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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 15 October 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

DAVID FULLER INQUIRY: PHASE 2 INTERIM REPORT

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 a Report, dated 15 October 2024, entitled Independent Inquiry into the issues raised by the David Fuller case—Phase 2 Interim Report—Funeral Sector.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Health Outcomes: East Midlands

1. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps his Department plans to take to improve health outcomes in the east midlands. [900621]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Lord Darzi's report concluded that the health service is in a critical condition across the country, including in the east midlands, where healthy life expectancy has declined in the past decade. Waiting lists in the region stand at slightly below the national average for 18-week waits, at 57% compared to the national average of 58%.

Sir Edward Leigh: With two thirds of people having to wait more than four hours at Lincoln County hospital's A&E department and with horror stories from my constituents of people waiting up to 24 hours, does the Minister understand that if we are to save the NHS and give people the timely appointments they need, we must unleash the full power of the private sector?

Karin Smyth: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for helping to underline the shocking inheritance from the previous Government. He is absolutely right. We are committed to cutting waiting times and serving constituents, like mine, by delivering the long-term reform the NHS desperately needs. The Government are committed to the funding model. We are not going to change it. He tries this every time, but we are committed to the funding model as it exists.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): A really important part of improving health outcomes in the east midlands, and across the country, is the use of diagnostics. The Rosalind Franklin laboratory, which was set up in my constituency, was closed down just a few months ago at a cost of £0.6 billion. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most important things we could do is to restore good quality diagnostics to our NHS?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are committed to improving diagnostics as part of our reform of the health sector. Analysis of waiting lists shows that 20% of people will end up with a hospital admission, most as a day case. To improve waiting times, the focus must be on early prevention, diagnostics and consultant review at an early stage.

NHS Urgent and Emergency Care

2. **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of NHS urgent and emergency care services. [900622]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The recent independent report by Lord Darzi makes it absolutely clear that urgent and emergency care services are also struggling, with the latest data published last week showing that one in 10 patients spend over 12 hours in A&E. We are committed to returning to service standards that patients rightly expect through our ambitious 10-year plan to reform the health service.

Mike Tapp: In September 2021, Victoria hospital in Deal lost provision for blood testing. After a long campaign by residents, it was agreed that it would return. However, that has stalled in the tendering process. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can move this forward?

Karin Smyth: I commend my hon. Friend for championing this issue on behalf of his constituents. I understand that he has raised it with the chief executive officer of his local trust. He will appreciate that commissioning decisions are a matter for the local integrated care board, in this case Kent and Medway ICB, but I am, of course, very happy to meet him to discuss it further.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I wish the Minister well in her efforts to address this issue, because it is extremely serious. There are very often more than 20 ambulances queueing outside Treliske hospital, which has a serious impact on expectations for patients. Will the Minister please look at the potential for urgent treatment centres to take pressure away from emergency departments, such as the urgent treatment centre at West Cornwall hospital in Penzance, which really needs to be re-established on a 24/7 basis? That would make a real impact.

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good wishes. It is, indeed, a huge task we have before us. We will maintain ambulance capacity throughout this winter. He makes a valuable point about alternative models to hospital admissions and treatment in the community. That is a matter for the local ICB, as I

know he knows. It needs to look at which model is the best fit, particularly in rural areas, to reduce the pressure on frontline A&E services.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): Intermediate care for people facing homelessness, which is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, can reduce rough sleeping by around 70%. That is life-changing for people who have been sleeping rough and it plays a significant role in relieving pressure on hospitals. A recent evaluation of intermediate care for people facing homelessness in one county in England found a 56% reduction in A&E visits and a 67% reduction in emergency admissions. What exists currently is a postcode lottery. How can we embed the NICE approach in every integrated care system across England?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend has highlighted an issue that is often overlooked. Homelessness has risen to shocking levels in the last 14 years. When it was addressed under the last Labour Government, people were moved off the streets, and there was decent care at the front end of the hospital system and support in the community. My hon. Friend is right: there are good examples across the country, and we would like to see them embedded as part of our overall goal, across Government, of reducing the scourge of homelessness in society and once again supporting the front end of the health service.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I recently met representatives of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, who told me that the inadequate state of social care was resulting in the deterioration of people's physical health, leading to more presentations at emergency departments. Does the Minister agree that if social care were properly funded, pressure on our hospitals would be reduced?

Karin Smyth: What we see at the front end of the system is a result of the deterioration throughout the system, and the flow of patients from the community, through discharge and, indeed, through social care. Our ambitious 10-year plan will involve examining the entire patient pathway to ensure that care is provided in the community, closer to home. Prevention is a key part of that, as is the look that we are taking at social care.

Adult Social Care

3. **Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): What steps he plans to take to reform adult social care. [900623]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): After 14 years of Tory neglect and incompetence, adult social care is on its knees. The number of people receiving long-term care decreased between 2015 and 2023, and there were a staggering 130,000 staff vacancies in the system. Last Thursday, recognising the central role of our amazing care workforce, we took a critical first step by introducing the groundbreaking legislation that will establish the first ever fair pay agreement for care professionals. I think it fair to say that this Government have done more for our adult social care workers in 14 weeks than the last lot did in 14 years.

Greg Smith: Given unfunded schemes such as the proposed national care service, given the new negotiating body's aim of establishing a minimum pay floor, and given what clearly amounts to an expensive top-down reorganisation of the care system, can the Minister explain how he will maintain and enhance the role of local authorities, including Buckinghamshire Council, in targeting and delivering care, and how he plans to maintain day-to-day spending alongside this grand plan for reform, without raising taxes?

Stephen Kinnock: It beggars belief that Opposition Members should lecture us on fiscal discipline when there is a £22 billion in-year black hole. We are committed to consulting widely on the design of a fair pay agreement, and we will engage with all who may be affected. We are keen to ensure that all voices are heard so that the financial impacts on the adult social care market, local government and self-funders can be considered, but in a week in which this Government have attracted £63 billion of investment and just days after the publication of the Employment Rights Bill, we are seeing a Government who are pro-business, pro-worker and pro-growth.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Adult social care is under extreme pressure. One in four hospital beds are occupied by patients with dementia. Will the Minister commit himself to the delivery of a dementia strategy in the current Parliament?

Stephen Kinnock: That is an extremely important question. I recognise that dementia is a huge issue that impacts on the entire country and, indeed, many Members on both sides of the House. We are absolutely committed to the research that is fundamental to addressing the problem, and our fair pay agreement is about not just pay but training and terms and conditions. We will be ramping up dementia training for our adult social care workforce.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): The Labour manifesto spoke of the need for a consensus on social care, and the Secretary of State has said that he wants to reach out across the political divide—although the message does not seem quite to have reached the Minister yet. During Health and Social Care questions in July, the Minister said that there would be announcements in the near future, but since then we have heard nothing. We are ready to talk; when will the Government be ready?

Stephen Kinnock: I am not sure if the right hon. Gentleman was listening to my previous answer. We have just set out a groundbreaking piece of legislation to settle the issue of adult social care pay, which is more than the last lot did in 14 years. We are absolutely committed to building cross-party consensus. We know that we need a process that will be sustainable and fix adult social care for the long term. That absolutely includes engagement and dialogue across this House, because we want to build a consensus that works. We recognise that successive Governments have failed to get a grip on this issue, but we recognise the vital role that adult social care will play. It is going to be a hugely

important part of our 10-year plan for the future of the NHS, and I look forward to engaging with all hon. Members on this issue.

Post-sepsis Syndrome

4. Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of treatment for post-sepsis syndrome. [900624]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): I thank the hon. Member for raising awareness of this important issue. He has spoken powerfully about the experiences of patients in his constituency and his wife's personal battle with sepsis. The long-term complications of sepsis can have a devastating impact long after discharge from hospital. Through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Department is funding research to improve outcomes for sepsis survivors.

Lee Anderson: Last year, Abbi Hickson from Ashfield lost both her hands and her lower legs to sepsis. The local hospital was very slow to diagnosis her condition, and since then she has been suffering from shortness of breath, fatigue and a lack of sleep. This could be post-sepsis syndrome, yet nobody at the hospital has spoken to her about it. Does the Minister agree that every single sepsis patient and survivor should be advised about this condition?

Andrew Gwynne: I absolutely do, and I pay tribute to Abbi, a beautiful woman whom I was privileged to meet after the Westminster Hall debate last week. Although care after sepsis will vary hugely on a case-by-case basis, we need to make sure that the needs of each individual are met. In this case, it sounds like they have not been met. If the hon. Gentleman wants to meet me to discuss this issue further, I am more than happy to do so.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Given that last month was Sepsis Awareness Month, will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the courage of John Snow and his family in my Dartford constituency? Tragically, he has just experienced a quadruple amputation due to sepsis. He has received amazing support from the Dartford community, who have rallied around to help fund support for his family. Will the Minister use that as a spur to improve treatment for sepsis more generally across the country?

Andrew Gwynne: I pay tribute to John Snow and, indeed, my hon. Friend's constituents, who have rallied around him at his time of need. This matter highlights the need to have better joined-up care to ensure that people who have sepsis receive the best care possible, that those who tragically lose limbs as a consequence of sepsis are able to have good-quality aftercare, and that we continue to raise awareness of sepsis and the risks it poses.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): We think that about 48,000 people a year lose their lives to sepsis, but the truth is that we do not know, because the data is inconsistent. Will the Minister look

at establishing a national registry to track sepsis cases, so that performance can be measured, published and improved?

Andrew Gwynne: Given the national standards and framework that have been put in place in this regard, I hope very much that the NHS will be able to do precisely what the hon. Gentleman wants it to do.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Yesterday was Allied Health Professions Day, which raises awareness of 14 professions, including physios, speech and language therapists, and radiographers. Does the Minister agree that all the hard work of those professionals is really important for patient care?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. The wonderful staff we have working across health and care ensure that our constituents receive, within a very tightly constrained health service, the best possible care that we can give them. The NHS is broken. We have to fix our broken health service, and having good-quality staff at the heart of it is how we are going to achieve that aim.

Patient Waiting Times

5. Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of patient waiting times. [900625]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Waiting times are wholly inadequate in our country. That is because the previous Conservative Government took a golden inheritance of the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history and left behind the worst crisis in the NHS's history. What is more, they accept no responsibility and cannot even bring themselves to say sorry.

Karl Turner: I pay tribute to my own family GP, Dr Islam at the East Hull family practice, who goes above and beyond for his patients. However, I know that GPs are troubled by the amount of time patients have to wait to see them. The disparity between GP numbers in different areas is utterly shocking. In Kingston upon Thames, for example, a GP looks after 1,800 patients, but in Kingston upon Hull it is more than double that number. What is my right hon. Friend doing to sort out the Tory mess of the last 14 years?

Wes Streeting: May I first, through my hon. Friend, say thank you to Dr Islam and to GPs right across the country who, against the backdrop of the extraordinary challenges they are working through, have none the less managed to deliver more appointments now than when there were thousands more GPs? My hon. Friend is right to point out that we do not have enough GPs in this country. That is why, within weeks of taking office, this Government found just shy of £100 million to put into the frontline to employ 1,000 more GPs who will be seeing patients before the end of this financial year. That will make a real difference, and the shadow Secretary of State should have the humility and to grace accept that.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Patient waiting times are reduced dramatically through the recruitment and retention of more GPs, so will the Secretary of State welcome the work of the Anglia Ruskin medical school in Essex, and perhaps have a conversation with myself and neighbouring MPs about how that medical school could be expanded to do much more to support the recruitment and training of more MPs—more GPs in Essex?

