their urban counterparts. They travel for longer, and their routes are funded less per head than those in urban areas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this debate forward; the turnout here in Westminster Hall is an indication of its importance for rural areas. I commend her on her diligence in this matter. Strangford has issues similar to those in the hon. Lady's constituency: we have students who must travel up to 45 minutes on the bus to get to their local secondary schools. For those doing GCSEs and A-levels, staying in school later to study can become increasingly popular around exam times. Does the hon. Lady agree that more needs to be done to support schoolchildren who live in rural areas who perhaps are required to be in school earlier and leave later due to exams?

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. That is an issue that I will come to later.

Budgeted local authority expenditure per resident in rural areas is on average £11.68, compared with £20.22 in urban areas. A report from the County Councils Network partly blamed how the previous Government's national bus strategy apportioned funding. It found that two thirds of the funding went to urban areas, despite these areas having seen lower declines in passenger numbers than rural areas. It also found that councils in rural and county areas were experiencing a £420 million shortfall in their transport budgets, impacting their ability to subsidise operating routes regarded by the operator as commercially unviable.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for that point and for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall. Where rural areas in Northern

Ireland do not have a central bus connection or even a bus route at all, organisations and individuals rely on community transport organisations, such as South Antrim Community Transport in my own constituency, to pick up the slack. That organisation takes people to hospital appointments and makes sure they can get their shopping where there is not a central bus service supporting those rural areas at all.

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Once again, I will come to that a little later.

I have spoken previously in this place about the rural premium that residents are forced to pay because they live in the countryside. The severe lack of decent bus services just increases people's reliance on private cars, which they of course need to fill with fuel and maintain, thus increasing that premium. The Countryside Alliance research from 2022 found that rural households were spending almost £800 a year more on fuel than people in urban areas, and up to 6p more per litre of fuel.

Before I move on, I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a serving Somerset councillor. Somerset council receives around £25.15 per head from central Government to invest in bus services, while Campaign for Better Transport research reveals that 12 local authorities get around double that. One local authority receives more than £300 per head to spend on bus services.

Rural areas have a multitude of factors resulting in poor public transport connections. The lack of funding, sparsity of routes and smaller population centres have resulted in one in four bus routes ceasing to exist in county and rural areas over the 11 years between 2010-11 and 2021-22. A 2021 survey of rural residents revealed that only 18% felt they had access to frequent and reliable bus routes; 44% felt that bus routes had decreased over the previous three years; and 38% said that they did not use buses at all, due to the lack of frequent services.

That illustrates one of the issues that providers in rural areas consistently grapple with when trying to increase provision or save existing bus routes. Rural bus routes are less profitable, due to the smaller patronage. That means that routes are likely to be removed from service or be infrequent, so local people simply do not have the faith they need to use the local bus network. They do not trust that a bus will arrive, or know when it will arrive, so patronage drops, resulting in the route closing.

Key to improving the journey experience is providing easy access to information about bus timetables, clean buses, improved bus stops and bus stations, integration with other modes of transport, and giving priority to buses, especially in and around urban areas.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I just wanted to say—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. Could I ask the Member to stand?

Dr Opher: Sorry. We have experienced a lot of problems with cross-border rural buses in our area. The hon. Lady mentioned local authorities. If there are two local authorities, it creates enormous problems. In Wotton-under-Edge, we have just lost the 84/85 bus service

[Dr Opher]

because we cannot get agreement from all the different local authorities to fund it. That is putting a severe strain on rural populations. I would ask for that to be considered.

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I absolutely agree that collaboration with contiguous authorities is crucial. We must also provide confidence in bus services to increase footfall and make them more sustainable. I would like to thank the Somerset Bus Partnership for all the work it does to promote bus travel in my county.

In Glastonbury and Somerton, and across Somerset, we are facing a near-constant annual cycle where bus routes are threatened with closure and changes. Every year, the council and bus companies negotiate to come to an agreement to keep the route open for another year. If an agreement is reached, the bus route is saved for a whole cycle of events, until that cycle of events starts again, as a contract comes up for renewal a year later.

Earlier this year, I campaigned to save the 54, 58, 58A, 25 and 28 bus routes, which run through my constituency. Thankfully, Somerset council and First Bus South were able to reach an agreement to keep the routes, but some have had timetable changes imposed on them. Inevitably, some of those routes will be under threat yet again when the agreement needs renewal later this year. That is simply unsustainable.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): The reintroduction of funding for the Trowbridge to Bath bus service by Bath and North East Somerset council was vital for villages such as Freshford in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that cash-strapped local councils are going to need confirmed, long-term funding commitments to help support those vital services?

Sarah Dyke: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I could not agree more; it is crucial that local authorities are given the funding they need to provide these essential services. Local authorities are once again currently waiting for further information regarding the future of various sources of funding they receive from central Government. I submitted a written question to the new Government in July regarding the future of the bus service improvement plan and BSIP Phase 2 funds. While the response affirmed a commitment to improving bus services as part of their growth mission, it failed to provide specific details of plans.

Rural areas desperately need to see plans and to have those assurances of how vital services can continue to run. Earlier this week, the Government laid forward a statutory instrument that opened up bus franchising for all local authorities in England. I welcome the Government's ambition to fix the country's broken buses, but they must understand that bus services outside urban areas face different problems.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Of the 68 settlements in Huntingdon, eight currently do not receive a bus service at all, including Brington, Bythorn, Covington, Holywell, Keyston, Molesworth and Southoe. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government's

proposed introduction of bus franchising must make provision to ensure that those rural communities are included as the new routes are devised?

Sarah Dyke: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. Rural bus services need to be given proper funding. They are so crucial to our residents and must be aligned with those urban resources, because there are different problems, as I mentioned.

Rural areas often see low passenger numbers, but those who use the bus services are absolutely reliant on them. The previous Government, in their bus back better plans made a commitment to providing

"guidance on the meaning and role of 'socially necessary' services, expanding the category to include 'economically necessary' services".

That did not happen, leaving more uncertainty about the future of the services and failing to provide the protection they need. Will the Minister provide specific guidance on the protection of bus routes for social and environmental reasons?

In my constituency and in other rural areas across the country, there are people for whom bus services are an absolute lifeline. One family from Templecombe told me that their daughter—a single mother who cannot drive due to a medical condition—relies on the 58 bus to take her children to school and college. They rely on the same bus to see their GP in Milborne Port and to get to Wincanton. Thankfully, that route is saved for now, but that one example demonstrates how crucial buses are for those who are reliant on them. That is why, in the last Parliament, I tabled the Public Transport (Rural Areas) Bill, which would have set a minimum service level for the provision of public transport in rural areas, ensuring that people have access to major sites of employment, education and leisure.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member on her efforts this morning. In Upper Bann this year, it is evident that rural children have been disadvantaged, with some children left standing on the side of the road without transport to school because of capacity issues and a lack of planning. Does she agree that that is unacceptable, whether in Upper Bann in Northern Ireland or in her constituency of Glastonbury and Somerton, and that rural people should not be disadvantaged in that way?

Sarah Dyke: That was the exact point of the Public Transport (Rural Areas) Bill: to make sure there is a service level agreement so people can travel where they need to go, particularly for education and work. The economic benefits public transport brings can be huge. Research from the Confederation of Passenger Transport measured the economic benefits buses bring, finding that every £1 that Government spend on better services and bus priority schemes can secure economic benefits of up to £4.55.

We must recognise that in rural areas alternative forms of bus routes can play a major role in ensuring that type of access remains. The Liberal Democrats made a commitment in our manifesto to supporting and encouraging alternative services such as on-demand buses. Those types of buses have already been rolled out across certain areas of my constituency to great success.

For instance, the Slinky service is a door-to-door demand-responsive transport service funded by the council. It operates in the Langport and Somerton area and the council is currently trialling a digital offering, aiming to make the service easier to access. The Liberal Democrats have also committed to keeping bus routes affordable by retaining the £2 fare cap while fares are reviewed. I invite the Minister to comment on whether an announcement will be made on the future of the bus fare cap post-31 December.

The Liberal Democrats recognise the need to support local authorities and bus companies to switch their offering to zero emission buses. Buses have a key role to play in tackling climate change and meeting our decarbonisation targets. Research commissioned by the Confederation of Passenger Transport found that if we all took the bus instead of the car just twice a month, we would create a reduction of 15.8 million tonnes of CO₂ by 2050.

Britain is at the forefront of the green bus transition in Europe, and bus services are outpacing other road vehicles such as cars, vans and trucks in decarbonising. However, take-up varies between regions and is more challenging for smaller and rural bus operators, which may struggle with the cost of financing new vehicles and the necessary infrastructure. The UK's 2050 carbon reduction commitment relies on a transition to zero emission vehicles but also a modal shift to public transport, and we must ensure that rural areas are included in that. With assistance from the Government, we welcomed a new fleet of 25 electric buses to our roads in Somerset earlier this year. They are much needed, and we must ensure that the transition continues and rural areas are not forgotten.

I turn to the need to include buses in integrated travel plans across rural areas, especially those that are poorly connected to the rail network. The new Government have thrown doubt on rail projects around the country by cancelling the restoring your railway fund, and residents in my constituency who worked hard to bid into the fund are devastated that the proposed station in the Langport and Somerton area could be scrapped as a result. That area has the longest stretch of rail between London and Cornwall without a connection to the rail network, and delivering a station there would provide 50,000 residents with access to trains and drive economic growth. We must provide a train station in the area, but the journey to delivering a station must include integrating local bus services into existing train stations in Castle Cary, Bruton, Taunton and Yeovil, just outside my constituency. We know that there is demand for a train station, and we want the opportunity to prove it.

There is currently no direct bus between Langport and Somerton and Castle Cary, so people wishing to access rail at Castle Cary need to change, which makes the shortest journey time around one hour and 17 minutes. By private car, that journey would take no more than 30 minutes. There are also no public transport links between Street and Glastonbury and Castle Cary station. Taunton station can be reached by changing at Somerton. Many residents have reached out to tell me that they need a dedicated bus service from Glastonbury to Castle Cary station. Again, that route would take less than 30 minutes by private car, but the available bus options require using up to three different buses, taking two hours.

That type of offering makes it impossible for people to consider taking buses to access the rail network for work or education, making people more reliant on their

private cars and making decarbonisation targets harder to achieve. We can take some quick steps, such as reviewing timetables to ensure that rail services are better integrated with local bus services, and we must work with local bus companies to put on services and create bus stops that are branded as rail links.

It has been proven that integration of bus and rail can grow patronage for operators of both while opening up new opportunities to connect communities across Somerset. There are good examples in Devon and Cornwall demonstrating that this works, and evidence shows that communities feel better connected to the rail network as a result. The new Government have promised to develop a long-term strategy that will create unified and integrated transport systems. Bus and rail links must be a central part of that strategy in rural areas, and local authorities must be given the support to work with key stakeholders to make this a reality.

For too long, buses have been in decline. They have been unsustainable, inaccessible and unreliable, and have failed to meet the needs of those who use them, but there is a way forward that can deliver opportunities for people in rural areas. I believe that the integration of public transport must form a major part of new plans, and I am eager to hear from the Minister how the new Government will provide rural communities with the services that we need in both the short and the long term. We must protect crucial existing routes, make bus travel fairer for rural residents and explore new avenues to make rural bus travel more sustainable, accessible and flexible.

In addition, any powers passed to local authorities must come with funding or any changes will, frankly, flop badly. It is not clear how areas that are not local transport authorities will be able to get involved. We must also recognise the crucial role that bus travel has to play in meeting decarbonisation targets, encourage modal shift from private cars to buses, and improve bus and rail integration. People should be able to get by bus where they want to go, when they want to go, and their journey should be reliable, comfortable and affordable.

11.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I want to start by thanking the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing this debate on the important issue of bus services in rural areas. She has been a committed champion for her constituents when it comes to local bus provision. She has worked hard to try to prevent cuts to essential bus services in her constituency, as reflected in her speech.

Access to reliable and affordable public transport is a lifeline for communities across England, whether for getting to work or education, accessing essential services, or seeing family and friends. I want to make sure that no matter where someone lives—whether it is in one of our cities or in a rural area in England such as Glastonbury and Somerton—they have access to buses that they can depend on. Britain needs a modern transport network that reaches every corner of the country to help kick-start economic growth. Many people feel let down by bus services and that is often exacerbated in rural areas.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the Government will ensure that rural voices are heard in their plans to empower local communities to influence and shape bus services, because of the specific issues that rural communities face in terms of the bus services they need?

Simon Lightwood: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Our announcement on Monday that all local transport authorities—not just those in mayoral combined authorities—will be able to explore franchising will enable just that. It will enable local leaders to take back control of their buses and set fares and routes, taking careful consideration of their local communities, including the rural aspects of some of them.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Will the Minister and his Department commit to working with me to bring back the 503 National Express service, which served my town of Launceston in North Cornwall and ran through to Exeter and London? The community in Launceston and other towns in North Cornwall have been left without any connection to Exeter and London.

Simon Lightwood: I will certainly explore that with the hon. Member. Obviously it is a decision for the commercial operator whether to continue that service, but I am happy to explore that with him outside today's debate. I will crack on now, because I have limited time.

For too long bus users have been subjected to a postcode lottery when it comes to the quality of their services. That is not just an inconvenience but a barrier to opportunity and growth. Our plan aims to end that disparity and ensure that everyone, regardless of where they live, has access to dependable public transport.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: Very briefly.

Ellie Chowns: The inequality in funding between rural and urban bus services that the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) highlighted is of enormous concern to my constituents in North Herefordshire. Rural bus services need more support per head than urban ones; they are less commercially viable. Will the Minister commit to reversing that inequality?

Simon Lightwood: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. We are committed to simplifying the plethora of different funding pots that are available for buses. We hope to deliver more long-term funding for local authorities and devolve to them the power to decide where the money is spent.

The Government have set out an ambitious action plan to deliver better buses, grow passenger numbers and drive opportunity to underserved regions. A core part of that plan was announced in the King's Speech: the passing of a buses Bill. We are introducing the Bill in this Session because we want to see change as quickly as possible. On Monday, we announced a package of franchising measures to support local leaders to deliver better services for passengers in advance of the buses Bill. The first measure is the publication of a consultation document, which will gather views on proposed updates to the bus franchising guidance. The second measure was the laying of a statutory instrument that will open

up bus franchising to all local transport authorities and reduce barriers. Later in the Session, we will introduce the Bill, which will be designed to put power back in the hands of local leaders right across England and ensure that networks meet the needs of people who rely on them, including in rural communities.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I need to make progress.

The Bill alone will not remove all the challenges facing the bus sector, so the Government will take further steps to deliver more reliable and accessible bus services. Those will include giving local authorities more flexibility and control over bus funding, so they can plan for the long term and deliver on local priorities. We also want to provide safeguards over local networks, to raise the standard of the services that passengers should expect to receive.

The Government know that what each community needs from its public transport network is unique, and we want to empower local leaders to work with operators to design networks that meet their needs. It is great to see that that work is already under way in Somerset, with the trial of the Slinky digital demand-responsive transport service. Somerset county council has also introduced some great local schemes that aim to encourage people on to buses.

Through our plans, we will support and empower local transport authorities to take back control by working in collaboration with bus operators and passengers to deliver bus services for passengers.

Helen Grant: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. In my Maidstone and Malling constituency, local bus companies Arriva and Nu-Venture tell me that a significant reason for the lack of services is the lack of drivers, and that speeding up the process for granting provisional licences could make a real difference. Will the Minister look at that?

Simon Lightwood: I pushed for that when I was in opposition, and we did some consultation just before the general election. We are busy looking at the feedback and will report on it in due course.

Under the Government's action plan for buses, we will step in and ensure that local bus networks provide more accountability over bus operators, so that standards are raised wherever people live across the country. Making fares as affordable as possible is one of the Government's top priorities. As the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton said, the £2 fare cap is due to run out on 31 December. We are looking carefully and at speed at what to do in the future to support bus networks.

Local authorities, bus operators and passengers are eager to hear more details of our plans, and I assure them that we are working at pace to consider how we might best support buses in all areas, including rural communities, in our upcoming spending review. We will work closely with local authorities and bus operators to understand what is needed to improve and grow bus networks.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Simon Lightwood: I am just about to finish, but go on—I have given way to everyone else.

Caroline Voaden: Will the Minister consider the health impact of rural bus networks? Rural settings are very different from urban ones, and given the serious health implications of isolation and loneliness, particularly among older people, good bus connections can have an impact. My hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) talked about balancing the rural-urban funding divide. It is so much more important that bus services are subsidised in rural areas.

Simon Lightwood: As I said, it is important that local leaders get to decide—that they take back control of bus services, use the funding that is devolved to them and make informed decisions in their local areas.