Wes Streeting: I am sure that the right hon. Lady does want more Conservative MPs in Essex. She has raised an entirely constructive point, which I strongly welcome. This Government are committed, as we were in opposition, to doubling the number of medical school places, and that means real opportunities for local medical schools such as hers. As ever, I would of course be delighted to meet her to talk about what more can do with her local university.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The news that we are recruiting more GPs is very welcome. I spent an afternoon shadowing a local GP and saw just how stretched the services were. Will the Secretary of State give a commitment that we are moving towards investment in primary care services and moving from a national health service to a focus on neighbourhood health services?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that question. When in opposition, I was delighted to spend time with a whole group of GPs from across Sheffield who showed us what primary care reform could look like. We are committed to increasing primary care as a proportion of the NHS's budget, which will be important, and also to building exactly the kind of neighbourhood health service she describes, with more care closer to people's homes. General practice has a key role to play in that.

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

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What we measure is often what we end up improving, and one of the great assets of Lord Darzi's report is the technical annex with its 330 analyses. It is incredibly useful; it is a baseline. Will the Secretary of State make sure that it is updated yearly?

Wes Streeting: That is a great constructive challenge. I am absolutely committed to transparency and to keeping that dataset updated in the way that the hon. Lady requests. We are not going to get everything right and sometimes we are not going to make progress as fast as we would like, but where that is the case we are never going to duck it or pretend that things are better than they are. The reason that we will succeed where the previous Government failed is that we are willing to face up to the challenges in the NHS rather than pretend that they do not exist.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The Prime Minister has repeatedly stressed the importance of preventing people from taking up smoking, as one of his priorities to improve the nation's health, reduce waiting lists and lessen demand on the NHS, and we

agree. The Government like to talk about the record of their first 100 days in office but, according to data from Action on Smoking and Health, 280 children under the age of 16 take up smoking in England each day. That is 28,000 children in England during the Secretary of State's first 100 days. Why has he not yet reintroduced our Tobacco and Vapes Bill? How many children need to take up smoking before he makes this a priority?

Wes Streeting: Perhaps the shadow Minister would like to give us the figures for the entire 14 years that his party was in government. By the way, just to set the record straight, not only did I propose the measures in that Bill during an interview with *The Times* earlier last year, but if it was such a priority for the Opposition, why did they leave the Bill unfinished? Why had it only had its Second Reading? And why did we go into the general election with that Bill unpassed? I will tell him why: because his party was divided on the issue, and the then Prime Minister was too weak to stand up to his own right-wingers who are now calling the shots in his party. The smoking Bill will be back, it will be stronger and, unlike the previous Government, we will deliver it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): My constituent Mel Lycett has terminal cancer. After repeated visits to her GP, she was referred to a two-week urgent pathway in May. She was not diagnosed until the end of July, and she still has not started treatment. Every single target for her diagnosis and treatment was missed. That is not uncommon in Shropshire, and it is not uncommon in the rest of the country. Can the Secretary of State reassure me of what he is doing to deal with this terrible legacy left behind by the Conservative Government? How will he ensure that cancer patients are treated in a timely manner?

Wes Streeting: I welcome the hon. Lady to her role. I am afraid that this case is just one of countless stories of people whose lives might have been saved had the NHS been there for them when they needed it. It is bad enough when people receive a late diagnosis that equates to a death sentence; it is worse still when people in that position are not given the fighting chance of urgent, life-extending treatment.

The inheritance we have received is truly shameful. I assure the hon. Lady, as a cancer survivor myself—because the NHS was there for me when I needed it—that we will work tirelessly through a national cancer plan to make sure that we deliver the cancer waiting time standards that the last Labour Government met, and that are sorely needed today.

Primary Care Services for Men: England and Scotland

6. **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): If he will make a comparative assessment of the adequacy of access to primary care services for men in (a) England and (b) Scotland. [900626]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): As Lord Darzi identified in his NHS review, primary care is broken, with 1,600 fewer fully qualified GPs than in 2017. We recognise that men can face particular challenges in accessing services,

which is why we are committed to fixing the front door to the NHS, bringing back the family doctor and shifting the focus of care away from hospitals and into the community. Health is devolved in Scotland, but I welcome opportunities to share learning across our two nations.

Johanna Baxter: In my Paisley and Renfrewshire South constituency, the rate of premature death in men is 47.9% higher than the UK average. According to National Records of Scotland, the number of people who have died by suicide in Renfrewshire as a whole has increased to the highest level in 10 years. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a damning indictment of the SNP Government's record on health? Will he commit today to holding a summit in November, with Movember, to raise men's health up the agenda?

Andrew Gwynne: Those statistics are both damning and shocking. Health inequalities in any part of our United Kingdom need to be tackled, and the SNP Government have real questions to answer on these shocking statistics for men in my hon. Friend's constituency and across Scotland. I will take up her challenge. A summit with Movember, and with her and other interested Members, to talk about men's health issues is a cracking idea, and I will get straight on to it when I get back to the Department.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I appreciate that the Secretary of State is unlikely to comment on the Chancellor's forthcoming statement, but he and his Front-Bench colleagues have already mentioned funding issues a number of times this morning, so will he confirm that it is the policy of his Government to take steps to increase the UK's health spending to the average of other countries in north-west Europe? That would lead to an increase of around £17 billion for the national health service and would help address some of the issues referred to by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter).

Mr Speaker: Order. Questions ought to be linked to the subject being dealt with, which is access to primary care. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman meant to ask, "Will there also be funding to improve access to primary care?", which I am sure the Minister can answer.

Andrew Gwynne: This Labour Government were elected to tackle health inequalities, fix our NHS and ensure that more people live longer, healthier lives. That will require a concerted Government effort, which is why we have the health mission board in place. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is making the case for investment and reform at every opportunity, but let us be clear: every single Labour Government have left the country with a better NHS than they inherited, and this Labour Government will fix our NHS once more.

Whipps Cross Hospital: Redevelopment

7. **Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): What his Department's timetable is for announcing the outcome of its review of the new hospital programme in relation to the proposed redevelopment of Whipps Cross hospital. [900627]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I must declare an interest, because Whipps Cross hospital serves my constituents, as well as those of the right hon. Gentleman. On that basis, I am well aware that we desperately need the proposed redevelopment of the hospital. That is why, in common with so many Members across the House, I am furious that the previous Government's new hospitals programme had a timetable that was a work of fiction and money that will run out in March. The assurance I can give to the right hon. Gentleman, his constituents, my constituents, and the constituents of every right hon. and hon. Member across the House whose constituents are waiting for news on the new hospitals programme, is that we will deliver on a timetable that is credible and a programme that is funded, giving our constituents the clarity and consistency they deserve, and rebuilding by placing the Government among our construction industry supply chain.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The Secretary of State knows that we have campaigned together for the redevelopment of Whipps Cross hospital, and whether that is delivered by a Labour or Conservative Government makes no difference to me. I want to drag him to the reality of a specific point about the hospital: it was granted £1.2 million towards undertaking a business case, which it received in August, but that money has run out. A total of £5 million is required to be ready when the decision is made; if it is not available, the hospital will lose the architects and builders. Will he go back to the Department and ensure that the hospital receives that money, so that managers can be ready with the full, detailed business case the moment the decision is made? Otherwise, it will cost £50 million extra over the next year to get the architects and builders back. I beg the Secretary of State—I literally beg him—to look at that carefully.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. Those practical considerations are very much part of the review. I say to the poor project managers across the country who have had to deal with the previous Government's stop-start approach that we are not going to make that mistake. We are going to come forward with a credible plan that is also funded, not the work of fiction or the £22 billion black hole that the shadow Secretary of State left in her wake.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Whipps Cross hospital is in my constituency and it is my constituents who have had to endure five years of the previous Government organising photo opportunity after photo opportunity, not putting the contracts in place for the project to be up and running and ready to go. Does my right hon. Friend agree that only a fully costed, long-term approach from this Labour Government can deliver the modern healthcare that my constituents need?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend, my constituency neighbour, is absolutely right. He has been doing an outstanding job of representing the people of Leyton and Wanstead since his arrival. What our constituents, and indeed constituents right across the country, deserve is honesty, clarity and consistency. That is how we will turn the new hospitals programme from a press release into reality and how, in doing so, we will restore trust in

politics and, for businesses, the construction industry and the supply chain, restore confidence in public sector procurement.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Many Leicestershire residents are concerned about the Government's review of the new hospitals programme, which would have seen two new hospitals, a midwifery-led unit and a multi-storey car park in the city. What representations has the Minister made to the Chancellor to retain this vital investment for the NHS in Leicestershire?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman asks what representations I am making to retain the funding. If only that were the case. The funding was not there. The Conservative party went into the general election with a programme timetable that was a work of fiction and a claim to have a funded programme that was simply not true. What we arrived to find was a timetable that was a load of rubbish and a £22 billion hole in the public finances that the party hid from the country because it did not want to confront the hard truths. This Government are facing the facts and answering the challenges.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am probably the only MP in this current Chamber who has recently used Whipps Cross hospital, which also serves my community in Walthamstow, because I had both my children there, so I know at first hand how desperately it needs redevelopment and how poor the facilities are that the amazing staff are having to use. Does my right hon. Friend agree that finally getting this project moving under a Labour Government will also deliver thousands of much-needed homes in our local community? It is a win-win situation, which is why it is such a travesty that, for years, Conservative Ministers came and took photos, but we never saw any diggers or spades in the ground. Does he agree that Labour can change that?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is about not just the necessary hospital projects, but the growth that will come through construction, getting these projects up and running and, of course, the role that the NHS plays as an economic anchor institution in communities, as some of these projects will necessarily unlock new housing sites and a local transport infrastructure. We are mindful of all of that. The most important thing is that we come forward with a timetable that is credible and a programme that is funded, and that is exactly what we will do.

Mr Speaker: We look forward to getting the land in Chorley on that basis.

District Hospitals

8. **Michelle Scrogam** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of district hospitals in providing services that meet the needs of local communities. [900628]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): Lord Darzi's report concluded that the health service is in a critical condition across the country. District hospitals have a vital role to play in meeting the needs of their communities, and this

Government will support them to reduce waiting times, to improve urgent care and to play their part in building a neighbourhood health service.

Michelle Scrogam: Critical care at Furness general hospital in Barrow has been temporarily downgraded, meaning that those in most need of the highest level of care are now exposed to potentially life-threatening delays during a 50-mile transfer on difficult roads. Will the Minister please look at this worrying decision by the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS foundation trust and do everything to enable the reopening of this service as soon as possible?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is a doughty fighter for her constituents. I am aware that the decision she mentions is an interim measure made by the critical care network, the Lancashire and South Cumbria integrated care board and the NHS trust. The decision will be kept under review and patients impacted will receive the appropriate support. The Government recognise that more must be done to improve the sustainability of the NHS both nationally and in rural and coastal areas.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Services at Chase community hospital in my constituency, in Whitehill and Bordon, are being run down by the ICB. This is based on a promise that a brand-new health hub will be built in place, which is much welcomed. It has the support of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, which owns the land, East Hampshire district council and the community, but the ICB is suffering from inertia. Can the Minister speak to the ICB and suggest that it either builds this new health hub or refurbishes and renovates the Chase community hospital?