We want to learn from the experiences and build on the successes, and I look forward to announcing more information on the buses Bill and the Government's plans for bus funding in due course.

Ellie Chowns *rose—*

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member needs to sit down. This issue is clearly of much concern in many constituencies across the country. It could be appropriate for a group of Members to get together and submit an application for a 60 or 90-minute debate in Westminster Hall, which would give Members the opportunity to make their cases and the Minister enough time to respond to their concerns. I am not formally requiring that of anybody, but I suggest that it might be a useful mechanism.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Rural Depopulation

[**VALERIE VAZ** *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call Torcuil Crichton to move the motion.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered depopulation in rural areas.

Tapadh leibh, Ms Vaz; thank you. It is an honour to have you in the Chair. I thank all colleagues for their attendance and support in what I am sure will be an illuminating 90-minute debate. Staging your first Westminster Hall debate is a bit like throwing a birthday party and wondering whether anyone will turn up—at least we know there is not a depopulation crisis in Westminster. I also thank the Minister for taking this debate. It may not seem obvious at first what the demographics of the Western Isles have to do with the Home Office, but if she bears with me, I will explain and expand on why this issue, which now affects the periphery of the UK, influences the entire economy and should inform the decisions that we make at national level on immigration.

First, let me give some context. In Na h-Eileanan an Iar, the Western Isles, we are in the middle of a depopulation crisis, and I am here to sound that alarm. We are painfully aware of what is a rapidly changing population. An older, strongly Gaelic-speaking demographic is passing on, and we see the rapid out-migration of younger, economically active families. They sometimes face insurmountable challenges: being priced out of housing and facing failing transport connections, stuttering health provision and childcare and a host of other issues, which weigh heavily in the scales of deciding whether to stay or go. And while we sound the warnings at home, the lights should be flashing on the dashboard in this place, too, and in offices across Whitehall. That is why I am staging this debate—to highlight the fact that we are simply running out of people to take up key public sector and private sector posts to keep our islands going. That affects the viability of vital services and it ill serves the local economy and the national one, too.

Just to give some further context, the estimated population of the Western Isles is 26,200. That represents a 5.5% decrease since the 2011 census and the highest percentage decrease in Scotland. According to estimates from the Western Isles health board, which has an obvious interest in this issue from a staffing and care point of view, the working-age population of the islands is set to decrease by 6% by 2028, while the over-75 population with the highest levels of comorbidity—people who have more than one illness—is set to rise by 25%. The situation is frightening. According to the board, these population changes will result in a year-on-year reduction in the available workforce—nurses and care staff—to attend the most important, most vulnerable people, and ultimately undermine the ability to sustain services.

I say we have to address this with local responses, Scottish responses and action at UK level to prevent the situation from entering that downward spiral. We know

[*Torcuil Crichton*]

that an ageing-population pattern is part of a Europe-wide trend, and somehow we kid ourselves that this is an over-the-horizon event that we will deal with later, but for us in the islands, it is an urgent reality, and our breakfast will become everyone else's lunch; if we do not address these issues on the edge of Europe, they will become structural problems for the rest of the country and the rest of the continent.

More than worrying about an ageing population, I worry about the exodus of a working population, particularly the female population. Since 2007, the number of women aged between 25 and 44 on the islands has dropped by 15%, from 3,289 down to 2,787. There are many reasons for that rapid decline but, for most parents, they can be encapsulated in one word—childcare. Of course that is a challenge for parents everywhere, but the lack of a working-age population, as well as the burdensome regulation, has strangled childcare in the islands. I am sure that is the experience of colleagues across the board. Working parents and primarily working mothers, of course, find it hard to return to work—to balance childcare and careers—and despite the many strong family connections and networks they have on the islands, ultimately they give up in frustration, and ultimately they speak to me, as they spoke to me during the election campaign, about giving up and moving to the mainland. And when we lose families, we lose the working-age population.

During the successful election campaign, I was joined by the then shadow Business Secretary, now the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, on a visit around some of the key ports in Stornoway. We went to a shellfish export company that was successful, with a £4 million turnover and rising, which was a great investment by the port and the parent company in the local fishing fleet. But the actual processing of the product in the chill of the packing room could not operate were it not for the Ukraine war. Most of the staff that packed the products were refugees from that conflict. They are a welcome and valuable addition to the workforce and the islands, but we cannot have our economic growth dependent on a conflict on the other side of Europe.

At a seafood processor on another island, a £3 million business at the end of a single-track road, there were sustainable stocks and work for perhaps 30 employees, but only 15 workers were available because there are simply no workers to be found locally. This was an operation that, pre-Brexit, had a large and well-integrated European workforce. Now it cannot find a local workforce, and the regulatory and bureaucratic challenge of sourcing staff is almost overwhelming.

In the fishing industry offshore, the present immigration requirements as I understand them require staff employed under the sponsored visa scheme to pass stage 4 English language tests. That is quite a high academic bar for an industry that seeks crewmen who are primarily experienced in working in noisy and challenging conditions where hand signals are often as useful as linguistic ones.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Member will be aware that this is a matter on which a number of us have campaigned over the years. Essentially, the problem is that the definition of what constitutes a skilled migrant worker is narrow and

brings in skills, as with the English language test, that are not central to the jobs that those people are going to do. We have safely had migrant workers in the catching sector for years without that level of English language. Will the hon. Member and others join me in encouraging the new Home Office team to have yet another look, and this time take the issues seriously?

Torcuil Crichton: I agree entirely with the right hon. Member. The language requirement is just one aspect of the present visa system that is unsuitable for our fishing industry, the islands, and rural economies, and which we have until now been unable to navigate around. Hopefully it will undergo a fresh review under a new Home Office team.

The new Home Office team and immigration policy are rightly the reserve of the UK Government. I do not seek to break up control of the system. I stood on a platform of a properly managed, points-based immigration system that links up the needs of the workforce, the economy and the country. But I counter the narrative, which this summer was in danger of becoming the prevailing one, that the country is somehow “full up”. There are parts of the UK and Scotland where we are crying out for skilled workers to come and be part of our workforce, and to then stay and become part of our communities.

Scotland has specific needs for our skills base, and the islands and rural areas of Scotland and the UK have some very specific asks of their own. The lesson of policy in almost every area—not just immigration—be it administered from here or Holyrood, is that one size does not fit all. What works at a UK level may need more flexibility at a Scottish level, and again at a rural and island level.

In the past, the UK Government in other guises have worked with the Scottish Government to show flexibility. The former First Minister Jack McConnell, now Baron McConnell of Glenscorrodale, promoted the fresh talent initiative for post-study work visas for overseas students at Scottish universities, enabling them to stay on for a period. There is, and should be, interest in reviving that plan, and the idea of rural visa projects, which was advanced by the Scottish Government with the Migration Advisory Committee before the previous UK Government stamped on the idea.

There are many levers of Government that are not at the hand of the Minister, but that bear mentioning because they are part of local and Scottish solutions to rural depopulation. In the islands, we are lucky to have a system of crofting tenure, a uniquely Scottish system which has kept generations in their home community, but crofting has been hollowed out by political forces that neither understand nor value its work. Crofting tenure, properly regulated, should be a defence against the property market, but instead it has become an enabler. The sale of croft tenancies at inflated rates has become a critical factor in the housing shortage.

Crofting needs urgent reform. I commend the Shucksmith report, “The Future of Crofting”, now more than a decade old but an excellent piece of work, which sought to rebalance—or restore the balance—between crofters’ right to security of tenure and their responsibilities to keep the market at bay. It should be dusted down and re-enacted, but that is probably a subject for another debate and another place.

The lack of affordable housing, however, is an issue that many other Members here and elsewhere will recognise. I hope that it will be taken up by other speakers in the debate. In many of our areas, it is impossible for anyone with modest means to secure a house, which is a pretty basic precondition for retaining a working-age population and keeping the economy spinning.

We therefore need action on housing and on crofting regulation; we need access to land; and we need access and action on depopulation. As I said, the dashboard lights are flashing. More than anything we need focus. We need economic focus on the peripheries of the north and west of Scotland, those areas of continued depopulation. We need economic incentives, state aid, perhaps a reduction in VAT on construction, and enhanced capital allowances. I do not want the Minister to worry too much about those issues, because they are for the Treasury and other Departments, and I will take them up with them.

My time is running out, and I do not want to end on a note of despondency. There is hope. There is hope in community ownership of the many crofting estates in the Western Isles, a quiet revolution that has injected not just a new wave of development, but a growing sense of confidence and assurance that, given the tools, we can tackle the issues for ourselves. There is the vast opportunity of community ownership of, and a community share in, the wealth of wind in onshore and offshore developments, which are due offers. That change is so tantalisingly close and could be so transformative in terms of finance and confidence that it cannot be ignored as part of the UK Government's GB Energy strategy.

There is also hope in individuals, families and communities and their resilience, which make the islands not just a great place to visit, but a precious place to stay. There are examples of local initiatives like the Uist repopulation zone, which has provided training opportunities and much-hallowed childcare provision to parents. It is led by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and has received £60,000 from the Scottish Government. I commend the work of that project and of many other individuals and communities who focus themselves on the issue of depopulation at a local level.

As I said, we have a sense of urgency about this in the islands: we are experiencing a depopulation crisis. I hope now that that can find an echo not just in the contributions to this debate, but in the UK Government's awareness and response to the issue.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I expect to call the Lib Dem opposition spokesperson at 3.28 pm.

2.43 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) on securing this debate. The issue is as important to me and my communities as it is to him and his.

The yardstick by which I have for many years now measured any proposal for anything to happen in the Northern Isles is to ask a simple question: will this make it more or less likely for people to want to live here? Without a healthy and growing population, we

risk losing the critical mass and, within that critical mass, we do not have the mix. Every population—every community—needs to have a mix of the professional, the technical, the skilled and semi-skilled, and the unskilled. In a city, where there is mobility within the different districts, we can take that sort of thing for granted; when we live in an island community it is a different story.

In some ways, I am the living, breathing example of how depopulation happens. I was born and brought up on Islay; I left as a 17-year-old to go to university and I eventually qualified as a solicitor. Islay has a population of between 3,000 and 3,500 people. It would not have been possible for me to return to Islay to go into legal practice with a population of that sort. I have lived most of my adult life in Orkney, where we have a population of about 22,000, which is big enough to sustain that professional community. The legal and accountancy firms, the wide range of doctors and the bigger hospital are things that allow us to maintain that mix so that we can keep our community functioning properly.

The history of Orkney and Shetland is slightly different from that of the Western Isles. Our population in Shetland was down to about 16,000 in the mid-1970s, at which point the oil industry came. Since then, the population grew quite rapidly, and it rests at around 22,000 or 23,000. That tells us that the critical thing to grow a population is the availability of a good mix of well-paid and varied jobs in the local economy.

Fifty years later, as we enter a period of decline in oil and gas as part of our economy, the just transition matters to us more than anywhere else. We see opportunities for our community in the development of, for example, marine renewables, tidal power and tidal stream generation, but if we push oil and gas off a cliff before the technologies are mature enough to come on stream, people will not hang around in places such as Orkney or Shetland, waiting for something else to happen. They have a history and a legitimate expectation of working in good, well-paid jobs, and they will take their skills elsewhere.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the importance of housing, which is probably the single biggest constraint on economic growth in the Northern Isles. I had an interesting conversation recently with the chief executive of Hjaltland housing association in Shetland. He was talking about a proposal he had put to a significant contractor, which was going to employ a significant number of people for a good number of years. He said, essentially, "If they pay the rent for us in advance"—this was a big corporate so it was rich enough to do it—"we will build the houses. Then, at the end of the time, the housing stock will revert to us and be available for other use in our community." That was a brilliant idea—absolutely fantastic, not least in its simplicity. I think that the corporate would be up for that, but it was not seen with favour by the Government in Edinburgh and has subsequently been discouraged. That sort of creativity—coming up with solutions to problems that are appropriate to the community—is critical if we are to halt the reverse in numbers.

The infrastructure available for people in island communities is also essential, including digital infrastructure such as modern broadband and the availability of mobile phone coverage, given the problems that could be faced by communities such as mine when the copper wire switch-off happens for landline technologies. Other infrastructure is essential as well, such as the physical

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

infrastructure of a ferry service. The hon. Gentleman does not need me to tell him about the problems that come from the lack of a reliable ferry service, because his constituents have endured that. But even within Shetland, and increasingly in Orkney as well, the internal ferry services have been problematic, as fleets get older and need to be replaced. Again, we need to listen to the communities. Those in Unst, Yell, Whalsay and Bressay are all keen to say, “Actually, for the next generation, we don’t want to rely on ferries. We want the construction of fixed links and tunnels, which would offer us opportunities to build and grow businesses.”

I spoke to one woman in Yell recently who told me that she would love to go back and have her home in Yell—she was born and brought up in Unst originally—but she has two children with medical conditions, which means that she does not want to take the risk of having to rely on a ferry journey, possibly in the middle of the night, should her children need medical attention at the hospital. Therefore, somebody who would like to live in Yell or Unst is forced to live on the Shetland mainland.

The problems of population decline for Shetland as a whole—if we look at the headline figures—may not be as acute, but the smaller island communities in Shetland continue to see that decline. This is about giving every community the empowerment to come up with solutions that are appropriate to them in their communities. I know that others want to speak, but I could say a lot more about this, and I hope that we will return to it at some point in the future.

2.50 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairing this afternoon, Ms Vaz. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) on securing this debate and on the eloquent way in which he introduced it. He said that it was like coming to a birthday party; the only problem is that he did not think to bring any cake for all of us attending.

Depopulation in rural areas is, of course, a live and pressing issue. The hon. Member captured most of the real issues that we constantly live with in rural areas across Scotland. We took this issue very seriously on the Scottish Affairs Committee in the last Parliament, and we produced two reports on the subject. One was about Scotland’s population and demography, and the range of issues that the hon. Gentleman presented came up regularly in our proceedings. And, just before the Dissolution of the last Parliament, we concluded a report on the cost of living crisis in rural areas, which was very gratefully received by a number of people who were looking at this as a means to address some of the issues that he raised.

We have known our problem for a while: Scotland is facing population decline. We are the only part of the United Kingdom that is projected to have a population decline. By 2033, our population will start to go down again. That is after making a bit of progress in the last 20 years, which I think everybody welcomed. Most of that was down to people coming to Scotland from eastern Europe, which boosted so many of our communities. The hon. Gentleman was right to reference the contribution

that so many people made to our communities, right across Scotland, under freedom of movement. It is an absolute disaster—a tragedy—that we have lost the ability to get that type of immigration going because of the refusal to review the disastrous consequences of leaving the European Union. Particularly, the opportunities of freedom of movement have left us.

In Scotland, we have a falling birth rate and an increasingly ageing population, and the issues following Brexit have created particularly difficult issues. We have acute labour shortages in all sectors, whether that is in our NHS, our care sector, hospitality, tourism or agriculture, and that is even more pronounced in Scotland’s rural areas. The declining population makes it harder to fill the available vacancies that are available. Even if every school leaver opted to work in Scotland’s social care sector, there would still be vacancies left for people to fill, such is the scale of the difficulties that we have.

I am not sure what Labour’s new policy is on immigration. I have listened very carefully to the Home Secretary when she has spoken about this in debates, and I have followed what the Prime Minister has been saying, but I am still not sure what Labour is trying to achieve. I think that they understand, respect and get the problem, but it is just that they are not prepared to do anything about it. We still hear the same old language that immigration is a burden and asylum seekers are to be demonised. No clear and concise routes to UK citizenship are being offered and opened up to people who hope to come to our shores.

Labour really has to do better on this issue. It has to acknowledge the value of immigration. For goodness’ sake, look what it has done to our communities; look how it has driven economic growth. I was here when Tony Blair opened up the route to the UK to the accession nations. It was a massive success, and, if anything, it contributed to the economic growth that we got in the late 2000s before the economic crash, such was the vision of the previous Labour Government. Please show us some of that same vision, too.

The hon. Gentleman is quite right to reference the Fresh Talent scheme. A Labour Government delivered that fantastic innovation, in partnership with a Labour-Liberal Executive in Scotland. Fresh Talent gave us some advantages over the rest of the United Kingdom. It allowed us to retain Scottish-educated foreign national students so that they could stay and consider Scotland to be a home. If only we could see that type of imagination being deployed once again, but even introducing something like Fresh Talent would barely touch the sides of the difficulties that we have just now.

There is general consensus among all the political parties of Scotland and across Holyrood that something needs to be done and that we need to address this issue as a priority. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar referred to some of the welcome things that the Scottish Government have done, but the one thing that we need—I cannot for the life of me understand why this has not been seriously looked at—is a Scottish visa. We need to look at the option of a sub-national immigration system that caters for the nations and regions throughout the whole United Kingdom and allows the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and other constituencies around Scotland to get the immigrants they require. Such systems work perfectly and effectively in other nations. The Scottish Affairs Committee visited Quebec last year

and saw its system working perfectly. Quebec has an arrangement with France and is able to recruit people in shortage areas. Montreal is now one of the fastest-growing cities and economies in the whole of North America—imagine having just a bit of that in Scotland.

I was immensely encouraged during the general election campaign to hear Labour talk about a Scottish visa; I listened carefully to Labour's deputy leader, Jackie Baillie, talk about the idea glowingly. I spoke to representatives of businesses and sectors in my constituency, who really appreciated that and thought, "Maybe at last we will be able to make some sort of progress," but that has all gone. What has happened to it? What happened to this idea? Now all that Labour talks about is tinkering with the shortage occupation list. That will help, but it will not do anything to address our real needs, so we need some serious solutions.

People tell us that we need to get more people from the United Kingdom to come to Scotland. I remember being lectured by previous Scottish Conservative Members of Parliament, who said that people will not come to Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom—apparently, they are put off by our lower council tax, free prescriptions, free childcare and lack of tuition fees. Apparently, that was also a disincentive to immigrants from eastern Europe and further afield. Those MPs said that people refused to come to Scotland because they would pay a few pounds more in tax. That was absolute and utter rubbish, and we now know that because the latest figures from the National Records of Scotland show that there is net migration to Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom. We need to do more, but let us get away from that nonsense. I hope we do not hear anything like that from the Labour Government.

Yes, there are problems; yes, there are real difficulties. Rural Scotland is suffering, but it is now in the hands of a Labour Government. It is not the Conservatives any more, with their cultural resistance to things like immigration. Labour has the opportunity to respond with its values. Please, for goodness' sake—for the hon. Gentleman's constituency and for all of us who represent rural constituencies—do something about it. Get it fixed. Help us. Bring forward the solutions.

2.57 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) for securing this important debate. I associate myself with his comments about the challenges his constituents face.

I want to address an issue that deeply affects rural communities across the United Kingdom, one specific aspect of which particularly affects my constituency of Morecambe and Lunesdale. This is a matter that strikes at the heart of our villages and rural areas, where we are seeing an alarming trend: young people, the lifeblood of our communities, are being forced to move away. One of the key reasons for that is a lack of affordable housing. Today I will speak about building homes, and tomorrow I hope to speak in this Chamber about the impact of short-term lets on my constituency.

In Morecambe and Lunesdale, rising house prices and a chronic shortage of affordable homes are pushing young people to relocate to urban areas in search of

housing they can afford. They want to stay and contribute to the communities they grew up in, but many simply cannot, and the result is a steady drain of talent and energy from our villages. That has serious consequences. We see it most clearly in our local economy, particularly in key sectors such as agriculture and hospitality—industries that have been the backbone of our rural life for generations. Farms, restaurants, hotels and pubs across Morecambe and Lunesdale are struggling to find the workers they need. Without young people staying in these areas or moving in, the workforce shrinks and businesses are unable to expand or even survive.

Let us be clear: rural depopulation is not just a social issue, but an economic one. The lack of workers drives economic stagnation and, as businesses falter, fewer opportunities remain, fuelling further depopulation. It is a vicious cycle that we must break. The solution lies in providing more affordable, energy-efficient housing. By building homes that young people and families can actually afford, we can keep our communities vibrant and growing. Affordable housing does not just keep people in our rural areas; it attracts new investment, brings vitality back to our villages and strengthens the local economy.

We must ensure that these homes are energy efficient. In the face of both the climate crisis and soaring energy costs, it is imperative that any new housing meets high environmental standards. By doing that, we are not only addressing housing affordability, but preparing our rural areas for a sustainable future.

I must mention the Lune Valley Community Land Trust, which, in collaboration with South Lakes Housing, has built beautiful, affordable, energy-efficient homes in the village of Halton in my constituency. I believe they are looking to build more in the area. I welcome this approach and urge the Government to support it.

If we are serious about tackling rural depopulation, we must take decisive action. That means working closely with local authorities, developers and communities to ensure that we have the right mix of affordable and social housing built to the highest standards. It means creating jobs, fostering economic growth and ensuring that young people want, and can afford, to live and work in rural areas such as Morecambe and Lunesdale.

I urge the Government to prioritise affordable and energy-efficient rural housing as part of their broader strategy to tackle rural depopulation and enable economic growth. Our villages and rural areas deserve nothing less.

3.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, for what I believe is the first time during this Session. I am sure it will be the first of many, and I look forward to working alongside you.

It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge). She is here in Westminster Hall almost as much as I am! I look forward to many more contributions from her.

I say to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton)—that is my Northern Ireland pronunciation of the name of his constituency; I hope it was somewhere near to what it really should be—that it is a real pleasure to see him in this debate, and I am here to make a contribution to support him.

[Jim Shannon]

As one who is thankful to live in a rural community and to feel part of it, I speak with some personal knowledge. I come over here on a Monday, and I leave on a Thursday. London will never be my home, because there is too much concrete. I need green fields, grass and fresh air. That is just a personal opinion; I have nothing against the people of London. I am sure they are very happy here, but I know I certainly could not be here any longer than I have to be. But that is by the way.

The Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs—I always give a Northern Ireland perspective to these things—publishes an annual “Key Rural Issues” publication. According to the 2023 edition, 36% of Northern Ireland’s population lived in a rural area in 2020. The population of rural areas grew by 20% between 2001 and 2020, while the population of urban areas grew by 7%. Perhaps what we are seeing in Northern Ireland is a reverse of what the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar referred to; more people seem to be moving to rural areas for whatever reason.

I can see this happening. Although I still see the people I went to school with and their children in Kircubbin and Greyabbey, the two nearest villages to my home, I also see many, many new faces on my constituency door knocks throughout the year. I do not just knock doors at the election; I will be doing it next week in recess, and I did it the whole month of August. I do it because it is a good way to hear what constituents are saying. In August, when everybody goes out, it was also a good way for people to know I was back again after the 4 July election. It shows an interest. It is how we know what people want, so that is why I do it.

I also see that the footprint has expanded. That is due not simply to children having children and moving to their own places, but to historical family connections no longer being in place. In my opinion, that adds to the character and abilities in the community.

I will quickly refer to the community and what it means to me and the people I live alongside. I have lived in the Ards peninsula since I was four, over 65 years ago—now hon. Members know my age—and yet there are those who still consider me, and label me, a blow-in. How many times have we rural people heard that? There is a joke that if someone’s great-grandparents are not buried in Ballywalter graveyard, they are a blow-in. That would take them back before their birth, but that is by the way. That has not stopped me from being an integral part of the local community and from being proud to be known as the wee boy from Ballywalter.

This is a message that people need to understand: although someone may not be born in a rural community, they will be made a part of that community if they understand and embrace all that that entails. That means farmers ploughing or spraying fields at 1.30 am, because that is the best time—perhaps the only time—they can do so. It means being delayed behind a tractor or by a farmer moving cattle across the road. It means being woken up by the sound of a bird scarer, which is how the farmer protects his field. Those are the things of the countryside, but we embrace them. They are parts of daily life for people who move to a home in the country.

By the same token, living in a rural community means a farmer may drop off a bag of groceries when someone is snowed in. It means that when someone has

a new baby, they will receive at least 10 ready-made meals from the local community, and possibly many more. That is the community that I live in. It is probably the community we all live in—I know that it is certainly the community that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) lives in. Living in a rural community means that if someone is delayed in getting to the school, people will wait with their child. It means that people are part of that community. For me, community means all those things. If someone new comes in, welcome them; if someone needs help, reach out.

We need to do better at some things if we are to encourage more people to take up rural living and to bring their skills and qualities to rural life. We need to ensure that there is adequate broadband for home working and small businesses. We have to move with the times: when people want to work from home, and have businesses in their homes, we need to encourage them and make that happen. We need to ensure that there are places in small rural schools. We need to enhance public transport connectivity.

We also need to encourage, by any means, our banks to realise that their face-to-face obligations to rural customers come first. I do not think that there are any hon. Members who have not spoken about bank closures. It sickens me that when banks make more money than they did the year before, they close branches in rural areas. I am not a socialist, but I cannot comprehend how banks can close branches in rural areas and then produce more dividends for the chief executives. That is seriously morally wrong. If any banks are listening, please note my words, because they are not just my words—they are the words of many others.

We need to ensure that rural medical practices have adequate facilities for physios, nutritionists, sexual health clinicians and dentists, so there is adequate provision for rural communities. Those are all things that people who come to live in the countryside wish to have.

A lot of people want to speak, so I will finish with this. Living in a rural community offers so much and, with sensible planning and forethought, there is space for more. There is nothing quite like country life. I say that not just because I am a shooting man, but because I just love the country. We need to protect our country life while encouraging people to reap the health benefits of living in the country, such as fresher, cleaner air. My goodness, who could say there is anything wrong with that?

3.9 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) for securing a debate on this very important subject. We were previously on opposite sides of the great newspaper divide. I was on the true blue Tory side supporting the *Daily Mail*, and he was on a red rag called the *Daily Record*, but we will not dwell on that.

Depopulation is the curse of rural areas—a blight that creeps up and strangles the lifeblood. It can precipitate a crisis, after which shops and schools close, and so communities wither and die. It is a multiheaded hydra of a problem, and we are hearing that today. There is no one cause; therefore, there is no one solution. There is no magic wand here. Bright lights and big cities will always have their charms. As a proud country boy myself, I think all that is overrated, but we need to make moving away from a rural area a choice, not a necessity.

Some of the issues are common to rural areas across the UK and the whole globe. First among them is jobs. If someone cannot find work, their choices are stark: move, if they can, or linger where they are. That can be a miserable existence, for rural deprivation is real. Issues with connectivity, especially public transport, can add genuine isolation to the burden. Scenery in rural areas such as my Dumfries and Galloway constituency is lovely. It is a delight for locals and tourists alike, but you cannot eat the scenery.

Another layer of difficulty, peculiar to Scotland, lies in the fact that we have two Governments: one here in Westminster and one at Holyrood. The arrival of the devolved Parliament was designed to shorten the distance between the people and the Government and deliver a light-on-its-feet legislature able to deliver Scottish solutions to Scottish problems, such as depopulation. The theory was marvellous, but the reality perhaps less successful. Much great work has been done by MSP colleagues, but problems persist, not least when one side of the equation is not the willing partner it ought to be.

From previous experience as a special adviser in the Scotland Office, I found that the SNP Scottish Government were capable of foot-dragging, with little interest in making joint projects with the UK Government a success. Take the A75 road—critical to connectivity between Northern Ireland, Scotland and the rest of the UK. Carrying perhaps as much as 60% of Northern Ireland's trade, it is a sorry cattle track of a road, very often dubbed “the road to hell”. The UK Government earmarked money for improvements, but the Scottish Government cried foul because transport is devolved. The result? No action on the road that is the very spine of my rural constituency.

How can we attract young families to rural Scotland when the quality of schools is such a lottery? Why, with one so-called “Curriculum for Excellence” in Scotland, are 32 local authority heads of education delivering that in 32 different ways? Why is there a postcode lottery, where one school may offer nine exams while one 25 miles down the road may offer 10? Regardless of pupils' ability, some are at an instant disadvantage.

Housing is a problem. Someone may find a job, but can they find a rural home within affordable commuting distance? Probably not. Housing sits with the Scottish Government. We are told that there will be a reset in relations between the new Administration here and the one in Edinburgh.

Pete Wishart: I will take the chance to add to his list. He knows that immigration is a matter exclusively reserved to the UK Government. When he was special adviser, what did he recommend to one of his Secretaries of State about how immigration routes to Scotland could be improved?

John Cooper: Our advice was that things like Scottish visa projects have a fundamental problem, in that if someone arrives in Scotland with a bit of paper that says they can be there, there is nothing to keep them there. We have found difficulties with the black economy. People disappear rapidly, and again, it's bright lights and big cities, so there is a fundamental problem. We on our side think that the UK should have one immigration policy and not break it up piecemeal. As we say in Scotland, the proof is in the preein. We will see what

this new relationship brings and whether it is fruitful. Perhaps we could all be friends between Westminster and Edinburgh. I certainly hope so but, again, as we say in Scotland, I hae ma doots.

Housing is worthy of debate entirely on its own; it is a sprawling subject and we simply do not have the time to dwell on it today. Having touched on many of the difficulties, I will turn briefly to some of the solutions. If depopulation is one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse for rural Britain, then indifference is coming up on the rail, and that is something that we as politicians can tackle. We can, as we are doing today, raise these issues. We need to lift the profile of rural Britain. We can rail against the urban-centric policies of those who do not understand what rural life, with all its challenges and all its benefits, is truly about. Most importantly, we can fight for the three j's—jobs, jobs, jobs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. We will start the wind-up speeches at 3.28 pm and we have three more speakers, so hon. Members can do the maths.

3.15 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz; I will be brief.

I applied to contribute to this debate because I wanted to speak not just about my experiences, but about the experiences of people I grew up around, people I was at school with and people who, in many cases, were forced to leave my constituency of Hexham, which colleagues will be surprised to learn is the largest in England. As the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) spoke about the beauty of his constituency, I feel compelled to remind people of the beauty of my constituency, which is in the county of Hadrian's Wall, and to note that we will be marking the anniversary of the loss of the Sycamore Gap tree during the conference recess later in September.

When I go through so many towns and villages in my constituency, I see that they are marked by exactly what Members have spoken about today: a lack of younger people, who have been forced—they have not chosen—to move away. They have been forced, by a lack of jobs and opportunities, to seek to make their lives elsewhere, often leaving behind families and caring responsibilities, which means large amounts of travel back home to meet those obligations. The last Government failed to grapple with this issue, which we know is a huge, inherited, generational and demographic challenge, and one that I urge our Government to take on fully.

I spoke to some of the businesses in my constituency on the campaign trail. They want to take on more people, but they simply cannot find the skills they need or people who want to work and can afford to live in such an overheated and over-inflated housing market. That leads to a decline for those businesses and, for some of them, a slow death. One of the larger employers told me during the election that if they take on someone and train them up, but then they cannot afford to live in my constituency and move somewhere else, they bear all the training costs, only to see that individual go and work in a far more urban part of the country. We have spoken a lot about the rural premium and the rural cost of living, but there is a rural cost of doing business as well, which we should note very carefully.

[Joe Morris]

As the representative for the Hexham constituency—the first Labour representative for the constituency—and as someone who was privileged to be out knocking on doors with my school friends and my schoolteachers, I know that we are not just letting our young people down, but letting our older generations down. I am privileged to be able to go back to visit my grandma every week when I am back in the constituency, but I have friends who now live three or four hours away and are unable to do the same. This is having a genuinely devastating impact on a lot of families, particularly given the acute social care crisis that this Government have inherited.

Ultimately, only by addressing this issue and the really biting crisis of rural depopulation can we turn our communities around and ensure that they can become the thriving engines of growth that the economy needs them to be.

3.18 pm

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) very much indeed for securing a debate on such an important subject. He consistently hits the nail on the head by bringing forward subjects that really matter to us.

We have talked about accommodation, and the Highland council, on which I was a councillor, has £1.2 billion of borrowing, yet 40% of our housing budget is spent on interest payments. That is a catastrophe. Basically, we cannot borrow any more money to build more housing. The utility companies that are building renewable energy projects across the whole of the highlands need to build properties that will remain there for generations rather than modular housing for the extent of the jobs or projects, and the same should go for the owners of fish farms. It would make a big difference if the private and public sectors worked together, because I fear that public sector housing will not be able to fill the gap.

Scotland has a £3.4 billion transport budget, but it is not coming to the highlands. The A82 up Loch Lomond must be one of the worst roads in the world; trucks cannot get past there. Mowi, the fish farm company, and BSW Timber just cannot operate safely, and it is extremely bad for the area. The railway from Glasgow to Mallaig has an average speed of just over 40 mph. This HS2 thing is a joke, and the ferries make Scotland a laughing stock.

The Scottish Government have done no favours to the highlands and Scotland on connectivity over the last 17 years, and the same can be said for schools in the highlands. Schools such as Mallaig high school and Gairloch high school are less than 50% full—there is a complete collapse. As the numbers drop, we are losing the breadth of subjects taught by the teachers, so we are desperate for computing, mathematics and engineering teachers—they are the jobs of the future. The attainment gap in Scotland is a great shame for our country. Again, the Scottish Government's management of our educational system has been catastrophic.