Andrew Gwynne: I have every sympathy with the case that the hon. Gentleman has put forward. This Government want to see a shift of health services from hospital to community, from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention, but these decisions are not taken through inertia; they are taken because of the Government's inheritance from the Conservative party. We have had 14 years of running down our health services, with needless reorganisations that have destroyed and set back the progress that the last Labour Government made on the NHS. This Government will fix the NHS, including in the hon. Gentleman's local area, but he has to recognise that the root cause of many of the problems faced by Members across the Chamber lies at the feet of the former Secretary of State and the last Government.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): We have heard about the challenges facing Whipps Cross hospital. The Secretary of State's decisions to pause capital projects across the country and put them under review has caused worry and uncertainty for staff in hospitals nationwide. Can he say when the review will be completed, so that we have certainty about when things will go ahead?

Andrew Gwynne: The review will be completed when all the information has been analysed. The hon. Lady should not just be a little more patient; she should be a little more apologetic for the fact that the Government found a hospital rebuilding programme that was not worth the paper it was written on, because the ultimate paper we needed—the cash—was not there.

NHS Dental Contracting Framework

9. Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the NHS dental contracting framework. [900629]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the excellent work he does for the people of Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme. The scale of the problem that he points out is massive. One of the most shocking statistics I have discovered since taking up this position is that the most common reason for children aged five to nine being admitted to hospital is tooth decay. That is completely and utterly shocking—truly Dickensian. We cannot fix the matter overnight, but we are committed to reforming the dental contract and working with the British Dental Association to focus on prevention and on the retention of NHS dentists. We are also working at pace to ensure that patients can access an additional 700,000 urgent dental appointments.

Lee Pitcher: The horror stories I hear in my constituency are just awful: from the mum on the Isle of Axholme who could not find an NHS dentist after five years and who carries out her own treatment on her son, to a gentleman in Doncaster East whose teeth are crumbling due to illness, causing him horrendous pain, and who cannot get an appointment. The Government's pledge to provide more emergency appointments is great, but I know that it will take time to rebuild dentistry. Can the Minister reassure me that people in my constituency will be given the priority they deserve?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right. South Yorkshire has the highest level of hospital tooth extractions in England, and I want to assure him that we will target interventions at the areas of greatest need. For example, integrated care boards have started to advertise roles through our “golden hello” scheme, which will drive recruitment of graduate dentists to areas of greatest need for three years. We have inherited a mess and we are working at pace to clear it up.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is right to underline the issues for children, but can I remind him of the issues for those above the state pension age—which is increasing to 67, including for ladies—in particular when it comes to certain benefits, such as attendance allowance? Will he look at the contract for those who are elderly and in receipt of such benefits?

Stephen Kinnock: We are in a situation where a staggering 28% of the country—13 million people—have a need that is unmet by NHS dentistry. There are so many issues that we need to resolve. We are looking at the contract with the BDA and I am more than happy to look into the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Last month, the Secretary of State for Wales told the Labour party conference that this Labour Government will “take inspiration” from Labour-run Wales on dentistry. That is the same health system in which less than 60% of dentistry courses are being completed in comparison

with pre-pandemic figures—a rate that is far lower than in England. Does the Minister agree that the Secretary of State for Wales is right and that Wales is a blueprint for what a Labour Government will do in England, or will they drop the bluster, get serious and commit to the dental reforms set out in the dental recovery plan, including a tie-in to NHS dentistry for graduate dentists?

Stephen Kinnock: I find it extraordinary that yet again we see a total lack of humility and contrition from the Opposition. The key difference that we will see in how our United Kingdom works is that we now have some grown-ups in charge in Westminster, who will work with colleagues in Cardiff Bay to ensure that a rising tide lifts all boats and we improve the state of NHS dentistry across the United Kingdom.

Access to NHS Mental Health Services

10. Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of access to NHS mental health services. [900630]

15. Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of access to NHS mental health services. [900636]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): Our mental health service is on its knees, thanks to 14 years of Tory neglect and mismanagement. A staggering 1 million people are waiting to access mental health services, and vacancy rates are around 10%, the highest across the NHS. This Government are committed to fixing our broken NHS so that people can be confident of accessing high-quality mental health support when needed. That includes recruiting 8,500 more mental health workers, introducing specialist mental health professionals in every school, rolling out Young Futures hubs in every community and modernising the Mental Health Act.

Luke Akehurst: Patients tell me they cannot get access to community mental health nurses, putting huge pressure on GP practices and leading to people going to A&E in desperation. Can the Minister confirm whether the 8,500 extra mental health staff pledged in Labour's manifesto will include much-needed nurses in the community?

Stephen Kinnock: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is doing excellent work for the people of North Durham. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank our mental health nurses, who do such vital and valuable work. The Government are committed to shifting from hospital to community, and that of course includes the mental health sector. I can assure my hon. Friend that we are working with NHS England on how best to deploy those additional 8,500 mental health workers.

Chris Webb: I wish to pay my respects to the family of Jamie Pearson, the 27-year-old Blackpool man who sadly took his own life in a local hospital in August after waiting nearly 24 hours to see a mental health worker in A&E. Jamie was in a mental health crisis, but got himself to what should have been a place of safety. What steps is the Minister's Department taking to ensure that no one is left to suffer in A&E because they

cannot access mental health treatment in their community, and will he meet me to discuss that tragic issue, so that we can make sure that it never happens again?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that deeply tragic case. Words cannot express the heartbreak caused to Jamie Pearson's friends and family. I hope it might be some small comfort to them to know that all acute hospitals should now have a 24/7 mental health liaison service in A&E, and we are looking at how best to take forward the Government's suicide prevention strategy for England. We will do everything in our power to ensure that the tragic circumstances of Jamie's untimely death are addressed, and that lessons are learned. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Those providing child and adolescent mental health services in south Cumbria do an outstanding job, but they are without a dedicated crisis team, unlike the rest of Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust. That is devastating and dangerous for my constituents. Will the Minister use his power to intervene with the integrated care board and Lancashire and South Cumbria to make sure that young people in our communities have access to a crisis team?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question and the passion with which he put it. We are committed to rolling out Young Futures hubs across the country and, of course, we need to prioritise areas of particular need. I would be happy to meet him to discuss that further.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): A recent review of children's mental health services in my local authority, the London borough of Richmond, found that, staggeringly, children with mild to moderate needs in tier 2 waited on average 15 months before receiving treatment, and those with more severe needs waited on average nine months. The Minister does not need me to tell him that during that time, children's conditions get worse; they need greater treatment and, sadly, too many present at A&E self-harming and attempting to take their own life. As well as committing to mental health professionals in every school, will he put some money into acute provision, so that children do not end up in A&E?

Stephen Kinnock: We are absolutely committed to the three shifts: from hospital to community, from sickness to prevention and from analogue to digital. The sickness to prevention aspect is important in the question that the hon. Member raises. Treatable mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression should be identified early to prevent them from developing into something more serious and into a crisis, so I absolutely share the sentiment behind her question. They will be at the heart of our 10-year strategy for the future of our health.

Access to Primary Care

11. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to GP appointments. [900631]

14. **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of patient access to primary care services. [900635]

17. **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of patient access to primary care services. [900639]

20. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of patient access to primary care services. [900642]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): As identified in Lord Darzi's review, primary care is broken. Satisfaction with GP services has fallen from a peak of 80% in 2009 to just 35% last year—a truly damning indictment of 14 years of Tory failure. We will rebuild general practice. We have invested £82 million to recruit 1,000 new GPs, we have launched our red tape challenge, and we are committed to improving continuity of care and ending the 8 am scramble. On primary care more broadly, we are committed to boosting the role of community pharmacies, enabling patients to be treated for certain conditions by their local pharmacists, without the need to see a GP.

Clive Jones: The Arborfield Green community in my Wokingham constituency has around 10,000 residents in new homes, with many more to come, but there is no local primary care provision. To see a GP, residents must travel to neighbouring villages, which are often inaccessible because of a lack of public transport. What steps will the Minister take to guarantee that there will be enough GPs in any major new developments that come down the line?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Member is absolutely right: there are seriously under-doctored areas of the country. Given the finite resources that we have, we must focus on areas with the greatest need. I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss how that might best be reflected in his constituency.

Katrina Murray: Access to GP appointments is consistently raised with me in Cumbernauld. A number of constituents have informed me that, having made complaints, they have been removed from the list of the general practice at which they have been patients for many years. Will the Minister raise the matter with the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, so that we can get some resolution for my constituents?

Stephen Kinnock: Patients have an absolute right to complain about NHS services, and they should not be removed from a practice's list because of a complaint they have made. Health is of course devolved, but I have asked officials in the Department to engage with their Scottish Government counterparts on that matter to ensure that patients in my hon. Friend's constituency are treated with the respect and compassion that they deserve.

Catherine Atkinson: Residents in Mickleover have been queuing from 7 am to get an appointment with their GP, and Healthwatch says that seven in 10 people

in Derby find it very difficult to book appointments. That is the legacy of the previous Government. With new homes being built in and around Mickleover, we need even more additional capacity. Does the Minister agree that GP capacity must be a priority?

Stephen Kinnock: We are absolutely committed to the challenge of cutting red tape and reducing the administrative burden for staff to help patients get the care that they need. An important element of our plan will be streamlining access to registration in order to move it online, and we are working at pace to make online registration available in all practices. I am very happy to come back to my hon. Friend on the constituency issue that she raises.

Warinder Juss: Lord Darzi's report on the NHS states that people are struggling to see their GPs. Prevention is better than cure, and interventions to protect health tend to be far less costly than dealing with the consequences of illness, both financially and in terms of outcomes. Early and quick access to primary care is therefore crucial. I accept that it is not always necessary to see a GP—an appointment with a nurse may suffice—but what steps are being taken to ensure that patients in my Wolverhampton West constituency have quick, easy and direct access to GP surgeries?

Stephen Kinnock: I note that Wolverhampton West has seen a decrease of 28 full-time equivalent GPs since 2018, which of course massively exacerbates the issues to which my hon. Friend refers. We will introduce a modern booking system to end the 8 am scramble and make it easier for patients to contact their GP. In particular, we are committed to increasing the use of the NHS app to view patient records and order repeat prescriptions. All of that will take pressure off the booking system.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Last week, NHS Suffolk and North East Essex integrated care board announced plans to scrap the super-surgery in north Essex. To say that my constituents were incandescent would be an understatement; many of them have waited since 2021 for a replacement to closed surgeries in Bramford, Claydon and Great Blakenham. Many have to use Needham Market surgery, which is also awaiting plans to move to larger premises with increased capacity. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can expedite plans to expand primary care in north Ipswich and the surrounding villages?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for setting out a list of all the failures of the past 14 years. He is dealing with that mess thanks to Members on the Benches he sits on. I strongly encourage his constituents to get actively involved in the 10-year plan that we will launch. There will be an important national engagement exercise on shifting from hospital to community, from sickness to prevention and from analogue to digital, because given the total and utter chaos that we inherited, we need systemic reform.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I recently met representatives of Martins Oak and Oldwood surgeries in my constituency. Both surgeries have ambitious plans to move to bigger premises so that they can see more

patients, but they face numerous challenges, including the gap between the lease lengths that the integrated care board will support and those that GP practices can get developers to sign up to. There are other challenges that I am sure the Minister can help unpick, so will he meet me to see whether we can help bring those ambitious plans for new surgeries to fruition?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman has considerable expertise in this area, given his background. I would be happy to discuss that issue with him, but I remind him that although there may well be specific issues, there is a generic problem: the total and utter failure to ensure investment, reform and strategic thinking about our system.