Broadband coverage in Scotland is 96.8%, but in the highlands it is 86.6%. That is a disparity of almost 15%. Of course, we cannot have the jobs of the future if we do not have the connectivity. Places lose their population

if the public sector pulls out, and that is what we are seeing. Eight care homes closed in the highlands in the two years that I was a highland councillor. People are getting shipped from the west coast of Skye up to Thurso or Inverness. There is a collapse in the care home sector. Care workers are being paid £12 an hour, which is less than they would get in the hospitality sector, and that is an increase on what it was before April. No wonder we have an absolute catastrophe in our care sector. Of course, we all know that the availability of dentists in the highlands is also a disaster.

We have heard about the importance of allowing immigrants to come to Scotland. We are losing more than 50% of our young. They choose not to work in the highlands; they want to leave home. We need to keep these guys. We need to offer them well-paid jobs and good accommodation, and cherish them, otherwise they will leave. At the moment, they cannot get accommodation and they are not being taught for the jobs of the future. We are not helped by the Scottish Government, and we all have a big job to do together.

3.23 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): Thank you, Ms Vaz, for the unexpected pleasure of contributing to this important debate; I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) on bringing it to this Chamber. I thought I would offer a Welsh perspective, to ensure that all the nations of these islands are spoken about in this debate, although I fear that much of what we have heard rings true in Wales, too.

I represent Ceredigion Preseli. At the last census, Ceredigion—the majority of my constituency—recorded a 5.9% decrease in its overall population, and the communities in Preseli or Pembrokeshire that I now represent saw their population flatline. This is a problem that we are very much living with today. What does it mean? In practice, it means that we are having very difficult discussions about, for example, the provision of public services and whether the school estate is sustainable for the future. We are talking about the lack of GPs and the fact that we do not have an NHS dentist any more in much of the constituency. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned bank closures. I shall not name them now, but there are three well-known banks in the UK that no longer have a single branch in the two counties that I represent. This is the real consequence of depopulation.

I very much align myself with the comments made by all colleagues on what needs to happen to try to reverse this trend. However, I will add that a Labour predecessor of mine in what was then the constituency of Cardiganshire, the great—and sadly late—Baron Elystan-Morgan, talked in his maiden speech about how the outmigration of young people sapped the vitality of rural communities. He was speaking in the 1960s, but I fear that that is as true today as it was then. As well as sapping the vitality from private enterprise and having a detrimental impact on the provision of staff for key public services, this outmigration is also sapping and undermining the viability of our rural communities.

This is something that the UK Government can help with, and it should be on their radar. When the Cabinet Office looks at the range of risks it must monitor as part of its remit—something that the Public Accounts

Committee discussed in the previous Parliament—it should look at how the discrepancies in demographic trends across these islands might have an impact on key public services, because in certain areas of rural Wales we will, I am afraid, see a collapse of public services. That will have a knock-on impact on more urban areas, which are themselves struggling with different demographic pressures.

This is an important debate, and I would ask the Home Office Minister to consider, as part of her important work in this new Parliament, the lessons to be drawn from experiences across the world. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) mentioned the experience of Quebec. As west Walians, we often turn on the radio to hear adverts from the Government of Western Australia trying to attract many of our young doctors and nurses to migrate to that part of the world. Are there incentives we could use to persuade more of our young people to stay or to attract those from other parts of the world? There are many benefits to rural living, as all hon. Members have outlined today. Perhaps we could be more creative in grasping this problem by the scruff of the neck, because I fear we do not have much time left to deal with it.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

3.26 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my neighbour from across the Minch, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton), on bringing this important subject to the attention of this place.

I am old enough to remember a time, when I was at school in Tain, when my father said to me, “Your future will lie in the south. Go south, young boy, because that’s where the jobs are.” Then, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) so wisely said, the oil came—and come it did. In my case, that meant working in the Nigg yard, as so many others did—at its height, there were 5,000 people employed there.

I married and brought up my children in my home town of Tain. I was one of the lucky ones. Indeed, it could be said that, in Caithness, the advent of Dounreay was equally important in not just halting but reversing depopulation. Even today, Dounreay keeps the lights on in Strath Halladale and Bettyhill, because many people have a croft, but they also have an income from Dounreay. To be plain with colleagues, I come to this from the issue of high-quality employment above all else. As my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) just said, that is crucial, because without jobs, depopulation will continue.

I congratulate all speakers; all the important points have been touched on. My neighbour across the Minch made an important point. He said that there is a perception that the highlands and islands, and indeed many other parts of the UK, are full up. That is absolutely not the case. One only needs to travel on what we call the Causeymire—or the Causewaymire—across Caithness from Latheron to Thurso to see the myriad empty ruined croft houses either side of the road. Those once upon a time supported families but that is not the case now. It will be exactly the same across the Minch.

My neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire mentioned schools. Just north of his constituency, we have a problem with recruiting and retaining staff for some of our primary and secondary schools. That is becoming a big issue. Such problems are a disincentive for people to come or employers to move to the highlands and offer employment.

I am very taken by what my Welsh friend, the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake), said about Western Australia. If incentives can be put together that will encourage qualified staff—dentists, doctors, teachers—to come to these areas, that would help so much. As my hon. Friend from across the Minch mentioned, there is a carers’ crisis. We see that in west Sutherland. We have an ever dropping number of carers, so who will look after the old people? People are giving up. The Government could tweak the rules governing the taxation of mileage that carers are burdened with. It is a very big disincentive indeed.

The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) talked about the loss of the migrant workers, as did the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris). The fact that we do not have those people—they have gone—makes a huge difference. I can remember Polish people in Easter Ross asking me, “Do they hate us? Why do they want us to leave?” That was very sad. Also, when I travel in Wester Ross and west Sutherland I see the old European signs with the stars on them saying, “This stretch of road was paid for with the help of EC money.” That was a huge loss to us all. Whatever we might think of the EC, the structural funding or something like objective 1, which was designed to reach the most disadvantaged areas including those that face depopulation, was a great loss to us all. I hope that His Majesty’s Government will look at the issues.

Time is short. There is a massive problem that matters hugely to my constituents. I could talk about health, which has been mentioned already in this debate. The fact that Caithness mothers have to travel more than a 200-mile return trip to give birth in Inverness is a piece of nonsense. That is one of the reasons that people are leaving Caithness and heading south. It is as simple as that.

Good Government treats the different parts of the UK fairly, whether they are remote, depopulated, or what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has left us now, referred to as the concrete of London. The point is that a good and fair Government will give people an equal chance in life to prosper and do well. It is not all doom and gloom, as the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) said. There are hopes for the future. We could look at other models of recruitment, imaginative ways of providing housing and incentives to get employers to come to remote areas. I very much hope that this will be the start of a constructive dialogue with the Government, and between the Scottish and UK Governments, on how we can, as has been said, grip the issue, shake it out and sort it once and for all.

3.33 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) on securing this important debate. I am pleased

[*Matt Vickers*]

to have this opportunity to respond on behalf of the Opposition. The hon. Member told us about his deeply rural and very special part of the world and the unique challenges that it faces in terms of childcare and labour shortages.

I echo right hon. and hon. Members' comments highlighting just how important our countryside is to the United Kingdom. We heard about the challenges of ensuring that young people are not forced out but can afford to live locally with access to jobs and housing, and about the challenges of access to schools, doctors, banks and other public services when there is no longer a critical mass.

Not only does the countryside make up 90% of the UK's land, as well as being home to millions of people, it contributes over £270 billion to our economy in England alone. As many speakers have observed, our labour market in rural areas has for a long time been constrained by a lack of supply, particularly with regard to certain skills. The supply of financial capital has also been limited by the structure and regulation of financial services. Historically, poor connectivity—both physical transport links and digital infrastructure—have added to the challenges in rural areas. That is why the last Government made it their core mission to level up parts of our country that had been traditionally overlooked, and I was proud to support the previous Administration's investment in rural communities.

In government, we introduced local skills improvement plans and a new local skills improvement fund to counter rural depopulation. We delivered the £3.6 billion towns fund, boosting investment to create jobs and opportunities across the country and grow the economy. We committed £110 million in extra investment to rural areas as part of the rural England prosperity fund to create jobs across the country. We invested in rural economies by helping farmers with an investment of £2.4 billion a year while EU land-based subsidies were phased out and new schemes were introduced that aimed to work for farmers, food producers and the environment. The farming investment fund will help to improve productivity and efficiency within farming businesses and animal health and welfare in the years to come, and bring forward more environmental benefits.

As well as supporting farmers, ensuring they have access to training to meet the needs of local communities and backing Britain's farmers, the last Government also made progress in tackling challenges to living in rural areas. I represent some of the most beautiful rural communities in the country—although not as deeply rural as others—so I know the challenges of poor broadband connections, limited public transport and rural crime only too well. Poor broadband connections create huge challenges for youngsters in education, impede rural businesses and put blocks on remote working. There is a long way to go on broadband roll-out but we are making huge progress. The last Government invested £5 billion to roll out and it is expected that by 2025 85% of homes will have high-speed gigabit broadband.

Another huge concern for those I represent in rural communities is public services, particularly public transport and bus services. Limited services prevent youngsters from getting to school, adults from getting to work and elderly people from accessing health services and social

activities. The obstacle to commercially sustainable services in some of those communities is obvious, but we cannot leave rural communities cut off and isolated. There is much more to do. The last Government put forward an additional £150 million to local authorities to help them to introduce new routes to unconnected areas or introduce demand-responsive transport services, such as my local Tees Flex service. We also established a new national rural crime unit, delivering our plan to crack down on crime and make our rural communities safe.

Yes, the previous Government invested and made progress in tackling the concerns and challenges facing many rural communities, but there is a lot more to do. I hope the new Administration will continue to look at how we support those communities, maintain investment, mitigate challenges and spread opportunities. The signs so far are not promising. Under the previous Labour Government, rural unemployment doubled in the last year of their Administration; at the general election, Labour's manifesto barely mentioned rural communities; and barely two months into the new Administration, we hear that Labour is looking to claw back £100 million from the farming budget.

Given today is Back British Farming Day, will the Minister provide some clarity on the Government's intention for the farming budget? The Government can make a substantial difference to our rural communities through protecting their distinct way of life. In the light of recent proposals to change house-building targets, will the Minister clarify how the Government will listen to rural communities with the new planning framework so those communities have a say in their future? There is much more still to do to support our rural communities. It is vital the new Government continue to work quickly to build on the work of the previous one and develop a vision for the countryside, to spread opportunities to all areas of the United Kingdom.

3.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) on his successful securing of this debate. I am extremely grateful to him and to right hon. and hon. Members for taking part in the debate. I will mention those who have made substantial contributions: my hon. Friends the Members for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) and for Hexham (Joe Morris), the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Members for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald), for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). I acknowledge the contributions from the Opposition leads as well, including the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers).

I want to address many of the issues raised in today's debate, which has focused on a range of key points and has brought together the challenges and consequences of depopulation in an important and effective way. I am heartened by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar also saying that he recognises this is an issue that goes way beyond the Home Office and that he plans to raise a number of the challenges with other Departments. I encourage him to do so.

The Government recognise the importance of this debate, and the challenges faced by rural and island communities in Scotland, as well as in Northern Ireland and more widely across the United Kingdom in Wales and England. Those challenges are now coming to workforces, and are about supporting local and national economies, as well as encouraging young people to feel that they have opportunity in the areas where they grew up. A range of issues was raised and important points were extremely well made, including on some of the generational shifts that are having impacts on families, as well as community cohesion, wider integration and the continued success of local services, the challenges in recruitment across primary local sectors and public services, and the running of our local communities.

One of the points raised was in relation to the fishing and fish-processing industries, which is of concern to many colleagues in Scotland. We recognise the contribution of those industries to the lifeblood of our nation, including to coastal and rural communities. Those industries generate almost £2 billion in exports. We recognise the challenges of recruiting domestically. Those and other valuable jobs are often done in difficult circumstances. As has been discussed, there has been a reliance on migration over recent years.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): Under the last Conservative Government, too often we saw rampant exploitation of migrant workers in the seasonal workers scheme. Does the Minister share my concerns about such labour exploitation, and will she work with me on novel ideas to tackle it?

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for making that serious point, one that I will draw on in my remarks. I will continue to work with him and others on how we tackle that serious issue.

Migration has been an important part of the history of our nation, as was raised by the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire. He will know, as I do, that for generations people have travelled here from all over the world, contributing to our economy, studying in our universities, working in our public services and being part of our communities and the way we have built our nation together. All of us here are alive to the demographic challenges that remote communities particularly are facing. We are also committed to ensuring that the immigration system works in the interests of the whole of the UK.

We have seen net migration treble in five years, driven largely by a big increase in overseas recruitment. We are clear that net migration must come down, and that the immigration system needs to be properly controlled and managed. I make that point because it is for that reason we are setting out a new approach, which is integral to tackling some of the challenges outlined today. We will link migration policy and visa controls to skills and labour market policy so that immigration is not used as an alternative to training or tackling workforce problems in the UK.

Mr Carmichael: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: I have to make my remarks, and the right hon. Member has spoken. I will come back if I have time.

On the vision of developing more sustainable alternatives to labour market issues, I am sure that we are all keen to work together. There is no other way. That is why I have asked my officials to work closely with Seafish, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and across Government to address the issues facing the sector and our rural communities, and to make sure we are building together a more sustainable workforce and community.

Jim Shannon: I welcome the Minister to her position. I apologise for not doing so earlier; I wish her well in her job. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and I have pursued the issue of visas for fishermen across the sea—in Northern Ireland, my villages of Portavogie, Kilkeel and Ardglass are examples—as has the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart). Along the line, we have always had verbal commitments, but we have never seen action to make visas more acceptable for skilled workers so that small fishing villages such as Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel can survive. The Minister might wish to continue pursuing that, if it is agreeable.

Seema Malhotra: I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, who is a long-standing campaigner on these issues. I make the point that it is important that we work closely across Westminster and with our devolved Administrations. This is part of an important reset, and it is important that we look at how we tackle these challenges together. Many of the issues that have been raised are matters for the Scottish Government and for local authorities in Scotland, but it is important that we look at how we work together across Westminster and with the Scottish Government to ensure that we have shared projects that are a success.

Mr Carmichael: I have said often enough that the medium to long-term structural problems in the catching sector for deckhands have to be solved by a better training programme, to make sure that we recruit from our own fishing and coastal communities. In the meantime, working together with the Scottish Government, where the responsibility lies, to bridge the gap with the availability of visas for incoming crew seems to me the perfect way in which the Governments here and in Edinburgh can work together to provide the industry with what it needs.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. I shall be coming on to some of these issues in my remarks, but let me first talk briefly about the regional visa schemes that have been alluded to. I am aware that the devolved Government in Scotland retain a key interest in this, and in 2022 the Migration Advisory Committee suggested that the Government could explore the issue further. It is important to say that the MAC must hear the voices of our devolved Administrations across the country.

Proposals have included measures to restrict migrants to certain areas, but there is currently no legal basis to do so, even if we wanted to. Fundamentally, overseas recruits are likely to be affected by the same factors as anyone else when making decisions about whether to move into or remain in remote parts of the country. That means that jobs must be available that offer sustainable salaries and attractive working conditions, but we must also ensure affordable housing, transport links, suitable local infrastructure such as broadband, and childcare. So many of those issues affect where people choose to settle and to make communities their home.

[Seema Malhotra]

Addressing such concerns, and thereby making challenging careers more attractive, has to be the focus of the work to tackle depopulation. Otherwise, even migrants drawn to the UK to perform these roles can leave their jobs and the area as soon as a more favourable opportunity becomes available. In some of the analysis of the Fresh Talent experience, that has been part of the story. It is important to learn lessons—

Pete Wishart: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Gentleman can come back to me later, but I need to continue my remarks, because I want to make the point that it is important for us to learn what has and has not worked in the UK, as well as learning from abroad.

The arguments in favour of legislating to enable rural communities to recruit and retain international recruits more easily are well intentioned, but could risk placing international recruits in a particularly vulnerable position, especially at a time when, as has been mentioned, we are looking to protect workers against exploitive practices in the care and fishing sectors and elsewhere in the economy. Previously suggested schemes for devolved migration controls would restrict their movement and rights. However, immigration is a national system, not a local one, and although we have routes and flexibilities in our immigration system, a range of issues have contributed to depopulation—a point that has been raised in this very effective debate—so we need a much more integrated strategy across Government and with the devolved Administrations. That is why it is important that it is taken further.

On housing, the Government have set out an overhaul of the planning system, and we have introduced new mandatory housing targets. We are looking at prioritising brownfield sites, and it is a key mission of ours to build 1.5 million affordable homes across the country. That is essential for the reasons that we have talked about, including stability for families and for our local economies.

I mentioned the need for a coherent link between our labour market and migration. Since the new Government came in, we have been working to establish a framework in which the Migration Advisory Committee, Skills England, the Industrial Strategy Council and the Department for Work and Pensions will work together to address the issues facing the UK labour market, including skills gaps—

Ben Lake: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Seema Malhotra: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman, but I may answer his question with my next point.

Those bodies will also look at pay and conditions, economic activity and the role that migration can play in supporting that. In order to deliver on the Government's missions, we need to tackle these challenges in all parts of the United Kingdom. The bodies must work closely with our devolved Governments, our combined authorities and local government to address these matters.

Ben Lake: The Minister has gone halfway to addressing the point that I wanted to raise. Australia, which has a federal system, operates a single immigration system, but the territories and states can nominate key critical

shortage occupations to encourage and boost them. In her discussions with the devolved Administrations, will she bear in mind the experience of Australia and see whether its approach can be brought into the UK system?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I was pleased to visit Australia very briefly in May to talk about the work that is being done on skills there. I think it would help him to know that we have announced a new council of the nations and regions, and we are starting the process of establishing local growth plans and encouraging local authorities to take on more devolved power. He may want to contribute to some of those discussions.

I do not wish to test your patience, Ms Vaz, so I will conclude.

Pete Wishart: Just before she does, will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: I need to conclude in a couple of minutes.

A point was raised about the English language. The English language requirement is fundamental to successful integration into British society, as it helps visa holders to access services, participate in community life and work. Workers who do not have a good command of English are likely to be more vulnerable to exploitation and less able to understand their rights. The level that we have set is B1 on the common European framework of reference for languages: lower intermediate English, which is more of a functional understanding. But there are gaps and we have more to do, beyond what we inherited.

On the broader point about depopulation, there are many ways in which the previous Government's levelling-up agenda did not integrate and did not have a strategy for tackling all these issues together. That is why the work that we are doing across the country on devolution is an important part of how we move forward.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar again for securing this debate. I have heard and am grateful for the points that he and other Members have made. As I have made clear, the Government will work to continue to understand the issues that Members face in greater detail and will consider how best to work collectively to address them. We must and will remain open to international skills and talent, but I suggest that immigration is not the solution to depopulation, nor must it be used as an alternative to the important job of tackling skills and labour market failures here in the UK, around which we have set out a new approach.

3.54 pm

Torcuil Crichton: I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and other right hon. and hon. Members who contributed to this debate. It was not bad for a birthday party—it turned out quite well.

I particularly welcome the Minister's suggestion of a reset of the thinking on immigration and the hint she gave of a more integrated strategy across Government, involving DEFRA, Seafish and the Home Office working together on the fishing visa issues that we raised. I also welcome her suggestions about the council of the nations and regions and about more devolved and sophisticated approaches to immigration. What she says is true: the problem of depopulation is a multiheaded hydra, as the

hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) put it, and responsibility for it does not lie at the Minister's door, but some of the solutions can come from this place and other Governments and local authorities working together.

I thank all Members for their contributions, which were lyrically encapsulated by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He spoke very movingly about sense of place, belonging and community, which I think is what we all want to retain when we talk about depopulation.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) talked about the drift from villages into towns. I warn them from my own experience in Na h-Eileanan an Iar that it is then only one more step on to the ferry, on to the mainland and out of the constituency.

Housing and jobs were highlighted by the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway and my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris), who is my Westminster Hall tag-team buddy—we seem to be in every debate together! These are the solutions. No jobs means no people. No people, in the case of my constituency, means no language, culture or sense of belonging.

The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway spoke about the necessity of a multi-agency solution. There was understandable tension between him and the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), who brought a great deal of expertise and knowledge gleaned from his chairmanship of the Scottish Affairs Committee. We thank him for that, as the chairmanship passes on.

There is understandable tension over the idea of a separate Scottish visa. I think the solution lies in an integrated visa and perhaps in more sophisticated, more regional and more local visa requirements. After all, my phone knows exactly where I am, my bank knows exactly where I am and most of the time my online shopping cart knows where I am, so why cannot the Government know where skilled migrants work, onshore and offshore, most of the time as well? It will require local, national and regional solutions. It also requires a great deal of care and sensitivity because of how host communities feel about migrant communities and the importance of retaining the traditional communities, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and many others spoke about.

In conclusion, Ms Vaz, I thank you for your chairmanship, I thank the Minister and shadow Minister for their responses and I thank all hon. Members who took part. I hope that we can move this debate on. We face a depopulation crisis on the edge of Europe, but here at the centre of power, the lights on the dashboard should be on as well. We should start addressing these issues now, before they become structural problems that affect the entire economy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered depopulation in rural areas.

Oswestry to Gobowen Railway Line

4 pm

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I will call Helen Morgan to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Oswestry to Gobowen railway line.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. This is an important subject for my constituents in the lovely town of Oswestry and the nearby village of Gobowen. Oswestry has a population of approximately 17,000 people. It is the second largest town in Shropshire and is of huge importance to the border region, but economic potential there is being stunted by poor public transport, which plagues the whole of Shropshire.

People who live in Oswestry are forced to rely on a bus or car to get to Gobowen railway station just up the road to access connections to larger economic centres, such as Shrewsbury, Liverpool or Manchester. What about someone who does not have a car and works in Chester? They will need to leave home by 7 am to get to the office for 9 o'clock—a journey that takes about 45 minutes in a car. Someone travelling further afield and returning late would need to get a taxi back from the station because the buses do not run outside regular hours, and that is if they can track down a taxi, which is another problem for another debate.

Oswestry was once a proud railway town. The railway station was on the main line of the Cambrian railway and, at one stage, it housed the headquarters of the Cambrian Railways Company. Unfortunately, it was a victim of the Beeching cuts, and there has been no connection to the main line from Oswestry since 1966. That is why the news that the restoring your railway fund would be used to reopen the line between Gobowen and Oswestry was so well received locally; and why the news that the Government wanted to scrap the funding, without even examining the new business case, has been such a huge disappointment. From healthcare and high streets to the environment and the economy, I cannot overstate what a transformational impact reopening the line would have on our area.

Poor public transport removes opportunity. It hinders young people, limiting their options for further and higher education and restricting their access to culture and leisure. In short, barriers to mobility are barriers to social mobility. During a recent visit to the jobcentre in Oswestry, the brilliant staff there told me that the No. 1 barrier to people accessing work is poor public transport. Meanwhile, I have spoken to businesses in Oswestry that have reported real difficulties in recruiting. They need to be able to attract people to work from a much wider area than Oswestry and not just those who have access to a private car. That means we are in the ridiculous situation where employers cannot recruit and jobseekers cannot find jobs to match their skills because of the same problem of poor public transport.

Let us take the outstanding Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt orthopaedic hospital near Gobowen: it has such a fine reputation that it has no trouble attracting high-quality staff, but the problem is that it cannot get people to and

[*Helen Morgan*]

from their shifts early and late because there is no public transport, so if they do not have a car, the job will not work for them. Reopening the line would include a halt at the hospital. That would help to swell staff numbers and ease access for patients, many of whom are elderly, do not have access to a car and have to rely on the good will of friends to get to appointments on time. The hospital is a national resource: people come from across the country to access the excellent care there, including from the veterans' centre, and railway access for them would be a huge bonus.

It is not just me who thinks that this is a great project. Feedback from the Department for Transport on the strategic outline business case acknowledged the importance of all of this:

"Oswestry is the second largest employment area in Shropshire, and unemployment in Oswestry is higher than the average in Shropshire. Productivity—the ability to match jobs with labour across North Shropshire—is a particularly pertinent issue. The growth in vacancies has been significant in Oswestry and Gobowen in recent years, which is exacerbated by the low population density and ageing populations of these areas."

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that many railway reopenings in the last 20 years have seen significantly higher use than expected? They include the Ebbw Vale line, which achieved year four ridership by the end of year one, Larkhall in Scotland, where demand was 26% higher than forecast, and the Borders railway, which saw a doubling of demand in the first month, compared with plan, and extra coaches and car parking needed.

Helen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his really good intervention. It is true that we tend to underestimate the passenger numbers on the newly reopened lines, and the benefits are probably in excess of the business cases that have supported them. I will come to further developments on this line later, so I am grateful to him for making that point.

Public transport is critical to the issue of productivity, growth and matching jobs with people who want to do them, so this line will be really important for job creation, education opportunities and economic growth in a rural area that has huge potential but is currently not meeting that potential. It will also be a huge boost to the regeneration of Oswestry's beautiful and historic town centre. Oswestry already boasts a large number of independent shops and a relatively low number of vacant units. On the border between England and Wales, the town has a rich cultural history, a large number of native Welsh speakers and the potential to really thrive in the future.

The area surrounding the station is planned to become a transport hub for the town, and the listed station building is undergoing works to ensure that it is structurally sound and fit for the future, but it will need tenants inside it. A fully operating station has the potential to unlock private investment in the area, to regenerate this important transport gateway to Oswestry, only a few minutes' walk from the centre of town, and to provide crucial facilities, such as public toilets and a café, that would make connecting bus services into the rural area beyond much more viable. One of the big issues that local bus providers have with providing services in the

area is that there is not a public toilet for their drivers to use when they stop over. That really hinders the ability for them to provide a decent bus service.

People who live in Oswestry are largely dependent on their car. Linking local bus and rail services will reduce congestion and emissions and open a world of opportunity for those who, for whatever reason, are unable to access a car or drive one. As I said, it is not just me who thinks the reopening is a good idea. The DFT's feedback on the strategic outline business case was extremely positive, saying that it was a "strong strategic case", that the "proposal aligns to various local plans over the past decade", and that the

"appraisal outputs presented in the economic case show that all options yield 'Very High and Financially Positive' value for money".

Crucially, the project is expected to bring in more cash than it would cost to set up. That clear value for money is in stark contrast to the three other restoring your railway schemes approved by the previous Government last October, which were judged to offer poor value for money at best. It was the strong business case that persuaded the DFT to commit to funding the project through to delivery. To come to my hon. Friend's point, when the business case was put together, it did not factor in the likelihood of the new Wrexham, Shropshire & Midlands Railway Company to provide a direct service on the line from Gobowen to London. If that service goes ahead—I very much hope that it will—the benefits for Oswestry will be even greater.

There has been some local opposition. Some people have argued that we could just run a shuttle bus, seemingly unaware that there already is one. But the shuttle bus has not worked: it does not run in the evening or early morning; it is frequently delayed by congestion on the A5, which has to be crossed to get to the station; and sometimes it just does not turn up at all. It certainly will not unlock the economic regeneration of the transport hub in the centre of Oswestry that the rail reopening promises. It is also really expensive to travel by bus and train, because people need two different tickets. Perhaps most importantly, whether it is for an urgent appointment at the orthopaedic hospital or an overnight shift at nearby Derwen college, people cannot trust a bus that will not get them there on time.

I welcome this week's announcement that local authorities will be given the powers to franchise their own bus services. If that happens in Shropshire, we will see huge benefits across the whole of my constituency—for the many villages that have no service at all, and towns such as Market Drayton and Ellesmere, for which reconnection to the railway is desirable but not realistically possible. But we cannot pin our hopes on that. Given that the funding for all this brilliant new public transport remains unclear and uncommitted, it seems highly unlikely that Shropshire's Conservative-run council will take on the revenue strain of start-up bus services. The council forecasts that it will balance its books this year by using up all its reserves, unless it can find a further £38 million of cuts, which would be on top of £58 million last year and £30 million already delivered this year.

The ambition should also be to link rail and bus services, so that people can genuinely consider leaving their car at home because the alternative is reliable, convenient and affordable. The Oswestry to Gobowen line uses a railway line that is already there. It obviously

needs to be upgraded if it is to be usable once more, but because it has not been built over, there is space for a footpath or cycle path to go alongside. The benefits of active travel are well documented, and they could be exploited here if the scheme goes ahead.

The project has a capital cost of between £5 million and £15 million, and ongoing operating costs of £196,000 per annum. Critically, it is forecast to be cash-positive over the appraisal period. Local critics have highlighted the potential disruption caused by it crossing the A5, but it is important to emphasise that nobody is proposing to run a slow, steam heritage train over a major level crossing. The proposal involves very little disruption and many benefits. Indeed, it is difficult to see any justification for axing the project.

The Government have said that they want to grow the economy, improve education, clear NHS backlogs and clean up the environment, but they are potentially blocking a scheme that would help to achieve all those objectives. Shropshire is one of the worst-served counties in England for public transport, with only one bus route running on a Sunday in the whole county, and the loss of more bus miles since 2015 than any other county in England. There are huge barriers in place to realising Shropshire's potential, and the project would help to remove one of them. It would enable local businesses to find quality candidates for the vacancies that they cannot fill, it would remove a huge barrier for those without a car who are seeking work beyond the boundaries of their immediate area, and it would enable young people and those wanting to develop new skills to access a far greater range of educational provision.

It would also unlock investment and regeneration in an important regional town centre. We cannot regenerate growth, jobs, skills and investment if a town is isolated from the rest of its region. That is why the previous Government promised to fund the project, and why the new Government should, too. I urge the Minister to come to Oswestry to see the wonderful potential of this historic market town and the additional value that the railway would bring to it. She should urgently reconsider the decision to remove funding from this fantastic project.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing today's debate on the Oswestry to Gobowen project, and I thank her for the thoughtful and important points that she made both today and in her previous campaigning work on the issue. I have read her correspondence with my noble Friend the Minister for Rail and with previous Ministers in the Department.

I understand the hon. Lady's argument about the problems with connectivity between Oswestry and Gobowen, particularly for those who have no access to private vehicles or do not wish to drive. I appreciate the importance of good public transport connections in the area, including for patients, staff and visitors travelling to the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt orthopaedic hospital, whether from the local area or from further afield. We want to ensure that people can access the public services they need, and they should not need private transport to do so.

My Department is committed to putting transport at the heart of mission-driven government. We aim to support economic growth by transforming infrastructure so that it works for the whole country, and we aim to improve connectivity to promote social mobility, as the hon. Lady said, and tackle regional inequality, particularly in terms of access to healthcare, jobs and homes. She described the difficulties that her constituents face in reaching the places where they can obtain opportunities for work, wider opportunities for study and education, and, indeed, enjoy leisure and culture activities. That is why transport is so important—because of the opportunities that it opens up for people, including to improve their wellbeing.

However, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out in her speech to the House on 29 July, the Government have been forced to address the economic inheritance that we have been left by the last Government, which includes that £22 billion black hole in the country's finances this year alone. That includes £2.9 billion of transport projects that were committed to despite the last Government knowing, full well, that they were unaffordable. I completely understand that the announcement of the difficult decision to close the restoring your railway programme has caused disappointment. I assure the hon. Member that that decision was not taken lightly.

As the Chancellor set out, individual restoring your railway projects will be considered as part of preparations for the spending review and wider spending decisions for the Department. But as the hon. Member will know from her correspondence with my noble Friend the Minister for Rail, it will not be possible for all transport projects, particularly those not yet in delivery, to continue. I am afraid that that is the difficult reality of the position that we find ourselves in, and I wish that it was not so.

The restoring your railway programme attracted considerable interest when it was launched by the last Government in January 2020, and the Department for Transport received more than 140 individual applications for funding to help to support the development of early-stage business cases. I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) that new services can be very popular and successful; there is a real appetite in communities up and down the country for new public transport services, in order to better connect people to the places that they want and need to go to. At the close of the final funding round in September 2021, the programme was heavily oversubscribed.

In the case of the Oswestry to Gobowen project, the previous Government announced, under their Network North initiative, that the project would proceed to delivery, subject to successful business cases. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has previously set out, there was a clear gap between promised projects and the money available to deliver them. The previous Government should have been up-front and frank about this, and they absolutely were not.

I want, of course, to thank all hon. Members who sponsored and campaigned for individual former restoring your railway projects for their patience and efforts over the years. I completely appreciate the frustration expressed about the lack of news on next steps—and that is reflected in the hon. Member for North Shropshire's

[Lilian Greenwood]

previous correspondence with the Department under the previous Government—because, undoubtedly, it felt incredibly slow at times. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has ordered a review of the Department's capital spend portfolio. That will move quickly to produce recommendations about current and future schemes and end the uncertainty that the previous Government created.

We also need to be clear that this Government's approach to how transport projects can be funded is based on local leaders and local transport authorities knowing best what projects to pursue in order to further the needs of their constituents. It is absolutely crucial that local stakeholders work together to provide affordable and reliable services for the communities they serve, and that should include better integration between different modes of transport. The hon. Member highlighted the potential of an integrated transport hub and the desire for better walking and cycling provision, which of course would provide not only transport benefits but health and wellbeing benefits. I hope that her local authority can explore those options further.