Topical Questions

T1. [900646] **Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Today, I am publishing the full findings of Dr Penny Dash's review of the Care Quality Commission. Her interim report made it clear that the CQC was not fit for purpose, with fewer inspections being carried out, urgent follow-ups being neglected and patient safety being put at risk. Today, she makes seven recommendations for improvement, and I have made sure that the CQC has begun urgently putting them into practice. We are also publishing a review of the CQC's deeply flawed single assessment framework today. Sir Julian Hartley will shortly begin as its new chief executive, with my full support.

Chris McDonald: My constituent Mark has been unable to find an NHS dentist for his 19-month-old child, even at the seventh time of trying. My right hon. Friend well understands the crisis he has inherited. Will he meet me to discuss the shortage of dentistry in Stockton North and across Teesside?

Wes Streeting: I am sorry for my hon. Friend's constituents, and so many others who are dealing with the consequences of the Conservatives' failure on dentistry. I would be delighted to meet him to discuss the challenges in his area.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I congratulate all nominees and winners in the NHS parliamentary awards yesterday. Their success was richly deserved, and the awards were a very good example of the House coming together to celebrate those who work so hard in our health service and social care services.

In the past five weeks, I have asked the Secretary of State 29 questions at this Dispatch Box, yet he has managed to answer only one. For the rest, he has tried to bluster his way out of his policy decisions, as we have seen this morning. Let us try again. When will be the first week in which we see delivery of his promised 40,000 more appointments?

Wes Streeting: After the performances I had to put up with when the right hon. Lady was at the Government Dispatch Box, she has some brass neck complaining at the Opposition Dispatch Box that I am not answering

her questions. She will know that we are working at pace to stand up 40,000 more appointments every week as our first step, as promised in our manifesto, and we will deliver. More than that, we will go into the next election with a record of which the right hon. Lady can only dream.

Victoria Atkins: After 14 years of opposition—two and a half of which the Secretary of State spent on the Front Bench and travelling around the world, funded by other Governments, to look at their healthcare systems—and more than 100 days in government, the right hon. Gentleman does not even know the start date of his own flagship policy. He is no Action Man; he is Anchorman.

Let us deal with Labour's cruel decision to slash winter fuel payments, which will add pressure not only to patients, but to the NHS. The NHS's deputy chief operating officer—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have got a lot of people to get in. Members on both Front Benches must be quicker.

Victoria Atkins: After Labour's cruel decision to slash winter fuel payments, which will add pressure to the NHS, its deputy chief operating officer warned that this winter our health service will not have the extra capacity or funding that it needs, which the Conservatives had previously provided. Why has the Secretary of State—

Mr Speaker: Order. I gave the right hon. Lady a hint to come to an end and not to carry on fully. It is unfair to Back Benchers, who I am trying to represent. I want a short answer.

Wes Streeting: The shadow Secretary of State questions the budget for this winter, but it was set by her Government. Is that finally an admission of failure on her part? Something else that we will have this winter, which we did not have last winter or the previous winter is no—

Mr Speaker: I call Lola McEvoy.

T2. [900647] **Lola McEvoy** (Darlington) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss a cross-departmental pilot in my constituency, bringing together the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, to tackle some of the immediate pressures that face child and adolescent mental health services in my area, and the impact on schooling, the local work force and family outcomes?

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): By cutting mental health waiting lists and intervening earlier, we can get this country back to health and back to work. There are 2.9 million people who are economically inactive, a large proportion owing to mental health issues. Many people can be helped back into work through talking therapies. We will put a mental health professional in every school and roll out 8,500 specialists. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter further.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat Health spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): In England, 4.4 million children have not seen a dentist for at least a year. Meanwhile, in Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin integrated health board, £1 million of dental funding went unspent in 2022-23. The system is clearly broken. When can we expect the Secretary of State to fix it?

Wes Streeting: It is precisely because of the situation the hon. Member describes—the poor services and, ironically, the underspend in the dentistry budget—that we will work not only to stand up the 700,000 urgent and emergency dental appointments we promised, but to do the prevention work for children in our schools.

T4. [900649] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Many people in my constituency are grateful that Slough will soon be home to a £25 million community diagnostic centre, which will help to reduce waiting lists, but many are also concerned that the local trust may be contracting out services for MRI scans. Does the Minister agree that, instead of just outsourcing, local trusts should, whenever possible, try to increase expertise and capacity in-house?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): We are committed to expanding community diagnostic capacity to build an NHS that is fit for the future. However, we are clear that independent sector providers have a role to play in supporting the NHS as trusted partners to recover elective services.

T3. [900648] **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I welcome all efforts to increase the number of GPs throughout England. Residents in new and growing towns such as Wixams in Mid Bedfordshire need a GP surgery. My local councils have been told that they need to put up the capital to deliver one, causing concern about cash flow and borrowing costs. Will the Minister meet me to discuss a new capital investment programme to ensure that residents in new towns such as Wixams do not have to wait for developer contributions to get the services they need?

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): As Lord Darzi outlined, capital development in the NHS is shocking, with a backlog of £11 billion in maintenance. I would be happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss his problem.

T5. [900650] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): Alan Petersen is a senior pharmacist in my constituency. He tells me that pharmacies have experienced high volatility in drugs pricing and big increases in bills in recent years. At the same time, they are expected to do far more in direct consultation with the public. Given the UK Government's jurisdiction over funding dispensing services in England and Wales, when do they plan to review pharmacy funding?

Stephen Kinnock: Obviously, health is a devolved matter and funding for pharmacies in Wales is the responsibility of the Welsh Government. Nevertheless, I pay tribute to the Welsh Government for securing a deal with pharmacies in Wales in line with DDRB—the review body on doctors' and dentists' remuneration—pay recommendations. I know that arrangements in England

affect matters in Wales and I am working as a matter of urgency to conclude the consultation on the community pharmacy contractual framework.

T6. [900651] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): To correct the Secretary of State, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill went through its Committee stage in the previous Parliament, with several amendments proposed across the Chamber, which the then Minister, Andrea Leadsom, agreed to take away and bring back. Will he incorporate those amendments so that we strengthen the Bill?

Wes Streeting: Whatever stage the Bill got to, it was not completed, was it? We will bring back a tobacco and vapes Bill that is stronger than the Conservatives' and I look forward to seeing if they support it.

T7. [900652] **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford) (Ind): Ingleside, the only birthing centre in the city of Salford, was temporarily closed in 2022 amid an acute midwifery staffing deficit across Greater Manchester. Will the Minister be kind enough to meet me to discuss what he can do to ensure that that unit reopens safely as soon as possible?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is right to raise the crisis of midwifery services. We have already had debates in Westminster Hall about this, and the issue affects the entire country. It is a priority for this Government, and I am of course happy to meet her to discuss her constituency issue.

T8. [900653] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Lord Darzi's report highlighted the importance of local focus and alignment to co-ordinating local services and improving health, contributing to reduced hospital admissions. In Oxfordshire, the integrated care board is proposing to remove Oxfordshire's dedicated place director. Will the Secretary of State give his support to place-based roles to maintain local authority alignment, as recommended in Lord Darzi's report?

Wes Streeting: I absolutely take the point the hon. Gentleman is making about the importance of place-based leadership. That is why one thing we will be looking to do, as part of the 10-year plan process, is to clarify roles and responsibilities in different parts of the system to ensure that we have better strategic place-based leadership.

T9. [900654] **Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Royal Stoke hospital is leading the way when it comes to treatment for stroke patients, but as with so many illnesses, prevention is better than cure. Can the Minister set out what this Government are doing to minimise the number of people affected by these life-altering events?

Andrew Gwynne: I agree with my hon. Friend, which is why we have set a goal for fewer lives being lost to cardiovascular disease. We will make it easier for people to have checks in the comfort of their own homes through, for example, the digital NHS health check and the new workplace trials.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Labour's cut to the winter fuel payment will cause 262,000 cold pensioners to seek NHS treatment, according

to the End Fuel Poverty Coalition. Do the Government agree with those figures, and if not, what are their own estimates?

Wes Streeting: The decision on the winter fuel allowance is not one that the Government took lightly, but we inherited a £22 billion hole in the nation's finances. We continue to stand behind vulnerable households by increasing the state pension with the triple lock, delivering the warm home discount and extending the household support fund to support the most vulnerable pensioners.

T10. [900655] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Prevention is the most important intervention to improve health outcomes, yet since 2015 the public health grant has fallen in value by 25%, and by 30% in York. Will the Minister say what he is doing to restore the value of the public health grant?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is incredibly knowledgeable about public health matters both at national and local level. Lord Darzi's investigation into the NHS set out the impact of past reductions in local government public health funding. We will confirm public health grant allocations for the next financial year as part of the forthcoming spending review, but the points she made have been made loudly and clearly.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Can the Secretary of State update the House on the status of Alan Milburn? Does he still attend meetings in the Department and have access to confidential information? Does he now have an official role in the Department? Does he still have private sector interests in the healthcare sector?

Wes Streeting: The right hon. Alan Milburn is alive, he is safe and we are treating him well.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and I stand here today as someone who was diagnosed, treated and cured of breast cancer this year by the amazing staff in the north-east, but not enough women are taking up their breast screening appointments. Will the Minister do more to raise awareness of, and access to, breast screening appointments, and may I urge all women to check themselves regularly?

Andrew Gwynne: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work in this area and for setting out eloquently her own personal experiences. Of course this Government will do more to raise awareness and enable more women to access breast screening services.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): A significant impediment to improving adult social care is the split of budget and responsibility and policy between the Secretary of State's Department and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Will he and colleagues work to remove that hurdle, to have better outcomes more cost-effectively delivered to improve the lives of all our constituents?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that risk. I assure him and the House that I and the Deputy Prime Minister, herself a former care worker, are working in lockstep to align strategy, policy and delivery.

Gaza and Lebanon

12.40 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on the situation in Gaza and Lebanon.

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) for raising this important question. We are deeply concerned about the continuing violence; we must avoid this conflict spiralling further out of control and into a wider regional war, which is in no one's interest.

The UK was the first G7 nation to call for an immediate ceasefire between Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel and for the implementation of a political plan that will enable civilians on both sides to return to their homes. The Prime Minister has spoken with international leaders including Prime Minister Netanyahu, King Abdullah of Jordan, President Macron and Chancellor Scholz to press the case for a ceasefire. This builds on extensive discussions by the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister at the United Nations with regional leaders.

We were gravely concerned to hear that five UN peacekeepers had been injured by the Israel Defence Forces. We reiterate that attacks on UN peacekeepers and UN members of staff are unacceptable. All parties must take all necessary measures to protect all UN personnel and premises and allow the UN to fulfil its mandate. The UK co-signed a joint statement by 34 United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon-contributing countries condemning recent attacks, calling for such actions to stop immediately and be adequately investigated.

The situation in Lebanon is worsening by the day. Civilian casualties are mounting and more than 25% of the Lebanese population has been displaced. On humanitarian needs in Lebanon, I announced £10 million of support to Lebanon to respond to the widespread lack of shelter and reduced access to water, hygiene and healthcare. This is in addition to the £5 million that we have already provided to UNICEF.

It is clear that a political solution consistent with resolution 1701 is the only way to restore the sovereignty, territorial integrity and stability of Lebanon. This requires an immediate ceasefire between Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel now and immediate negotiations to re-establish security and stability for the people living on either side of the Israeli-Lebanon border.

While the world turns its attention to Lebanon, we must not forget the situation for the people of Gaza: they are in a truly intolerable situation currently and winter will make them increasingly vulnerable including to communicable disease. All of Gaza's population now faces the risk of famine. Access to basic services, safe drinking water, shelter and healthcare are becoming harder by the day.

We are gravely concerned by the situation in northern Gaza in particular. Very little aid has entered northern Gaza since 1 October. Evacuation orders continue to be issued across northern Gaza but civilians are struggling to move to safety and we are worried that the IDF-designated humanitarian zone is overcrowded and unsafe. Israel must comply with international humanitarian

law and allow unfettered aid access. The message from this Government is clear: Israel could and must do more to ensure that aid reaches civilians in Gaza. It is unacceptable to restrict aid.

We have not lost sight of the destabilising role of Iran across the middle east through its support to militias including Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis. Iran must halt its attacks on Israel. To that end, we have placed a number of sanctions designations, and I welcome the question.

Mr Speaker: Order. The response should be for three minutes. Please can we try to stick to that? I call Andy McDonald, who will give us a fine example of a two-minute speech.

Andy McDonald: I thank the Minister. As Israel cuts off northern Gaza from essential supplies, it continues to strike Palestinian civilians while demanding their displacement. The attacks, such as those on the al-Aqsa hospital in central Gaza on Sunday night, show that there is nowhere safe to go. The sight of a patient on an IV drip burning to death in the flames of an airstrike on the tents of refugees will be the abiding image of this genocide. The 400,000 or so civilians left without food or supplies in northern Gaza are increasingly subject to airstrike, artillery and small arms fire from Israeli forces. Some 11,500 children have been killed in Gaza in a year: that is one classroom full of children every day for a single year. In Lebanon, we see Israeli strikes killing civilians, and now we hear that, in addition to invasions of UNIFIL posts—United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon positions—there are reports of attacks on UNIFIL forces of a chemical nature.

On UNIFIL, I acknowledge the Foreign Secretary's call to Israel and all parties to uphold their obligations, but repeatedly calling on Israel to uphold its obligations has no impact. Unless forced to change, Israel will continue to commit further outrages and breaches of international law in Lebanon and the west bank and continue its starvation and targeting of civilians in Gaza. Even Lord Cameron has today talked about individual sanctions for far-right Israeli Ministers. Will the Foreign Secretary consider those and other measures?

A partial arms embargo has not stopped the attacks on civilians either. Surely that has to be extended. The Government told me in a written answer:

"The US Government manages the sale of F-35 aircraft to Israel and the F-35 Global Supply Chain."

In the interests of protecting civilians in Gaza, I ask the Government to open discussions with the US to remove Israel from the end-use destinations of the F-35 global supply chain. There are many partners for peace in the region whose efforts are rejected by Israel, but the UK has an important role to play. Given that recognition of Palestine is a prerequisite for peace, and not a by-product of it, is it not now time to join the global majority in doing so?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the number of important points that he makes. First, he referred to footage that has been circulating widely. It is one of many instances of very disturbing footage that many of us and many of our constituents will have seen. Of course, the Government look very closely at all those reports, and we are concerned by all reports.

We will continue to take very seriously our responsibilities when it comes to conducting international humanitarian law assessments in that case or any other such case.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the UK Government's position on UNIFIL. The UK Government could not have been clearer on that. We were appalled to hear that UN peacekeepers had been injured by Israeli fire. Alongside international allies and partners, we condemn the attacks on UN peacekeepers. I think that is crystal clear.

My hon. Friend also referred to Palestinian statehood and recognition. The UK is working with partners to support a path to long-term peace and stability with a two-state solution at its heart. That means a safe and secure Israel alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. We want to be clear: Palestinian statehood is the right of the Palestinian people; it is not in the gift of any neighbour, and it is essential to the long-term security of Israel.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Palestinians face a devastating humanitarian crisis. The UK must continue to play a leading role in alleviating that suffering. There are still hostages in Gaza, including the British citizen Emily Damari. Can the Minister update the House on efforts to secure her release and the release of other hostages who are in such awful jeopardy?

The previous Government trebled our Gaza aid commitment and facilitated aid flows by land, sea, and air. Will the Minister confirm that those efforts continue? Can the Minister give us an update on the implementation of the Colonna recommendations on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency?

Turning to Lebanon, British nationals are urged to follow the UK travel advice. Clearly, resolution 1701 has not been implemented. Hezbollah has mobilised south of the Litani river and fired thousands of rockets into northern Israel. What steps are the Government taking with the UN to secure implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1701 and get Hezbollah to pull back?

Just as aid workers are not a target, UN peacekeepers cannot be a target. Does the Minister agree with Israel's assessment that Hezbollah has built thousands of tunnel shafts next to the chapter 6 UNIFIL peacekeepers? Has that put their mission in such grave danger that the UN must now review its mandate?

This is a grave situation. There is no equivalence between Iran's terrorist proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, and the state of Israel. Israel has a right to defend itself against an existential threat. But too many innocent civilians are losing their lives or seeing their lives irreparably changed. The UK must continue to support them with humanitarian aid.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the many important points she made. First, she commented on the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Clearly, we currently see a truly desperate and appalling situation for many people in Gaza. More than 90% of the population has now been displaced, and many people have been displaced numerous times, with some even having been forced to move 10 times. As I mentioned in my response to the urgent question, all of Gaza's population now faces the risk of famine, as well as many other challenges

around water, sanitation and the spread of communicable disease, and of course, as I said, winter is approaching. This really is a very concerning time.

The hon. Lady talked about the situation in relation to hostages. I can confirm that the Foreign Secretary has met or spoken to all the families of UK and UK-linked hostages who have been cruelly detained by Hamas, and he has heard at first hand the suffering that those families have endured. The Prime Minister also met the families of UK hostages in London on 11 and 14 September, and he has hosted them at No. 10. We continue to raise the cases of UK and UK-linked hostages at every single opportunity.

The hon. Lady talked about the need to ensure that aid is reaching Gaza and that the UK plays its part. This Government take that responsibility very seriously indeed. As the new Development Minister, I was concerned to ensure that I saw the delivery of the aid that the new UK Government have committed to, and that included visiting Jordan so that I could see the situation on the ground for myself. Clearly, however, it has got more challenging since then. None the less, we will continue to work to ensure that much-needed aid is received. That work has included, for example, an announcement of additional support to UK-Med, as well as to UNICEF, and a joint UK-Kuwait approach to funding to help UNICEF to deliver lifesaving aid to almost 2.5 million people in Gaza and in Yemen.

The hon. Lady talked about the situation in Lebanon. The UK Government's position on this is clear: any UK citizens must leave Lebanon immediately. Clear advice about that is now available, and has been for some time, on the FCDO website.

Finally, the hon. Lady talked about resolution 1701 on Lebanon. We are clear that a political solution consistent with resolution 1701 is the only way to restore the sovereignty, territorial integrity and stability of Lebanon, and to restore security and stability for the people living on either side of the Israel-Lebanon border. We will continue to support it and to advocate for it.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): My right hon. Friend speaks with great eloquence about how completely wrong it is for UN peacekeepers to be attacked in the way that they have been. They put their bodies on the line, keeping warring parties apart, and they were able to maintain peace—a rough peace—on the blue line for nearly 18 years before the conflict began. Is it possible for us to go further than just condemning it?

Given that there are 10,000 UNIFIL peacekeepers from 50 countries and that the full complement ought to be 15,000—Italy provides 1,000, France and Spain provide over 600, Ireland provides nearly 400 and Germany provides more than 100, while we provide one—might it be possible for the Government to reconsider the number of peacekeepers who are sent to UNIFIL, and whether Britain could make a bigger contribution?

Anneliese Dodds: I welcome my right hon. Friend to her rightful place as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. She is right that UNIFIL's role is absolutely crucial. It was already incredibly important in southern Lebanon,

[Anneliese Dodds]

of course, but it is now even more important given the escalating situation in the region. The UK fully supports UNIFIL's work. We of course keep our support for all UN agencies continuously under review, and that applies to UNIFIL as well.

I have realised that I failed to respond to the question from the shadow Minister about the Colonna report in relation to another UN agency, UNRWA. To be clear, the UK has engaged substantively on the recommendations from the Colonna report—I have done so myself with both Commissioner-General Lazzarini and his deputy—and we continue to work on them, including by providing financial support towards implementing the report.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): No one can be left unmoved by the level of human suffering we have seen recently on our screens. We need immediate ceasefires in Gaza and Lebanon more than ever. Liberal Democrats were appalled to learn of the unjustifiable attacks on UN peacekeepers in Lebanon by the Israel Defence Forces. Israel must stop these attacks and comply with international humanitarian law. The mass displacement orders issued by the IDF to 400,000 Palestinians in northern Gaza, and the ongoing bombings, place the population at grave risk. The international community must press for their protection.

Will the Minister commit to increasing the supply of aid to the region? UK aid to Lebanon has been cut by 90% since 2019. Does the Minister agree that now is the time to use our sanctions regime against the extremist Ministers, Ben-Gvir and Smotrich? Following the Government's new sanctions on Iran announced yesterday, will they go further and now proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising those very important matters. We are obviously of the same mind when it comes to the condemnation of attacks on UNIFIL, as I set out a few moments ago, and also in terms of concern about the humanitarian situation in both Gaza and Lebanon.

I discussed in detail with the Lebanese ambassador to the UK the need to ensure that there was not only pre-positioned aid but support for children in particular. I am sure that many Members will be aware that the public schools of a number of the children who have been displaced in Lebanon have been, understandably, turned into shelters, which of course means that the children are unable to learn. That is alongside the impact on those displaced. Hence, we have ensured that as a new Government we have provided additional support, as I set out in my remarks earlier. We believe it is important to provide that additional support.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about those who have expressed views that are inflammatory or even worse than that—remarks that are appallingly discriminatory. The UK Government have been wholehearted in their condemnation of those remarks.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about sanctions. Of course, the UK will always keep our sanctions regime closely under review, as he would expect, and we will announce any changes to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It feels a pathetic understatement to say that the situation in Gaza, particularly northern Gaza, grows ever more desperate and urgent—particularly as I have been saying that for a year. The UN says that it has not been allowed to deliver essential supplies, including food, since October. Last week, 15 UK and Irish humanitarian organisations warned that the UK is failing to uphold international law and that, without bold and immediate action from the UK, Palestinians in northern Gaza are facing an imminent existential threat. Please, Minister, give us more details on exactly what this Government are doing to make sure that the retired generals' "surrender or starve" strategy is not being implemented. We need to do more than just debate in this Chamber.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her remarks, and congratulate her on her leadership of the International Development Committee. This Government have shown that we are absolutely determined to play our part with UK leadership on these issues, which are of such desperate concern to our constituents and, of course, to the whole world. That has meant there has been serious engagement at every level, including in the first days of the new Government coming into office. There has been engagement at the highest level from the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and me—right across Government—with our counterparts, whether they be the Palestinian Authority, the Lebanese Government, the Israeli Government, other regional actors or the US. More broadly, we are determined to ensure that the ceasefires that are so desperately needed are put into place and that we play our part in facing up to the humanitarian crisis that we see unfolding.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Even if you care little for the tens of thousands of dead Arabs and the millions displaced; even if you could not give a damn for the children shot in the head or the burning hospital inmates in northern Gaza; if your only concern is the security of Israel, can the Minister see any argument why yet another massacre of Gazans will enhance that security in the future? If she cannot, when will the Government stop wringing their hands at this conflict and take positive, active steps to enforce international law and bring about a ceasefire?