The hon. Member made strong points about the quality—or rather, the lack of quality—of bus service provision in her area. As we both know, under the last Government thousands of bus services saw reduced frequency or were cut altogether, leaving many towns and villages without adequate, reliable and affordable public transport. We recognise that situation and are determined to do something about it.

I was really pleased to hear the hon. Member's welcome for the Government's pledge to deliver better bus services for passengers, which includes making franchising easier and quicker, removing the ideological ban on new municipal bus companies, and reforming funding for bus services to give more control and flexibility to local leaders to deliver their local priorities. I understand what she said about the Conservative-led county council and its appetite for such change, but I am sure that she and her constituents will make their point very clearly to those who seek to represent them at that level.

Helen Morgan: Bearing in mind that local councils are a hair's breadth away from issuing section 114 notices and are only likely to deliver statutory services

in their area, what kind of additional funding will be available from the Government for them to be able to franchise their own bus services? I ask that because it seems to me that it is all very well councils having the power to deliver such services, but unless they have the funding to do so, it will not bring about the results that we would like to see.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the hon. Member for her question and of course she is absolutely right to highlight the very difficult position that many local authorities find themselves in after 14 years of Conservative Governments. That is precisely why growing the economy and the ability to improve our public services is one of this Government's key missions. To achieve that, we need to make sure that the foundations are strong, and setting our economy on the right track is the first part of that process.

However, we will of course say more about support for transport as part of the spending review and we will work with local authorities to understand what is needed to improve and grow their bus networks, learning from their experiences and building on their successes to ensure that local networks can meet the needs of the communities who rely on them.

As we undertake vital reforms to the sector, including through the introduction of the Buses Bill, we will ensure that stakeholders are properly engaged with the proposals, and I look forward to the hon. Member participating in the debates about how we can do that as we go forward.

I thank the hon. Member again for securing this debate and offer her my support and that of my ministerial colleagues to work with her to improve the transport network in her constituency, and right across the country. As she recognised, transport is a vital enabler of jobs, opportunities and growth, and I am sure that we share the desire to see that for North Shropshire and indeed the whole country.

Question put and agreed to.

4.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

Financial Fraud and Economic Crime

4.30 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of financial fraud and economic crime.

It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank the House for allowing me to secure this debate. I also welcome the Minister to their place, and I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan), for attending.

I must start by declaring an interest. In my previous role before entering this place, I was head of fraud and compliance for a fintech firm, responsible for screening billions of dollars of transactions a year. When it comes to dealing with financial criminals, unfortunately I have seen it all. From the use of artificial intelligence—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. Apparently, there is an acoustic problem for everybody sitting in the front row. Could the hon. Gentleman move to the back as the mics are not working?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Always best to be a Back Bencher, Ms Vaz!

Mr Charters: May I continue, Ms Vaz?

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I am really sorry, but *Hansard* may not have picked up the earlier part of your speech, so could I ask you to start again, please? Thank you very much. You are doing a grand job for your first attempt.

Mr Charters: With apologies to right hon. and hon. Members who will be hearing the same thing, I will start again.

It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank the House for allowing me to secure this debate. I also welcome the Minister, and I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley, and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley, for attending.

I start by declaring an interest. In my previous role before entering this place, I was head of fraud and compliance for a fintech firm, responsible for screening billions of dollars of transactions a year. When it comes to dealing with financial criminals, unfortunately I have seen it all. From the use of artificial intelligence avatars to bypass biometric screening, to sophisticated shell companies and complex layering, to spearfishing and parasitically targeting legitimate companies to advanced cloning techniques, I cannot overemphasise the danger that fraud and financial crime now pose or the complex layers that exist behind it.

Fraud places an emotional burden on victims. It ruins lives. We all know that as MPs from our surgeries. I will touch on a case that I heard about recently. The criminal aspect of fraud is not just about hobbyists in basements; we are increasingly talking about nation states who in some cases are working alongside advanced organised crime groups that are taking the mantle. They are often experienced professionals who work to circumvent the systems we use. Criminals are smart and frequently shift their *modus operandi* to get around our systems.

Although the responsibility to be smarter and take that proverbial step ahead falls to Government and firms, the situation is more complex than that. The risks are real, and if scams continue to increase exponentially we will have a dangerous environment for businesses. We will have more constituents telling more stories about how they have fallen victim to fraud, and the national cost could become so undesirable that we may well become the worst developed country globally per capita when it comes to fraud rates. If we do not act, there is a risk that fraud and economic crime could suffocate growth.

We currently suffer from relatively weak national co-ordination in tackling fraud and economic crime, which is made more complex by the fact that the perpetrator is often not in the same geographical location as the victim. This can cause local police forces to deprioritise fraud reports, but if we can fix that, we may be able to fix the foundations. Although the online fraud charter introduced by the last Government was a positive step, it is non-statutory and voluntary. Nothing in the charter addresses the issue of compensating consumers who have been defrauded by content originating online. There are no penalties for non-compliance, and that must be thought through, but we can turn the page.

While this Government are in their early stages, I believe it is time to smell the coffee and grasp the nettle—whichever analogy hon. Members prefer—so that we can become a world leader in anti-fraud and protecting consumers and businesses, and become a country where companies want to do business and will not be ripped off. The prize is that our fintech, regtech and financial services sector will want to become ever more internationally competitive if we truly get to the heart of fraud and economic crime.

Before I go any further on how we can make some fixes, I will quantify the challenges that we face. Fraud accounts for more than 40% of crime in the UK but receives only 1% of police resources. That statistic is chilling, but wait until we hear the cost of payments fraud to the UK economy: it is roughly £1.2 billion. There is also a cost to individuals. I have a constituent who attended an advice surgery just this weekend and told me that they had lost life savings, to the tune of a five-figure sum. Fraud often hurts the most vulnerable, either those on low incomes or those with lower tech proficiency, who are also more likely to fall victim.

However, more than three quarters of authorised push payment fraud originates online. Research from Innovate Finance on fintech illustrates the challenge posed by online purchase scams. It found that Facebook Marketplace represented a staggering 51% of all fraud cases for the firm in question. After I secured this debate, a main UK bank got in touch with me outlining similar statistics in which a huge part of the fraud that it encountered originated from Facebook Marketplace, so we must get better at stopping fraud at the source. There are some positives to consider: tackling payment fraud could contribute £6 billion to the UK's GDP over five years, which would really strengthen our economy.

A smorgasbord of issues are causing our downfall, so I will outline seven positive steps to begin to tackle fraud and economic crime. They come from meetings that I have had with trade bodies, consumer groups, banks and payment providers and from many industry reports. We can become a world leader in anti-fraud

[Mr Charters]

and economic crime. Little investment is needed from the Government, but a new regulatory apparatus and new levels of co-ordination are needed. I stand as a firm friend to the Minister and the Government in making that change happen, so I will outline some positive suggestions for tackling fraud.

Recommendation 1 is that the new Government should set an anti-fraud target. In June 2023, the previous Government published their fraud strategy, saying that they would cut fraud by 10% on 2019 levels by December 2024. They achieved that, but the target was not ambitious enough and, importantly, excluded businesses, so the Government should commit to a fraud target that is genuinely ambitious and do so in collaboration with business. I do not want to pick an arbitrary number, because it is about focusing on action rather than aims, so one option is to set a target that we should have a lower fraud rate per capita than international peers—for example, an ambitious target that the per capita rate of fraud should be lower in the UK in five years' time than that in France, Germany and other countries.

Recommendation 2 is for the creation of a new national anti-fraud centre. We need a strong new anti-fraud centre to face the complex interdisciplinary challenges that fraud poses. Action Fraud has skilled individuals, but regrettably it is no longer fit for purpose. That is my view, and often the view of industry. We need to reform it, and that means a review of its shortfalls, as well as the ways in which we can build on some of its successes in receiving reports. During my career, I came across a case in which a UK business was scammed out of more than £200,000. It submitted dozens of pages of detail to Action Fraud, and did not even get a call back from the police.

We should look to Australia and create a national anti-fraud centre to drive forward the Government's fraud strategy with a clear vision and clear accountability. It could be part of the Serious Fraud Office or the National Crime Agency, or it could be its own entity, but it should be able to bring charges. The Australian Labour Government launched a cutting-edge national anti-scam centre in 2023. They rightly recognised the scale of the challenge, and took it on directly. The first action was to tackle investment scams, before disrupting criminal gangs who were advertising non-existent jobs. It is time to refresh the ecosystem that will fight fraud for decades to come, with a strong new national anti-fraud centre at the heart of Government. That would join up the SFO, the Financial Conduct Authority, Action Fraud, the NCA, the Met police, the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau and local police forces, and it would do that with a central leadership, because our institutions are currently too fragmented to properly deal with fraud.

Recommendation 3 is that this Government should replicate the previous Government's appointment of an anti-fraud champion in Parliament. The appointment of an anti-fraud champion would ensure better co-ordination across Departments and could be a precursor to a new national anti-fraud centre.

Recommendation 4 is that we should support data sharing between sectors. We have to create a framework to enable data sharing between social media companies and payment participants. If information can be shared between the two, there is an opportunity to stop transactions

at the source. Because of GDPR, there is no clear mechanism for data collaboration, but if we can find a way to create a precedent, that would provide regulatory certainty.

Recommendation 5 is to create a new framework that requires banks to share payment data. If we are to make progress, we need to find a way for banks to work collaboratively on payment data sharing. I regularly meet banks and industry leaders who are receptive to that recommendation.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): I declare an interest: prior to entering Parliament, I worked at Pay.UK, the payment system operator for the UK. I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. He raises an important point, not just about the cost of fraud to people and businesses, but about data sharing across banks. Does he agree that a modernised payment system might allow us to collect more data, which could be used across the industry to identify, tackle and prevent fraud at the source, saving businesses and customers lots of money in the future?

Mr Charters: It is brilliant to have Members such as my hon. Friend, with his experience at Pay.UK, in this place, and I completely agree about the renewal of the payments architecture. If it had risk analysis and artificial intelligence monitoring at its heart, we could detect payments fraud at the very centre, which could save banks billions of pounds in compensation and be a better result for consumers.

Industry innovations such as “money mule insights” prove that the latest data analytics allow for much more sophisticated ways of targeting of criminals via data sharing between payment providers. Lloyds Bank got in touch with me this week to highlight that its mule-hunting team had identified a 44% increase in money mules over the past year. Data sharing between banks is critical in targeting money mules. At present, banks file suspicious activity reports, but they are often unable to share suspicious payment transaction data with each other. If they did, there would be an opportunity to harness suspicious payment data to detect and block fraudulent and criminal transactions in real time. I now believe that we have an unmatched opportunity to rebuild fraud and economic crime analysis with the renewal of faster payments and a new payments architecture. In conclusion on this recommendation, much greater payments data sharing is crucial if we want to stop fraudulent transactions from being processed.

Let me turn to recommendation 6, on the obligations on social media companies. The Government could introduce a shared responsibility and liability for social media and telecommunications firms to tackle fraud origination and incentivise them to invest to prevent fraud. A new anti-fraud centre could govern regulatory powers over social media companies and impose penalties or issue guidance to reduce fraud. That would tackle the things we heard about earlier, such as fraud originating from Facebook Marketplace.

I turn to my final recommendation: to expand the Financial Conduct Authority's powers over the Post Office, which is the biggest cash provider in the country, through its everyday banking service, and has always played an integral role in providing access to cash for the nation. That should continue. As banks close

their branches, the importance of the Post Office is growing. However, following the Horizon scandal, its reputation has been damaged. The Horizon system is still fundamentally being used today for the everyday banking service, which processes billions in cash deposits and withdrawals each and every month. To give banks and consumers confidence in the Post Office, the FCA should gain direct regulatory oversight of the everyday banking service. That is critical for resilience and managing financial crime risks. I can confirm that I am in the process of writing to the FCA's CEO to encourage them to provide an update on their work on money laundering via the Post Office.

In conclusion, those are seven recommendations that I would like to implement. I think they would have a huge impact on our ability to better target fraud and economic crime. I will write to the Government outlining the recommendations, which are the culmination of meetings across industry, and I stand willing to work closely with them on implementing them, should they be interested in doing so. I look forward to hearing from colleagues across the House in the debate and to working constructively with Government and other hon. Members to tackle fraud. It is crucial we do that for financial credibility, for our constituents and for our country.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Member for his assistance. I expect to take the first of the Opposition spokespersons at 5.08 pm. They will have five minutes each and the Minister will have 10 minutes. If hon. Members wish to speak, they should bob.

4.47 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) on securing this massively important debate. This is a subject that I have been more than aware of throughout my entire professional career. In the light of that, I also declare an interest: I have been working in the financial services industry for many years.

According to the UK fraud costs measurement committee, the level of fraud in the UK directly affecting consumers in 2023 was estimated to be a staggering £8 billion. The former Conservative Government did not prioritise economic crime sufficiently, according to the Treasury Committee. Now, it is up to the new Government to take action to improve the supervisory system and combat economic crime, which is growing. Improvements need to be made to assess the extent of economic crime and fraud in the UK—it is telling that there are no clear measures of the true impact of fraud on individuals, businesses and the economy. Some of my hon. Friend's suggestions will help us to get a real understanding of the impact.

A wide range of crimes fall under the category of fraud and economic crime, and the sums of money involved range from small to huge. To give a personal example, only last month in my constituency in Southend, some of my constituents were left feeling tricked, over—believe it or not—an inflatable fun day. They bought tickets in good faith, but it was a fictitious event. Some parents were left out of pocket after buying a number of the £15 tickets online, and clearly children were left very upset. Those sorts of things should not happen, but it is one small example of how fraud can impact families on a day-to-day basis.

The police force in my county of Essex has a serious economic crime unit, which seized £2 million-worth of assets and made 15 arrests in February alone after an intensive, month-long investigation. The squad investigates offences including romance scams, online marketplace scams, rogue traders, investment fraud, bribery and corruption.

As my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer mentioned, fraud can have a devastating impact on individuals and their families, affecting not only their finances but their wellbeing, leaving them feeling manipulated and deceived. Of course, there is the long-term impact on their finances, which has a knock-on impact on the economy, as people no longer have their hard-earned savings to spend on much-needed goods and services, or just on enjoying themselves.

As I have mentioned, my background before coming to this place was in financial services, most recently in mortgages. With your indulgence, Ms Vaz, I will share a different type of fraud, where the consumer often unwittingly targets the lender. It is not usually out of malice, but done with the desire of achieving their housing dream, which for many can be seen as out of reach due to loan-to-income restrictions and high deposit requirements. Mortgage fraud can include overvaluing properties, overstating a salary or income, concealing a second mortgage from the primary lender or mis-stating the use of a property to either benefit from a more preferential rate of interest or to borrow more than the lender assesses that a client can afford.

The UK's leading fraud prevention service, Cifas, revealed in January 2024 that one in six of UK adults—16%—admitted that they or somebody they knew had misled mortgage companies about their annual salary in order to buy their home. I agree with Cifas that more needs to be done to raise awareness of how serious a crime mortgage fraud can be. Not being honest about one's income, debt history, employment or the value of the property is a serious matter. Being caught will have long-term effects on one's ability to gain a mortgage, and could have other financial consequences.

I call on the Minister and the new Government to work with the relevant partners and stakeholders to strengthen and expand the fraud strategy that was announced in May 2023 to combat the ever-growing and more sophisticated fraudulent schemes that target individual consumers. Equally, awareness needs to be raised among consumers about the consequences of them falling unexpectedly into the world of fraud when applying for finance, especially mortgages. I would like to see collaboration between banks and other lenders, the regulator and the Government, to drive awareness of mortgage fraud through misrepresentation. That, of course, would be complemented by the Government's plans to make the dream of home ownership more accessible for all.

4.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the second time today, Ms Vaz.

I thank the hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) for setting the scene so well. One of the great things about debates with new Members is that they bring their expertise, knowledge and interests in various subject

[Jim Shannon]

matters to our debates, which enriches the House greatly. I very much look forward to contributions from other hon. Members when the time comes.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. He and I have been friends a long time while on the Opposition side of the Chamber, as it was. I am pleased to see him in a place that is a well-deserved honour for him. I am also pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), in his place.

I am pleased to speak in this debate in the short time that we have. I have heard of countless economic crime cases, including scams and frauds. Constituents must be aware of the dangers, so it is vital to give some background in discussion of such matters. When I speak, I always bring in a Northern Ireland perspective, and I wish that I could tell the hon. Member for York Outer that things in Northern Ireland are better, but they are not. When he hears the figures, he will probably be shocked at just how bad they are.