Anneliese Dodds: I could not disagree more with the right hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the UK Government's approach. I mentioned a few moments ago the engagement that has taken place, but I want to be crystal clear that the new UK Government have always supported international humanitarian law. That is why we have been clear from the first moment of entering office that we support the mandate of the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. We reviewed arms export licences—something that the previous Government had not done—because we believed that was a legal imperative. We will continue to take action to show that UK leadership, which the UK population and those globally are looking to our country to deliver.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Loads of Members are standing, and this urgent question will run until around 1.50 pm. With short questions and short answers, we will hopefully get everyone in. As a good example, I call Naz Shah.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel, has said:

“Israel has perpetrated a concerted policy to destroy Gaza’s healthcare system as part of a broader assault on Gaza, committing war crimes and the crime against humanity of extermination with relentless and deliberate attacks on medical personnel and facilities”. The United Nations does not make those claims lightly. Have those assessments also been made by our Government’s legal teams? In the light of that, what further actions are being taken to protect international law, life itself in Gaza, and human rights?

Mr Speaker: That was not quite the example.

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend mentioned the critical issue of healthcare in Gaza, which has been of considerable concern to the UK Government. That is why we announced £5.5 million of new medical aid to UK-Med to operate its field hospitals in Gaza. I met UK-Med representatives to understand more about its response and to ensure that we were playing our part. It is also why we have helped UNICEF to support vulnerable families in Gaza with water, healthcare and specialist treatment. We take our responsibility to international humanitarian law very seriously, ensuring that we conduct the assessments that are needed legally.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Mohamed is a consultant NHS surgeon—in fact, he was mine when I was in hospital with sepsis just a few months ago. His parents are in the Jabalia refugee camp. They are elderly. His father has no colon, and his mother has diabetes. They cannot move, and there is nowhere safe for them to move. If they tried to move, he tells me that everything is being shot by drones and bodies are strewn in the street. Will the Minister impress upon the Israeli Government that Mohamed’s parents, the sick, the elderly and those who have stayed to care for them are not legitimate targets of war, no matter how many times they might have been told to move? Furthermore, if arrest warrants are issued for Netanyahu, as has been trailed, will this Government support it?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a very important issue and I really want to get everybody in, but you are going to have to help each other. I do not want people to miss out.

Anneliese Dodds: We are very much aware that more than 85% of Gaza is under evacuation orders. That is causing chronic overcrowding, with people desperately seeking shelter. Last month, the number of humanitarian trucks that entered Gaza was the lowest since the start of the year. The hon. Lady asked about our message to Israel and the representations that we have made: we call on Israel to take all possible steps to avoid civilian casualties, to allow unfettered aid into Gaza through all land routes, to respect the UN’s mandate and to allow the UN and its humanitarian partners to operate effectively—particularly in relation to the most vulnerable, as she rightly mentioned.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): In the past few days alone, Israel has burned people alive by bombing a tent camp at a hospital, killed children by bombing a school and fired on UN peacekeepers. We have had a year of this. As a Palestinian lawyer told me, Britain knows exactly what to do, because it rightly did it against Russia after its illegal invasion of Ukraine: impose sanctions on arms, trade and officials. That is how to get Israel to stop doing what it is doing. When will Israel be held to the same standards for its war crimes and violations of international law?

Anneliese Dodds: It is very important that the UK takes its responsibilities seriously. The hon. Member talked about some of the reports that we have seen—the UK Government are looking very closely at them and we are determined to ensure that we play our part in ensuring that international law is upheld. He talked about sanctions policy; as I mentioned before, we will always keep that under review, but he should be aware that the UK has already sanctioned eight people responsible for perpetrating and inciting human rights abuses against Palestinian communities in the west bank. We will continue to keep these issues under review.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Does bombing a hospital and having patients on IV drips burn to death in their beds constitute a war crime?

Anneliese Dodds: As I mentioned, the UK Government are looking carefully at all reports. There has been considerable footage that is extremely disturbing—not just the footage that many of us have seen, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but other types as well. It is very important that the UK Government look at them carefully and make proper assessments. There is a legal regime for doing that, and this UK Government take those legal responsibilities seriously because we know the impact that they can have.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that we urgently need a ceasefire in both Lebanon and Gaza, but also, with the grotesque level of civilian deaths, we need international law to be observed and breaches of it investigated properly?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. Let me underline again that the UK Government want an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages still cruelly detained by Hamas and much more aid to enter Gaza. The death and destruction in Gaza is intolerable, and the UK Government were the first Government in the G7 to call for a ceasefire in Lebanon. It is critical that international humanitarian law is upheld, and we take that responsibility very seriously.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Some 60,000 people were displaced in northern Israel, which led to the attacks in Lebanon targeting Hezbollah. When Israel responds to Iran’s attack, will we say that Israel should cease fire? If so, why are we not talking to further regional partners to de-escalate from Iran’s provocation in Gaza, Lebanon and directly?

Anneliese Dodds: The new Government are undertaking that engagement continuously with countries in the region and beyond. We have a responsibility to be a voice for de-escalation and an active partner pushing seriously for that de-escalation.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): As the Minister outlined, the humanitarian situation in northern Gaza is so dire that unconventional means of getting aid into it might need to be considered. What conversations is she having with colleagues about airdropping aid into northern Gaza to ease the humanitarian situation there?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I discussed these matters in detail when I was in Jordan, as well as with a number of humanitarian organisations that are active on the ground and in my meetings with UNRWA. There are challenges to delivering aid through airdrops—they are not as well targeted and can cause additional problems. It is important that land routes—the most effective way of getting aid into Gaza—are enabled. We need more trucks to get into Gaza and more access for people to get that aid. It is unacceptable where there are restrictions on aid.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): We all recognise the horrendous scale of the civilian casualties in the region. Does the Minister agree that the Government need to try and unite international opinion to get the remaining hostages released and deal with the terrorist threat from those who want to annihilate all Israelis?

Anneliese Dodds: The Government have been seeking precisely to work globally and with countries in the region to de-escalate to ensure that civilians are protected. The UK Government recognise that Israel has the right to defend itself, but we must see a future where, ultimately, we have a two-state solution. Most immediately, we must see a ceasefire in both Gaza and Lebanon.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): While the situation in Gaza is beyond devastating, there have been over 1,400 settler attacks in the west bank. The Minister says she is keeping sanctions under review. What will it take to impose sanctions on settlers and on the settler organisations funding settlers to carry out these atrocious attacks?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. The UK Government's position could not be clearer: settlements are illegal under international law. They present an obstacle to peace and threaten the physical viability of a two-state solution. During his visit in July, the Foreign Secretary met Palestinians displaced in the west bank. He was horrified to hear of the acts of violence that have been carried out by settlers. The UK Government have strongly condemned settler violence and inciteful remarks, as we talked about before, and we urge Israel to take greater action to hold violent settlers to account and clamp down on those who seek to inflame tensions.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon has failed to prevent Hezbollah's rearmament in southern Lebanon since 2006, sitting idly by while they amassed 150,000 missiles

with support from Iran. Those missiles are now being used on Israeli communities, with UNIFIL and Lebanese civilians being used as human shields by the terror group. What discussions has the Minister had with her Israeli counterparts to counter that threat?

Anneliese Dodds: We talked about Hezbollah's approach. The United Kingdom Government have been absolutely resolute in condemning Hezbollah's attacks on Israel over the past 11 months, which have driven more than 60,000 people from their homes. Those unjustified attacks have brought misery to ordinary people in Lebanon and Israel. We have repeatedly urged Lebanese Hezbollah to engage with the US-led discussions to resolve their disagreements diplomatically. We have made those points to every country in the region that the hon. Gentleman would expect.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Ind): Let us be absolutely clear in this House: the seriousness of Israel's violations of international law, as evidenced by countless international organisations, could not be more obvious, but the total lack of accountability has led to the international rules-based order collapsing around us as we watch children starve and teenagers burn to death in Israeli airstrikes on hospital compounds. The international community must now end the empty words. We need concrete steps, Minister. Will she today immediately announce an end to the arms sales, and immediately announce applying sanctions for the war crimes and breaches of international law?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government have been absolutely clear. Israel must act in accordance with international humanitarian law and must take all possible steps to avoid civilian casualties. We continue to urge Israel to fulfil its promise to flood Gaza with aid, and we urge Israel to permit immediate and unfettered access for the International Committee of the Red Cross to detention centres. The Foreign Secretary and other Ministers will continue to raise these issues with the Israeli Government. My hon. Friend must surely be aware that, following a review of Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law in respect of its activity in Gaza, the Government suspended around 30 export licences to Israel.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): We all want the killings to stop, we abhor the deaths, and we all want a ceasefire as soon as possible, but clearly the fastest way to a ceasefire is for Hamas to return the hostages, and for Hamas and Hezbollah to stop attacking Israel with missiles. That is the fastest way to a ceasefire. The western nations have failed to convince those proscribed terror organisations—this House appears to have forgotten about that—to stop making these attacks. Israel has concluded, therefore, that the fastest way to defend itself and ensure the safety of the region is to destroy Hamas and destroy Hezbollah.

Anneliese Dodds: I have to say that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's characterisation, certainly of the UK Government's leadership on these issues. The UK Government have been absolutely clear that we must see an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages, a flood of aid into Gaza, and, ultimately, the two-state solution that the people of Israel and Palestinians so rightly deserve.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): The situation in Gaza goes way beyond Israel's right to defend itself. The restriction on aid going into Gaza is unacceptable and words have not shifted Israel's position one iota. Is it not time for the Government to recognise that we need to go beyond words and start talking to our international allies about how we can force Israel to allow aid into Gaza and get both sides to call a ceasefire?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We have gone well beyond words. Clearly, diplomacy around the humanitarian situation is very important, but we have also been determined to ensure that the UK plays its part in getting that much-needed aid in as quickly as possible. The UK continues to provide core relief items. It has already provided 78,000 shelter items, 76,000 wound care kits and 1.3 million items of medicine that have been desperately needed.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). Tehran will not let Hamas and Hezbollah stop, and the lunatic right who are propping up Netanyahu will not let him sue for peace either. The western powers and everybody else can have as many conversations and urgings as they wish—those have been going on for months—but they are delivering precious little benefit, apart from more blood, heartache and tears on all sides. I know it is a difficult thing for a Minister to deal with at the Dispatch Box, but at some point, Washington, London and others surely have to realise that their current diplomatic strategy is not working and that something else needs to be tried. Otherwise, we will be standing here for months to come wringing our hands continually and expressing support, condemnation, solidarity or whatever, and all we will see are the bodies of the dead piling up on both sides.

Anneliese Dodds: In actual fact, the UK Government have been very clear in our condemnation of Iran's role in this situation. We have condemned in the strongest terms Iran's attack against Israel. We have been clear that it escalated an incredibly dangerous situation. It has pushed the region even closer to the brink and that cannot be tolerated. The Foreign Secretary has taken this up directly with the Iranian First Minister. He has condemned Iran's attack on Israel and was clear that Iran must take immediate steps to de-escalate the situation to prevent further death in the middle east.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the rejection of a two-state solution is against the interests of both the Israelis and Palestinians, and that we need a path towards a sustainable and long-term, lasting peace?

Anneliese Dodds: I absolutely do, and that has been the long-standing position of this Government, both in opposition and now in office. We really need to see that two-state solution—it can no longer be just words; it must become a reality. We will do all we can to get to a situation where that right of Palestinians and of Israelis is realised.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Deliberate targeting of UN peacekeepers is always unacceptable, but given the evident failure of UN Security

Council resolution 1701 and UNIFIL in intent and mission, what does the Minister suggest Israel is to do when it is facing incessant attacks on its population by a terrorist organisation backed by a state? Is it to tolerate the building of tunnels and attack positions in territories south of the Litani river indefinitely?