Last year, according to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, £23.1 million was lost to fraud over 13 months in Northern Ireland. Between December 2022 and January 2024, there were some 5,412 reports of fraud, with lost sums ranging from £5,000 up to almost—unfortunately—£250,000. I just cannot comprehend how that can happen, but it happened. Those sums were taken by criminals from people's bank accounts. The figures give an idea of where the scams are and where we need to focus. In 2023 alone, there were 3,400 cases of economic fraud. In many such cases, frauds and scams are committed at a distance through social media, online websites, phone calls and text messages.

I will probably age myself by saying this, but I remember getting a message from a general in Nigeria. My goodness! Right away, my hackles were up, because I do not know any generals in Nigeria. When I was told that I had won \$100,000 or whatever it was, I knew I could not have done, because I did not enter any competition, and I had no friends or relatives out there. It was clearly a scam, but they claimed that if I sent them my bank details, they would forward an astronomically large amount of money to me. The point I am making is that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't true. Someone turns up and says, "You have won this amount of money, just send me your bank details and we will transfer the money to you." I am not smarter than anyone else—I do not profess to be and am not—but whenever someone comes along with something that is just that good, it cannot be good, so beware.

I want to give the example of an elderly lady who came to see me—I speak for the elderly and the vulnerable as my focus for the short time I have. Just last week, in my office I dealt with an issue where a lady clicked a link on Facebook to lodge money in an online pot to gain interest over a period of time. Her details were given and the £276 immediately taken from her account. The dangers of social media are broad enough, and online fraud and scamming seem to be at a peak. Unfortunately, I see that regularly in my office. We advised her immediately to put a block on her card and to contact the local PSNI to make a report. But she is only one example, unfortunately, of what so many people face on a daily basis, every week in my constituency.

I am just looking up something from Danske Bank, which I belong to. It sends such things regularly, as a wee warning perhaps, and a caution:

"We want to remind you that we are all at risk of fraud, even if you are scam savvy. Bank impersonation scams are on the rise"

—which the hon. Member for York Outer referred to—"but remember, we will never call you to ask for log-on details, PIN numbers or passcodes, including those we send by text."

My bank sends that to me every month or every six weeks. If banks did that as a reminder to people to keep it fresh in their minds, it would be very helpful.

The UK economic crime team is responsible for leading the industry's fight against economic crime, but more needs to be done to support those who are not perhaps tech-savvy, which I profess that I am not: I sometimes do not understand the dangers that are out there. The online fraud steering group has numerous aims in tackling economic crime, including making the UK look like the least attractive place to commit such crimes, but they still happen with a regularity that tells us that that is not the case. Whether internally in the UK, or internationally where foreign actors interfere, we need to ensure that our constituents are protected and, most importantly, aware.

The PSNI back home in Northern Ireland has a crime prevention officer who specifically visits elderly and vulnerable people, including groups who meet every week. They go and talk to them and give them information. I would suggest that that could be done with greater regularity to remind people, because people do need to be reminded on a regular basis.

I will finish now because I am conscious that others want to speak. In terms of money laundering, we have seen terrible examples in Northern Ireland where, to be fair, the PSNI in conjunction with other police forces across the United Kingdom and further afield have been able to get on top of it, but it still happens. There are scams and fraud, so there is more work to be done. I look to the Minister with great respect. I know he will come back with the answers that will perhaps encourage us and give us some hope. I look to him for guidance on his updated plans to make our economic system run smoothly—it has to—and ensure that across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland we have a good structure for dealing with the issues and also the means to do so.

5 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) for securing this important debate and for shining a light on an issue that has been neglected for far too long.

A growing concern facing my constituents in Wolverhampton North East is the rise of fraud, particularly scams perpetrated from overseas. We often hear calls for more arrests and prosecutions of the criminals, and I fully support that. However, we also need to acknowledge that a significant and increasing number of these fraudsters are not operating from within the UK. Instead they are part of international fraud rings based in hotspots such as India, the Philippines, South Africa, Brazil and parts of eastern Europe.

With advanced technology we have machines capable of making thousands of calls or sending thousands of texts per minute. The criminals can easily target people

here in Britain. Our country unfortunately is a prime target for such activity. We do much of our shopping and banking online, and the widespread use of the English language makes it easier for fraudsters abroad to deceive and manipulate their victims here.

The real question is what we do about this. I suggest that when we negotiate trade deals with countries where such criminal activity is prominent, we push for stronger co-operation in fighting fraud. Let us make fraud prevention part of the agreements, giving the countries a real incentive to work with us to tackle the issue. Without such action, fraud will continue to grow, impacting more and more families in places like Wolverhampton North East. It is time we took strong, global, co-ordinated action to protect our residents from the scourge of international fraud.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call the spokesperson for the Lib Dems, Chris Coghlan.

5.3 pm

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, in this brilliant and necessary debate. I commend the hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) for securing this debate on financial fraud and economic crime and for his professional expertise in this area. I should declare an interest: I spent 11 years working in financial services and also worked in the Foreign Office on counter-terrorism, so I know how vital this debate is.

The hon. Member for York Outer made really interesting points in his seven proposals, particularly on the link between tackling fraud and economic growth and his call for a national anti-fraud centre based on the Australian model. The Liberal Democrats called for an online crime agency in our manifesto, so it is something we would be interested in supporting.

We need a dedicated body to tackle online crimes such as personal fraud; our police forces are overwhelmed. Local forces lack the specialist skills required to combat the complexity of modern online crime. Although the National Crime Agency focuses on the most serious offences, we need an agency specifically equipped to deal with online fraud.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Gentleman for making that reference to the NCA. I understand that just last week the NCA issued its first unexplained wealth order in Northern Ireland against a man suspected of involvement in serious organised crime. If anyone is living above their means, there should be questions about where the money is coming from. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that there perhaps needs to be more emphasis on that as well?

Chris Coghlan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I agree that there should be more emphasis on that area. I also thought that the hon. Member for York Outer made a really interesting point about the lack of FCA regulation of the Post Office, and I agree that that appears to be a gap in our existing regulatory framework.

We heard some really moving personal accounts about the cost of these online scams in the speech made by the hon. Member for Southend West and Leigh

(David Burton-Sampson). We are also calling for the naming and shaming of the banks that have the worst records on preventing fraud and reimbursing victims. They should be held accountable. Financial institutions have a duty to protect their customers and we need to call them out when they do not.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the power of social media scams, and we are also calling for a public awareness campaign. We need to empower everyone to spot, avoid and report fraud and scams. But let me be clear: the onus should not be on individuals to prevent fraud. Victims should never be blamed for falling prey to sophisticated scams. This issue is about building a society that protects citizens and not one that burdens them with responsibilities that should lie with institutions.

As we have heard, the numbers involved are staggering, both in terms of the billions of pounds that have been lost to fraud and the sheer volume of crime that is now online. Despite those facts, however, the previous Government's response was lacklustre. I was moved by the hon. Member for York Outer's point that 40% of crime is fraud, including online fraud, yet only 1% of police resources is dedicated to tackling fraud. The previous Government treated fraud with such little seriousness that they did not include it in crime statistics. Will the Minister commit to including fraud in crime statistics to demonstrate the new Government's seriousness about this issue?

The Government must also recognise that economic crime poses a significant threat to our democracy. For too long, the previous Government allowed oligarchs to treat the UK as their personal playground, so that they could funnel dirty money into our economy and undermine our values. The Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to begin seizing frozen Russian assets and to use the proceeds to support Ukraine; to close loopholes in economic crime legislation, which allow associates of authoritarian regimes, such as Putin's cronies, to funnel corrupt funds into our country; and to properly resource the NCA to ensure that it has the tools to tackle complex financial crimes. We are also calling for an audit of UK-based assets owned by officials from countries with troubling human rights records, such as China and Iran, to ensure that we are not enabling regimes that abuse their own citizens.

As a former counter-terrorism officer, I know how important cross-border co-operation is. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) really brought out the importance of such co-operation when she made the point that the people conducting these scams are not necessarily all in the same geographical location.

I also know the damage that Brexit caused to our cross-border co-operation on serious and online crime. Will the Minister commit to improving co-operation with our European allies and with other countries more widely on financial fraud and economic crime?

I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the debate. It was a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair for this debate, Ms Vaz, and I again thank the hon. Member for York Outer for securing it.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call the shadow Minister, who was appointed this morning, to speak.

5.9 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and to be able to respond to this debate on behalf of the Opposition as a newly appointed shadow Home Office Minister, as of this morning.

I congratulate the hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) on securing this debate and thank him for giving us the chance to discuss the serious issues that he outlined. Also, may I put on the record my commiserations to the constituent he mentioned, whom he saw at his surgery last week, for the serious issues that she has faced? I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for as usual showing his knowledge of yet another subject.

Many of us will have been, or know someone who has been, a victim of financial fraud. The hon. Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson) outlined the various possible targets, from the pensioner who is tricked into giving away their savings by a rogue cold call, to an unsuspecting parent receiving a scam text purportedly from their child asking for money. All ages and sections of society are at risk.

As these criminal schemes become more sophisticated, nobody is immune. We have seen that bank accounts can be emptied in minutes and life savings lost. In 2021, victims reported losing £2.35 billion to fraudsters and scammers. We also know from statistics that it is elderly and vulnerable people who are most susceptible to scams and fraud. To the vile criminals who target them, they are seen as a means to enrichment and to profit from their misery. It is our duty to protect them.

In an astonishing statistic, Home Office figures indicate that the social and economic cost to the UK from economic crime is £8.4 billion a year. Those costs directly impact the lives and livelihoods of millions of citizens, and further exacerbate social and economic pressures. I look forward to hearing reassurances from the Minister, whom I welcome to his role, on how he will continue to make the progress delivered by the previous Government.

We also know, as the hon. Member for York Outer mentioned, that it is not just individuals who are targeted. In a time of increasing global instability, adversaries are constantly probing for weaknesses in our digital financial infrastructure, from cyber-attacks aimed at crippling software, to ransomware attempts to extort money. Our systems are constantly having to update and evolve to keep ahead in a technological arms race. I was interested to hear recommendation 1 in the hon. Gentleman's speech. I would press the Minister to look seriously at that proposal, which would get support from the Opposition, as he outlines his proposals.

The previous Government showed leadership in this area. They introduced a reporting mechanism that was bolstered by replacing Action Fraud with a state-of-the-art system for victims to report fraud, while a new national fraud squad, with more than 400 new specialist investigators, made fraud a priority for the police. Will the Minister look seriously at the proposal outlined by the hon. Member for York Outer for a new national fraud centre? That is an interesting proposal and I would like to know whether the Government would look at that, as well as at an anti-fraud tsar who would be a champion in this place, to whom hon. Members can go. I know the

Minister is a champion and has many responsibilities. We could never go without another champion in this Parliament.

If we take a new approach, we can make a great deal of progress on the 13% reduction in fraud that we saw under the previous Government; indeed we can go further. The need to tackle this growing threat is clear. The economic crime plan, brought forward by the previous Government, for the first time introduced a more effective and joint way of working across various organisations, including law enforcement, supervisory agencies and the private sector, through the landmark Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023. Stronger tools were put in place to help us fight economic crime. We are all alive to the threats affecting our national security, with our economy being a prime target for rogue forces. The strengthening of our defences by widening our ability to freeze assets and to prevent abuses of our open economy proved to be key after Russia invaded Ukraine, and we must continue to strengthen our economic defence in the wake of rogue foreign entities.

Finally, we have seen the new Government make lofty statements about their desire to get tough on fraud, with a new expanded fraud strategy, which I welcome. Given recent policy decisions by the Government, going against promises and commitments in other areas made during the general election, I hope that this is not an area where we will let vulnerable people down. I hope that the Government deliver on those promises. We all agree on the need to tackle this issue. It is to be hoped that this Government are as committed and passionate as the previous one about dealing with this issue, so that we can make progress together. The Minister will have the Opposition's support in tackling this issue.

5.14 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) on securing this debate on what is—there has been a clear consensus about this—a very important matter. I often find myself in agreement with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—perhaps too regularly—but I completely agreed with what he said about the expertise that we have seen among new Members. I think we have seen that very clearly today, not least from my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer because it came through loud and clear from his speech that he has a strong knowledge and comprehensive understanding of these issues. I think that, collectively, we owe him a debt of gratitude for bringing them to our attention this afternoon. I am also grateful to all those other hon. Members who have contributed to what has genuinely been a very sensible and constructive debate.

I am genuinely grateful to both the Opposition Front Benchers for their sensible contributions. I welcome the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan). He comes to this place with a lot of hugely relevant and credible experience, and I look forward to working closely with him. He made a specific point—an entirely reasonable challenge—about the importance of seeking to work closely with allies in Europe. I can absolutely give him that assurance. We understand the importance of doing so, and we are on the case with that.

I also welcome the shadow Immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), to his post. On behalf of the Department, I can genuinely say that we wish him well, and that we look forward to working closely with him. I have had quite a busy day, but I am sure that he has had quite a busy one as well in preparing for this debate. As he always does, he made a number of sensible and reasonable points, and I am happy to confirm to him the commitment and the priority that we attach to these important matters. I hope very much that we can work closely together as we move forward.

Based on the contributions that we have had in today's debate, there is a clear consensus that economic crime and fraud are pernicious threats that ruin lives and damage our prosperity. They must be dealt with as a priority. I want to take the opportunity today to say something about the Government's approach, as I seek to respond to the many excellent points that hon. Members have raised.

Economic crime threatens our national security and the prosperity of the UK. It covers a broad range of illicit activity, including fraud, money laundering, kleptocracy and corruption. It drives serious organised crime, which has a hugely damaging and corrosive impact, and causes immense harm to the public—to all our constituents. It affects the financial and emotional wellbeing of victims and the interests of legitimate businesses, and undermines our international reputation.

According to the crime survey for England and Wales for the year ending March 2024, fraud against individuals accounts for 36% of crime, so it is by far the most common offence. That is a startling statistic, which underlines the scale of the threat and the challenge, but it does not capture the full horror of the misery and devastation that lies behind the numbers—the stories of life savings snatched, of confidence shattered, of emotional distress.

We know that nobody is safe from fraud; it can affect anyone, with one in 18 people becoming a victim of fraud in the year ending March 2024. Businesses are also under threat: the economic crime survey for 2020 estimated that one in five in the sectors surveyed had been victims of fraud in the previous three years. These figures are another striking illustration of the scale of the threat, and underline why it is so crucial that we eliminate any safe spaces for criminals to operate in.

I should note that the crime survey shows that fraud is down 10% on the previous year, which is encouraging, and I want to thank all those across Government, industry and law enforcement who work to turn the screw on fraudsters and criminals. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude for their important work. A lot of effort has gone into addressing these issues, and that is to be welcomed, but, to address the entirely reasonable point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson), we must now go further.

We know from experience that fraudsters are well organised. They are also opportunists and will try to perpetrate their crimes on anyone they can, including the most vulnerable in our society, which is especially callous. Given we are up against devious and resourceful criminals, we need to ensure that our approach is fit for purpose. My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer clearly has a very strong command of the subject matter,

which he has translated into a number of insightful recommendations. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley, rightly pressed me to ensure that we will take those seriously.

I hope my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer will understand if I stop short of making policy commitments at this stage and in this forum. That being said, his seven recommendations—the internal mail is clearly working in overdrive because the letter dropped just as he mentioned the seven recommendations—have clearly been very well thought through and are backed up by his considerable expertise. I give him the assurance that I will take them away and come back to him with a response as we continue to shape this Government's approach. Incidentally, I was particularly intrigued by suggestion No. 3 on the establishment of an anti-fraud champion. I wonder whether he had anyone in mind, but let's leave that hanging there for now.

Underlying any steps that the Government take, we will be steadfast in our determination to combat economic crime wherever and however it manifests itself. We are committed to working with key partners across the public sector, the private sector and law enforcement to reduce fraud and better protect the public and businesses.

Estimates suggest that around 80% of fraud has an online element, much of which originates from overseas, which was a point very well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge). Online platforms, as well as telecommunications services, are being exploited by fraudsters to commit their crimes. It is vital that we pull together with industry, regulators and consumer groups to consider what else can be done to close the gaps that criminals exploit.

The sector charter programme works to complement legislation and move in a more agile and targeted manner, and has improved collaboration with industry. It has enabled effective changes within sectors such as telecommunications, retail banking, tech and accountancy. We have seen telecommunications companies install spam shields, which have blocked over 1 billion text messages. The tech sector—I know my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer knows a lot about this—has introduced verification measures for marketplace sellers and advertisers to make sure people are who they say they are. Although we have seen strong action from companies, including via the sector charters, it is important to ensure that counter-fraud activity is prioritised. Recent legislation, such as the Online Safety Act 2023, will help to raise standards and best practice, but we remain open to the use of further legislation and regulation in the future, and that is a continuing conversation that we will want to have with my hon. Friend and with Members throughout the House.