Anneliese Dodds: The Government's view is that UNIFIL's role in southern Lebanon is absolutely critical, given the escalating situation in the region, but it was incredibly important in protecting people in southern Lebanon before that as well. The UK fully supports UNIFIL's work, as mandated in UN Security Council resolution 1701. That is a very firm basis for its operation, and we back that basis wholeheartedly.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): The Minister mentioned international law many times in her statement. My constituents are appalled at the inconsistency in the way in which international law and human rights are applied, depending on who is committing the atrocity and who make up the targeted civilian population. Will this Government finally do the right thing and end all arms sales to Israel, and will the Minister express a simple condemnation of Israel's actions, including the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government are absolutely clear about the fundamental importance of the international rule of humanitarian law, and about the fact that it must be applied without fear or favour, whoever we are talking about and wherever in the world they are. The UK respects the jurisdiction and independence of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, and the hon. Member can see that commitment to the rule of law reflected in many decisions that the new Government have made—including, of course, the review of Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law in respect of its activity in Gaza, which led to the suspension of about 30 arms export licences to Israel.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Minister has rightly acknowledged the abominable situation faced by people in Gaza and in southern Lebanon at the present time. The fundamental question asked by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) was simply this: if we condemn the acts being undertaken by the Israel Defence Forces—the killing of civilians, and the killing of people in hospitals and schools—why are we still supplying Israel with the weapons that enable them to undertake these military activities?

Anneliese Dodds: In the repeated messages that we have conveyed to Israeli counterparts, the UK Government have been absolutely clear about the need to take all possible steps to avoid civilian casualties, to allow unfettered aid into Gaza through all land routes, and to enable the UN and its humanitarian partners to operate effectively. As I have said many times during these exchanges, we have also been very clear on the subject of attacks on UNIFIL. The right hon. Member is, I believe, well aware of the decisions taken by the UK Government in respect of the arms export regime, and I will not go over that again, because we have already debated it in the House.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, a UN commission of inquiry found that

“Israeli security forces have deliberately killed, detained and tortured medical personnel and targeted medical vehicles while tightening their siege on Gaza”,

and said that

“These actions constitute...war crimes”.

Can the Secretary of State tell me how the UK Government will hold Israel to account for such appalling conduct?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government look very carefully indeed at any reports suggesting that there has been a breaking of international humanitarian law. We have been particularly concerned about the situation of many healthcare workers. We have seen many of them being killed, and that includes UK and UK-linked personnel. We continue to look carefully at all these representations, including those that have come from the UN.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): A moment ago, the Minister supported the current UN Security Council resolution 1701, which was established under chapter VI of the United Nations charter and relates to peacekeeping. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), said earlier that we could potentially deploy British troops to supplement UNIFIL. Will the Minister ensure that no British troops are deployed into that situation until there is a peace to keep, or, under chapter VII of the charter, peace enforcement?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government have been very clear that it is through diplomatic channels, and also through our humanitarian effort, that we are seeking to do all we can to promote de-escalation. Any decisions relating to any resolution would of course be taken very seriously indeed by our Defence Secretary and by the whole Government, but it has been through those humanitarian and diplomatic levers that we have been straining every sinew to de-escalate and improve the situation of the populations who are so badly impacted at the moment.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I think it is fair to say that calling on the Israeli Government to change their action has not worked and will not work. There are currently three Bills in the Israeli Knesset to outlaw the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and the Foreign Secretary has said in this House that no other agency can deliver aid on the scale that is needed. Will the Minister show political and UK leadership, and demonstrate explicit support for UNRWA?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter, because we have a number of times—it has been a personal priority for me. Soon after becoming Minister for Development, I ensured that I met Commissioner-General Lazzarini, and I also met his deputy when I was in Jordan. At the UN General Assembly, we were very clear that we supported the mandate of UNRWA, whose role is incredibly important. The Colonna review was important for the organisation, and the UK Government have supported UNRWA in implementing it. We are clear about the fact that it is a critical organisation, not just in Gaza but in the wider region as well.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The far-right Netanyahu Government continue to assert that they are complying with international law, when in fact they are acting without restraint. That is clear from the atrocities in northern Gaza, the Israeli settlement in the west bank, and completely inadequate evacuation orders issued to densely populated suburbs in Beirut. Will the Minister recognise that the UK is complicit in these war crimes due to the UK Government's continued refusal to stop all arms sales to Israel?

Anneliese Dodds: I regret the way in which the hon. Member phrased that question. I believe that the UK Government did exactly what they needed to do, legally and constitutionally, in ensuring that there was a proper review operating, with the requirement of international humanitarian law being taken seriously. That led to the decision to suspend 30 arms export licences, and it showed a Government taking those responsibilities seriously, which we will continue to do.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The UN has confirmed that it has not been able to deliver food aid to northern Gaza since 1 October, which means that for two weeks, no food, no water and no aid has reached the region. We now hear reports that Netanyahu has a “surrender or starve” plan, which, if carried out, will leave hundreds of thousands of Palestinians without the essentials. International humanitarian law prohibits the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare. Does the Minister agree that this is totally inexcusable, and that Israel must stop using starvation as a weapon of war? Will she provide an update on the efforts that we will make to ensure that the situation does not continue, and will she assure the House that we will not sit by and watch Palestinians starve to death?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government have been absolutely clear about our concern for the very large numbers of people in northern Gaza who are in extreme need. We are concerned about the fact that the entire population of Gaza are now at risk of starvation, but the situation is particularly intense for those in northern Gaza. My hon. Friend is right in saying that, disturbingly, it appears that there has been no access since 1 October, as there should have been. We have been clear that Israel must stand by its commitment to flood Gaza with aid, and we continue to push for that at every opportunity.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I fully appreciate what the Minister says about the engagement of the Government in standing up for international law, but, with respect, it has been a year now, and every time we come here we hear the same thing: that the situation has got worse. The entire region is living in fear, and the death toll is unimaginable. Have we not reached the point where we must accept that continually saying “This has to change” is not enough? We need to hear from the Government what actions will actually be taken to convince both sides that we need a ceasefire and we need the humanitarian aid. Ninety-seven hostages have been in captivity for a year, and we need more than engagement and reminders of their plight; so what are the Government going to do?

Anneliese Dodds: The new UK Government have made it absolutely clear that when it comes to international humanitarian law, the jurisdiction of both the ICC and

the ICJ is paramount. It is legitimate, and we have been explicit about that. We have called repeatedly for a ceasefire, and we believe that bilateral and multilateral engagement are very important. The UK should be seeking to exercise leadership in a move towards de-escalation in the region, but, on top of that, we have of course sought to fulfil our responsibilities in respect of provision of the humanitarian aid that is so desperately needed by people there.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I have been heartened to hear the Minister's call for a ceasefire in Lebanon and Gaza. Can she assure me and my constituents that we are evaluating and exhausting every available diplomatic effort not only to secure that ceasefire, but to get much-needed aid into those regions?

Anneliese Dodds: Yes, I absolutely can. The UK Government take our responsibility incredibly seriously. We worked very hard to ensure that we were the first country in the G7 to call for a ceasefire in Lebanon. We have worked very hard to encourage other countries to do the same, and we have consistently been calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza as well. That must be followed by the surge of aid needed, but before that, we need to make sure that there is no blockage of aid into Gaza and that people in Lebanon are adequately provided for as well. I have been working very hard on that as the Minister for Development.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I strongly endorse the words of the hon. Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald). I note that the Minister perpetually uses the word "condemn" when she refers to Israel's actions, yet last week the Prime Minister came to this House and said that he stands with the far-right Israeli Government. They are one of the most powerful and sophisticated military powers on the planet, yet only weeks ago we used our military to help defend Israel. Where is the equivalent action to defend the innocent people of Gaza and Lebanon? It simply cannot carry on like this. Surely the Government must stop pretending that they are bipartisan in this matter.

Anneliese Dodds: I must admit that I find some of the hon. Gentleman's comments rather difficult to understand. The Prime Minister could not have been clearer in stating that Israel has the right to defend itself; it absolutely does have that right. Israel is a democratic nation, and it is important that democratic nations have that right. However, it is of course important that international humanitarian law is adhered to, and I believe that this Government have demonstrated our commitment to that principle in the actions we have taken, including those of the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, me and others since our election.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Last night the Attorney General, who was giving the 2024 Bingham lecture, made a powerful case for the UK resuming its leading role in promoting international law after 14 years of back-peddalling. Nowhere is that role more needed than in Gaza and Lebanon, so what further steps will the Government take to stop the barbaric killing of civilians by Israeli forces operating in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Lebanon, with no pretence of following humanitarian law?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those important points. I had the privilege of hearing the Attorney General restate the UK's commitment to international humanitarian law at an event commemorating the foundation of the Geneva conventions, and this is an important time for us to reflect on their importance, given that it is many decades since they were introduced out of the rubble of the second world war. We have a clear commitment, and it must apply without fear or favour. This Government have been determined to ensure that that is the case in Gaza and Lebanon, but there is also grave concern about humanitarian law being broken in many other areas, including Sudan, Yemen and other contexts.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The humanitarian crisis in the middle east is another example of how the previous Government's cuts to the aid budget have left us responding to crises with one hand tied behind our back. Since 2019, official development assistance spending in Lebanon has fallen from over £200 million to just £7 million. Will the Minister look at replenishing that fund?

Anneliese Dodds: I share the hon. Lady's concern about the impacts of the previous Government's approach to financing overseas development. During a turbulent period, we saw in-donor refugee costs spiral out of control and eat up parts of the aid budget, which I have been very concerned about, and the Government are determined to deal with the situation.

When it comes to support for Lebanon, we are determined to do what we can with other countries and international organisations to support those in need. That has led to the announcement of £5 million for UNICEF, which was an early announcement to make sure that we were pre-positioning the support that, unfortunately, has now become necessary. In addition to that, we have announced £10 million for Lebanon to respond to the lack of shelter and reduced access to clean water, hygiene and healthcare.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I understand that the Minister is in a very difficult position, and I also understand that a huge amount of work is going on behind the scenes to try to make progress in getting towards a ceasefire. However, she has heard Members of different parties say that the current action is not enough. The consistent, egregious breaches of international law by a supposed ally cannot be allowed to continue unfettered. We have to have a more detailed response from the UK and its allies, as we did when there were breaches of international law against UNIFIL. Will the Minister commit to coming back to this House with a statement on what actions will be taken to send a clear message to Israel that it is engaging in unacceptable behaviour?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making those points. Regardless of which Benches Members sit on, I do not think there will be anyone in this House who is not deeply concerned about the situation impacting on people in Gaza—particularly northern Gaza—and Lebanon. Of course, we are now seeing the conflict impact on people who fled from Syria to Lebanon, so this is a very dire situation. The UK Government will do all that we can to de-escalate and to secure the

[Anneliese Dodds]

ceasefires that are so desperately needed, and we would be more than happy to come back to the House to discuss these matters and our activity. We know how important these issues are to many of us and, indeed, many of our constituents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers, and for the confidence that she clearly shows. Does she agree that the presence of tunnels within proximity of UN facilities is concerning? It is an indication that the type of underground facilities prevalent in Gaza are being used in Lebanon, and it is a clear indication of the scale of the Hamas and Hezbollah terrorists' reach. We need to deal with the reach of terrorism. Rather than berate Israel, we should support Israel to eradicate all terrorism in the region.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question, and for his kind words. The UK Government are clear that it is wrong to use civilians in that manner, and it is really important that civilians are protected. We have seen an appalling number of civilians being killed. A number of colleagues have already stated the figures in this debate, and the UK Government will do all that we can to de-escalate and to secure the ceasefires that are needed.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): Why do the Government allow to remain in our country Israeli diplomats who advocate a "Greater Israel", and who oppose a Palestinian state and therefore the potential for a two-state solution, contrary to United Nations resolutions?