There is still plenty more for Government and industry to do together, and I look forward to collaborating with our key partners in the coming months. We must also increase the disruption and prosecution of fraudsters. A national fraud squad of 400 new posts, led by the NCA's national economic crime centre and the City of London police, will target the most harmful fraudsters. This will transform the law enforcement response by taking a much more proactive and intelligence-led approach to disrupting the most serious fraudsters, both domestically and overseas.

[*Dan Jarvis*]

Another important element is public awareness. We need to ensure that people are alert to these crimes, and it is essential that we have the tools to protect people so that they have the confidence and trust to come forward and report cases where they have fallen victim to fraud. That is why we are working with the City of London police to create a new police “fraud protect network”, which will engage with local forces to provide consistent messaging and safeguarding advice to local communities. That is why there is a wealth of advice on how to spot and avoid fraud on our “Stop! Think Fraud” campaign website, although I note the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer about that.

As well as protecting individuals, the Government are committed to protecting businesses from fraud and other related crime such as ransomware. The Home Office supports a network of regional cyber-resilience centres to provide cyber-security advice and guidance to businesses across England and Wales.

We are also committed to improving economic crime legislation. The economic crime measures in last Session’s Criminal Justice Bill did not make the statute book before the general election was called. Since the election, the Government have been examining how best to progress action in a number of areas, including the reform of the criminal confiscation regime, the banning of SIM farms that can be used in fraudulent activity, accessing money in suspended accounts to further tackle economic crime, and improving corporate liability laws. We understand that those are important reforms to cut crime, but also that there will be others. We will set out our position in due course and, where necessary, introduce further legislation.

In closing, I thank all hon. Members attending for their contributions and once again thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer on securing the debate. We have covered a good deal of ground, all of it constructive and helpful. For all the statistics, policies and measures, it is the victims who we must always keep at the forefront of our minds. We must prevent more people and businesses suffering as a result of economic crime and fraud, and we must protect our

society and economy from those threats. As I have set out, this Government are committed to doing just that, and I look forward to working with colleagues across the House on this critical endeavour.

5.26 pm

Mr Charters: Thank you for chairing the debate, Ms Vaz. I am delighted that the House has been able to consider today’s motion. It is a matter of real importance and one that it is clear the Government will take seriously. I am grateful to the Minister for attending the debate, and to the shadow Minister and the Lib Dem Front Bencher for engaging, too. I am grateful to the Minister for considering my seven recommendations. The Members who have contributed are powerful advocates for their constituents. Many have experienced constituents coming to their surgeries and sharing harrowing stories of being scammed. I hope to work with some of the Members present on these issues over the months and years ahead.

I outlined in my maiden speech that under this Government there should be

“no safe harbour for fraudsters, no compromise in our pursuit of their schemes and”

—importantly—

“no escape from justice.”—[*Official Report*, 17 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 124.]

More than that, I am encouraged by the Minister’s words and know that this Government take fraud seriously. By the end of this Parliament, I hope we can look back and see that we have made huge steps forward. We can become a world leader in tackling fraud once and for all.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I thank the audio technician for sorting the problem out earlier.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of financial fraud and economic crime.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 11 September 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Tata Steel and UK Steel Strategy

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): The Government have secured an improved deal for the workers impacted by the transformation plans of Tata Steel and are setting out their ambition for a new UK-wide steel strategy, one which equips our steel-making industry with the right support to adapt and thrive in the new green economy.

I can announce today that we have agreed a process with Tata to assess investment opportunities for new capabilities that will deliver more, secure, long-term jobs than the deal that we inherited. I will report back to the House on progress.

Tata Steel has agreed to offer a comprehensive training programme for up to 500 employees as an alternative for those at risk of compulsory redundancy. This would be on full pay for one month, then £27,000 per annum per employee for 11 months. Tata will fund those costs. Employees will be able to choose from recognised qualifications to develop sought-after skills which will be in high demand in the local economy now and long into the future.

Tata also expects that at least 500 new jobs could be created during the construction of the electric arc furnace, which will tap into the local labour market wherever possible.

The Government have helped to secure improved terms for those at risk of redundancy by working closely with unions.

Tata Steel's employees are now able set out their expression of interest in the most generous voluntary redundancy package the company has ever offered for a restructuring of this size. Employees will now be paid 2.8 weeks of earnings for each year of service up to a maximum of 25 years.

There is also a minimum redundancy payment of £15,000 pro-rata and a "retention" payment of £5,000 for employees leaving the business because of these closures. Over 2,000 employees have expressed interest in voluntary redundancy on these terms.

As part of the deal, the company will also be releasing 385 acres of their site for sale or transfer. This is valuable real estate which will help bring in more companies and more employers not just from the steel sector but from a whole host of other industries too.

Taxpayers should know the improved terms for workforce are not dependent on additional money.

Strong conditions are included within the grant funding agreement to claw back investment if Tata Steel reneges on its promises or fails to keep its end of the bargain. For example, there is now an improved grant repayment of £40,000 for every job Tata Steel does not retain post transformation. It was £30,000 per job under the previous deal. In the event of this condition being enacted, this

money will be repaid directly to the Government—a powerful incentive to ensure Tata Steel meet its 5,000 UK jobs target.

The Government know this is the start of a journey towards a greener future for the steelworks in Port Talbot—reducing the site's carbon emissions by as much as 85% a year. However, decarbonisation should not mean deindustrialisation. As part of the agreement the Government will be working with Tata Steel over the coming weeks and months to consider business cases for further investment and job creation opportunities.

However, the Government's ambition for steel is so much bigger and broader than one single company. It is about the whole sector. The UK has always been a proud steelmaking nation, with a rich heritage stretching back to the industrial revolution. From cars to cranes, ships and scaffolding, British steel has been and is still used the world over, embodying our industrial might and innovation. For years, steel has been a neglected industry in this country. Crude steel production has declined by more than 50% in the last 10 years. Some proclaimed the industry's decline to be inevitable in the 21st century, but this Government do not believe that decline is inevitable. While the industry faces challenges today, we want to do everything we can to ensure that it can adapt and grow tomorrow.

That is why I am pleased to announce that the Government will introduce a new steel strategy, which will be published in spring 2025.

Our manifesto announced £2.5 billion for steel, on top of the £500 million for this transformation at Port Talbot. Our intention is to use the money we are investing to increase our UK capabilities so that we can create a more vibrant, competitive steel sector in the UK.

As part of our steel strategy, this Government will look seriously at the options to improve steel capabilities across the whole supply chain, including for primary steelmaking in the UK. We are also clear that we will not be able to prioritise short-term subsidies over long-term jobs. That is why with the help of independent experts, we will also be reviewing the viability of direct reduced iron in the UK.

Steel is essential to delivering on our net zero goals and building the next generation of green infrastructure, which Members know this Government are passionate about. It is why, as part of our steel strategy, we intend to use the new procurement Act to drive economic growth and account for social value in the things Government buy and the projects we commission. This work is already under way to increase the role of steel as we build our manufacturing base.

This Government also recognise that for far too long British energy-intensive industries, including the steel sector, have been held back by high electricity costs. More often than not, this has made the UK less attractive to international investors. The Government's clean energy mission will ensure we are no longer exposed to the kinds of gas price shocks we have seen in recent years, helping British businesses to compete and win in the global market. To support that ambition, we are also working with like-minded nations to tackle global trade distortions, including through our chairing of the Global Forum on Steel Excess Capacity this year.

The steel strategy will be developed and delivered in partnership with the steel sector and trade unions, and it will work in lockstep with the Government's industrial

strategy. The Government's ambition is to ramp up investment, strengthen our supply chains and create more well-paid jobs in the places where they are most needed.

To drive our partnership on the steel strategy forward, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade will shortly meet with industry experts and interested parties to discuss the future of the industry.

This Government care about steel, the communities it supports and recognise its fundamental importance to the economy.

And supporting steel in this country is about being involved in the detail, shepherding individual plants into the future while protecting the people in them. But it is also about providing a direction of travel. An inspiration for investment and a cause for confidence, so that the sector can play its part in the next 10 years and beyond.

[HCWS87]

EDUCATION

Education and Skills Funding Agency

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Today I am announcing the closure of the Education and Skills Funding Agency on 31 March 2025. The functions of the ESFA will be integrated into the core Department for Education. The ESFA is currently an executive agency of the Department.

This will happen in two stages. Schools' financial support and oversight functions will transfer from 1 October 2024 and be brought together with the regions group, part of the Department. This will provide a single seamless voice to schools and ensure that financial improvement is central to school improvement.

We will then centralise our funding and assurance functions into the Department for Education alongside the closure on 31 March 2025, putting certainty, support and assurance in the core of the Department.

Moving the agency functions back into the Department will bring benefits to the individuals and organisations we support as well as to the taxpayer. It will enable a single, joined-up approach to funding and regulation to improve accountability.

We will be working closely with our staff, unions, and stakeholders across the education sector to finalise and deliver our plans for closing the agency.

[HCWS83]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Framework Directive Regulations and River Basin Management Planning

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Today the Government are laying before the House our full response to the Office for Environmental Protection's review of the implementation of the water framework directive regulations and river basin management planning.

The Government welcome the OEP's recommendations and accept its key conclusions that not enough progress has been made by previous Governments to improve

the water environment and meet the WFD objective to restore 75% of water bodies to good ecological status or good ecological potential. We face a major challenge in achieving these objectives due to years of underinvestment and insufficient action.

This Government are committed to taking action to accelerate progress on improving the water environment. There are systemic issues that require urgent reform of our water system. The Government will set out over the coming months their plans to fundamentally transform how our water system works and clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good. This will include a review of the framework that underpins our water sector, to ensure it delivers long-term stability, and reflects the needs of customers and the environment. We expect that the OEP's review of the WFD will be an important contribution to inform the review.

The Government response will be available on gov.uk.

[HCWS86]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Review of Forensic Pathology

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Today I am publishing the report of an independent review of the forensic pathology response to the Hillsborough disaster, conducted by forensic science expert Mr Glenn Taylor. Sadly, Mr Taylor passed away on 6 August 2024 and his report is being published posthumously. I would therefore first like to offer sincere condolences to Mr Taylor's widow, and to express my profound gratitude for all the work that Mr Taylor put in to conducting this review.

Mr Taylor's review was established in 2022, in response to a recommendation in Bishop James Jones's 2017 report on the experiences of families bereaved by the Hillsborough stadium disaster on 15 April 1989. In 2012, the Hillsborough independent panel revealed that pathology evidence presented at the first Hillsborough inquests was flawed; this finding led to fresh inquests, and in turn a verdict in 2016 that the 97 men, women and children who tragically lost their lives as a result of the disaster were unlawfully killed. Mr Taylor's review examined what went wrong with the original pathology reports from the Hillsborough disaster, to ensure that similar mistakes will not be made in future.

In addition to seeking evidence from professionals, Mr Taylor engaged extensively with families who lost loved ones as a result of the Hillsborough disaster, as well as of the devastating Manchester Arena attack on 22 May 2017. I am most grateful to all those family members who took the time to speak to Mr Taylor about their experiences—their powerful words throughout this report are a stark reminder of the extent to which the state failed them.

Mr Taylor found that "significant progress" has been made in the quality and depth of forensic pathology reports since the Hillsborough disaster. It is clear from this report, however, that there is more to be done and more lessons that still need to be learnt. First, family members are entirely right to expect that the pathology taken in respect of their loved ones will be explained to them and their questions answered. More needs to be done on engagement and support for families. Second,

we must build resilience in our pathology services and ensure that we are adequately prepared for any future disaster. And third, we must look again at the structure of pathology in England and Wales, to ensure it best meets our needs as a public service. The Government welcome Mr Taylor's findings and accept all six of his recommendations, which it will work at pace to deliver.

To that end, I have today written to the chair of the pathology delivery board. I have requested that the board take forward those actions that Mr Taylor identified for it immediately, and that it submits a proposed plan of action to me within 12 months. I have also tasked officials in my Department to begin work on actions directed at the Home Office immediately.

I would once again like to extend my sincere thanks to Mr Taylor's wife for his work, and also to his team for their dedicated and sensitive approach to this matter.

The report has been laid before the House and will also be available on gov.uk.

[HCWS85]

JUSTICE

Law Commission Digital Assets Report: Government Response

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Heidi Alexander): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede) has today made the following statement:

I am pleased to inform the House that we are taking forward the Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill via the Law Commission's special procedure. This recommendation was made in the "Digital Assets: Final Report" published by the Law Commission in June 2023. The Bill will confirm in statute the common law position that certain digital assets can constitute property.

Providing certainty over legal issues around digital assets will encourage the use of English and Welsh law in internationally mobile transactions. The Ministry of Justice commissioned the digital assets report in 2020 to identify any barriers to the recognition of digital assets as property under English and Welsh private law and to recommend reforms in this area of law. This work is vital to our ambition to maintain English and Welsh law as a global law of choice.

I also accept the second recommendation by the Law Commission to set up an expert group on control of digital assets. The Ministry of Justice has asked the UK Jurisdiction Taskforce, an expert group chaired by the Master of the Rolls that produces non-binding guidance on areas of legal uncertainty, to take forward this work as a body that already has an internationally credible voice in the intersection of the law and technology. I believe the UKJT is uniquely placed to convene the expertise needed to consider the issues around control of digital assets.

Finally, the report made recommendations to make statutory amendments to the Financial Collateral Arrangements Regulations and to set up a multidisciplinary project to formulate a statutory framework for the entering into, operation and enforcement of certain crypto-token and crypto-asset collateral arrangements. I understand that my colleagues in HM Treasury are reviewing these recommendations and will provide an update in due course.

[HCWS84]

Petitions

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented on
30 July 2024 by Helena Dollimore.]

[P003008]

Wednesday 11 September 2024

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Proposals for the A21 level crossing at Robertsbridge

The petition of businesses of Hastings and the wider area of East Sussex south of Robertsbridge,

Declares that suppliers of businesses based south of Robertsbridge utilise the A21 as the main road in and out of Hastings and its environs to deliver raw materials and goods, and in turn businesses use the A21 to deliver our products across the UK and overseas; and further that the building of a level steam crossing on the A21 will have a severe impact on the timeliness and efficiency of the transport of goods in and out of the Hastings area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to request that the planning permission be withdrawn.

Portishead railway branch line

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that reopening the Portishead branch line is necessary to reduce traffic on the congested roads between Portishead and Bristol; further that reducing such traffic would lead to lower CO₂ emissions, thus benefitting the environment and further that this branch line is needed to encourage investment and economic growth in Portishead and the greater Bristol area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to recognise the considerable work already performed to reopen the Portishead branch line, to recognise public funding already invested in it, and to consider the resource needs of the Portishead branch line when providing funding for transport in this area —[Presented by Sadik Al-Hassan.]

[P003009]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 11 September 2024

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| PRIME MINISTER | 816 | WALES—continued | |
| Engagements | 816 | NHS Waiting Lists | 816 |
| WALES | 807 | Nuclear Power Plant: Wylfa | 815 |
| Clean Energy Projects | 807 | Rural Digital Infrastructure | 815 |
| Cross-border Train Services | 812 | Steel Industry | 809 |
| Economic Growth | 813 | Transport Infrastructure | 813 |

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 11 September 2024

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|---|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| BUSINESS AND TRADE | 39WS | HOME DEPARTMENT | 42WS |
| Tata Steel and UK Steel Strategy | 39WS | Independent Review of Forensic Pathology | 42WS |
| EDUCATION | 41WS | | |
| Education and Skills Funding Agency | 41WS | | |
| ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS. | 41WS | JUSTICE | 43WS |
| Water Framework Directive Regulations and | | Law Commission Digital Assets Report: | |
| RiverBasin Management Planning | 41WS | GovernmentResponse | 43WS |

PETITIONS

Wednesday 11 September 2024

| | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|---|-----------------|
| PRESENTED PETITIONS | 5P |
| Portishead railway branch line | 6P |
| Proposals for the A21 level crossing at | |
| Robertsbridge | 5P |

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**not later than
Wednesday 18 September 2024**

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 11 September 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 807] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Wales
Prime Minister

Port Talbot Transition Project [Col. 827]

Statement—(Jonathan Reynolds)

Patrick Finucane Murder [Col. 841]

Statement—(Hilary Benn)

Renters' Rights [Col. 851]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Building Safety and Resilience [Col. 852]

General debate

Speaker's Statement [Col. 931]

Democracy in Bangladesh [Col. 932]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Planning Policy: Traveller Sites [Col. 295WH]

Rural Bus Services [Col. 315WH]

Rural Depopulation [Col. 324WH]

Oswestry to Gobowen Railway Line [Col. 348WH]

Financial Fraud and Economic Crime [Col. 355WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 39WS]

Petitions [Col. 5P]