Anneliese Dodds: I know that the right hon. Gentleman will be well aware that particular rules apply to diplomatic representation. The UK Government's position is that diplomacy is incredibly important, given the gravity of the situation affecting Gaza and Lebanon. We will do all that we can through diplomatic means, including diplomatic representation of Israel and other regional actors, to de-escalate and to secure the ceasefires that are needed.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): It is very clear that many in this Chamber believe that our Government are not doing enough. Will the Minister please acknowledge that sentiment? Given the disproportionate scale of killing, will she please apply consistency to our approach and commit to suspending all arms sales to Israel?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question. In the spirit of constructive engagement, I would appreciate any clear suggestions for action. I do not believe that his broad characterisation actually reflects the engagement of the new UK Government, which has been intense since our first days of entering office to ensure that the UK is supplying the leadership needed. Above all, we must ensure that those who are badly affected by this dreadful situation are being supported with aid, and that we see the ceasefire that is so desperately needed. I have set out the fact that the UK has complied with our legal obligations around assessing arms export licences; we took that responsibility very seriously indeed. We have debated it thoroughly in this House, and rightly so.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The author Howard Jacobson recently wrote that the sustained media coverage of children being killed in Gaza was functioning as a new "blood libel" against the Jewish people. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the horrendous role that that blood libel has played in the violent pogroms and horrendous antisemitism across history. Will she clearly state that the accurate reporting of the terrible deaths of thousands of children and, equally importantly, the humanising of those vibrant lives cut short by the actions of the Israel Defence Forces are a critical part of the work of a free media in our country, so that our constituents can see the horrendous suffering that is happening in Gaza and Lebanon right now?

Anneliese Dodds: Accurate reporting is critical. We are seeing large numbers of images and pieces of footage circulating that are incredibly disturbing, and perhaps for the first time our constituents are able to access this wherever they are, because they can see it on their smartphones, not just on their television screens. It is important that we have accuracy, so that there is clarity for our domestic population about what has taken place, and so that, for example, assessments around humanitarian law can be taken in a fully informed manner. That is how they must be taken legally.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): UN peacekeepers, including 380 Irish soldiers, are currently being intimidated and threatened by the IDF, with armaments pointing directly at Irish troops who have protected innocent Lebanese civilians against Hezbollah and the IDF for decades. The IDF has repeatedly violated international law, including around armed conflict, and it treats hospitals, schools, churches and tents as legitimate targets. I know that the Minister agrees that the UN peacekeeping mandate must be upheld. If Israel continues on its current path, when will the UK use the arms trade and the official sanctions at its disposal?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend rightly points out the critical role of peacekeepers, and we recognise that that includes Irish nationals as well as nationals from a number of other countries. I am grateful to her for underlining that. We are clear that UNIFIL's role in southern Lebanon is crucial. It has a clear mandate from UN Security Council resolution 1701, and we will continue to support that mandate.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Today, we are joined in the Gallery by my friends from the excellent health and human rights NGO Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, and we pay tribute to their brave work. Together with other Israeli human rights organisations, today they have warned that the international community must act now to stop Israel forcibly transferring the population of northern Gaza. The Government must do more. What concrete new action are the Government taking to stop this happening?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and to all those who are engaged in promoting the health of those in Gaza, which is under so much pressure at the moment. The UK Government are concerned in particular about the potential for communicable disease, especially with winter approaching. I pay tribute to all those

working in that area. The UK Government have been very clear here. Already, more than 85% of Gaza is under evacuation orders, causing chronic overcrowding. People are desperately seeking shelter. The situation in northern Gaza is appalling at the moment, and we will continue to raise our concern about this with all the parties, regionally, internationally and multilaterally.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the Minister has repeated the Government's support for a two-state solution and for an independent Palestinian state. A simple question to the Minister: when? What more do the Palestinian people have to do to convince the Government to follow in the steps of other European Governments and give immediate recognition to that state?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. The UK Government are crystal clear here. Palestinian statehood is the right of the Palestinian people, as I said a few moments ago in this Chamber. It is not in the gift of any neighbour, and it is also essential to the long-term security of Israel. My hon. Friend asked about timing. The Government have been clear that we will recognise a Palestinian state as a contribution to a peace process at a time that is most conducive to the long-term prospects for peace, and surely peace is what we all need to see.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This morning we heard that Lord Cameron had done all the preparatory work to sanction two members of the Israeli Government. Could my right hon. Friend say what she has done with that work over the three months that it has been in the Department, and also whether the Government have commenced looking at work to sanction the Israeli Prime Minister for his contribution to these war crimes?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend rightly raises the issue of sanctions. I have referred previously in this urgent question to the fact that the UK Government have sanctioned those who have been promoting illegal and violent actions by settlers. We have been clear about the unacceptable nature of that. Of course, we will always keep our sanctions regime under review and we take that responsibility very seriously.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that securing an urgent ceasefire is a vital first step to securing a lasting peace in the region?

Anneliese Dodds: Absolutely, and the UK Government will continue to advocate very strongly indeed for that, in relation to Gaza and Lebanon.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in condemning IDF attacks on UNIFIL in Lebanon? Could she also outline what action the Government are taking to improve the safety and security of the personnel and premises of the UNIFIL peacekeeping mission, particularly in the light of recent comments from Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu?

Anneliese Dodds: I absolutely will join my hon. Friend in condemning any inappropriate attacks on UN agencies of any type. I was clear a few moments ago about the UK Government's commitment to UNIFIL. We believe that its role in southern Lebanon is crucial. We were appalled to hear that UN peacekeepers had been injured by Israeli fire and, alongside international allies and partners, we have very clearly condemned attacks on UN peacekeepers.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): Yesterday, the United Nations Secretary-General condemned Israel for once again targeting civilians. The Minister has stated that Israel must comply with international humanitarian law. We have been hearing that for over a year in this Chamber now. What action will this Government take to stop Israel abusing human rights and committing war crimes?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend rightly mentions the UN's role within this. As a new Government, we have been ensuring that we play that leadership role, including in relation to the UN. When I was at the UN General Assembly I discussed these matters in detail, particularly the mandate of UNWRA and the importance of rejecting attacks on UNRWA's mandate. He also asked about action. I believe that I have already set that out, but I will just underline it very speedily. The UK Government are very clear about the jurisdiction of the ICC and the ICJ, and we have conducted the review of arms export licences that was needed legally. We are determined to fulfil our legal responsibilities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The final question is from Olivia Blake.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): Reports describing the complete dismantlement of Gaza's healthcare infrastructure are impossible to ignore when the World Health Organisation has reported over 1,000 attacks on healthcare facilities and nearly 1,000 health workers dying so far in this conflict. What will the Government do to protect health workers as this conflict escalates, and will they consider sanctions in relation to these flagrant violations of international law?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning the situation of healthcare workers. I referred to this a few moments ago in relation to those present in the Chamber who have helped to deliver much-needed healthcare. The UK Government are absolutely clear that healthcare workers must be protected. We see a very disturbing situation with healthcare in Gaza currently. In particular, we see water and sanitation in a precarious situation across much of Gaza. Winter is approaching and we need to ensure that people are protected there. The UK Government will do all we can on that. I know that many other Members wished to ask questions. If any of them wish to write to me, I or the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Hamish Falconer), would be happy to respond.

House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill*Second Reading*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The reasoned amendment in the name of Sir Oliver Dowden has been selected.

1.50 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As set out in our manifesto, this Government are committed to reforming the House of Lords. As a result, I am proud to be taking forward our first commitment: the immediate first step to remove the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. The Bill before the House today, which was introduced in the first 100 days of this Government, delivers on that commitment. Change begins.

It is a change that is long overdue. In the 21st century, there should not be places in our Parliament, making our laws, reserved for those who were born into certain families. In fact, we are one of only two countries that still retain a hereditary element in our legislature, which is a clear sign that the time has come to see through this long-overdue change. It is a matter of principle for this Government, who are committed to fairness and equality. It is not personal or a comment on the contribution or service of any individual hereditary peer, past or present. We are grateful to all peers who commit their time to valuable public service. However, what we do not accept is that, in this era, as a matter of principle, anyone should have a position in either House on the basis of their ancestry.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Minister knows that I have a great deal of time for him, even though what he has said so far is nonsense, and what he is about to say is bound to be so too. The truth of the matter is that at the apex of our constitution is, of course, His Majesty the King. He is there because, in the Minister's words, he belongs to a certain family and therefore derives a certain authority from that antecedence. Is that wrong too?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: No, because the monarchy is a completely different part of our constitution. First, no monarch since Queen Anne has refused Royal Assent to a law. Secondly, our constitutional monarchy enjoys popular support. I return the right hon. Gentleman's respect, and the one thing he is is honest. He is actually setting out a defence of the hereditary principle, rather than hiding behind a smokescreen, which seems to be the position of Conservative Front Benchers, from whom we will hear in due course.

I want young people growing up in Blaenavon, Pontypool and Cwmbran in my constituency, and indeed in every part of the country, to feel that they have the same chance as anyone else to play a part in making the laws of the land. The continued presence of hereditary peers in our legislature is indefensible in a modern democracy.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The trouble with this sort of partial reform is that it opens other issues. Why does the Church of England have a monopoly

on places in the House of Lords? I am all in favour of the established Church, and of letting it have perhaps 12 bishops, but why can we not share the other places between this country's other Christian denominations and non-Christian faiths? Do they not deserve a voice?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am certainly in favour of the representation of different faiths in the upper House, but the Government set out a step-by-step process in our manifesto.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will come back to the right hon. Gentleman after making some progress.

Our manifesto sets out a series of steps, which is the key point. This Government have a mandate to reform the House of Lords.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: One moment. I will come back to the right hon. Gentleman.

Our manifesto sets out that there should be an alternative second Chamber that is more representative of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. We have been elected on a manifesto to get there on a step-by-step basis.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As this is his third attempt, I will show sympathy.

Sir Gavin Williamson: I thank the Minister for being so generous. He makes a very interesting argument, and I think many Members were excited about the change he proposed. I have read his manifesto, which makes a number of interesting points about hereditary peers, a retirement age of 80, strengthening the circumstances in which disgraced Members can be removed and an alternative second Chamber. All of this is missing from the Bill, but it was in his manifesto. Is he open to accepting amendments to include these proposals that were in his manifesto?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am delighted to hear the right hon. Gentleman's support for the other steps in our manifesto, which he should have communicated to Conservative Front Benchers when they were drafting their reasoned amendment—[*Interruption.*] It looks like it too. If the right hon. Gentleman reads our manifesto with his usual diligence, he will see that it states that this Bill is the immediate first step. That is the mandate we bring before the House today.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister update the House on the wider reforms that our Government are seeking to introduce to the House of Lords, and why these reforms should not be delayed by this specific Bill that, as the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) said, was widely supported by the electorate?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As we look to the other reforms, from the retirement age to participation, the Government will look to build wide support on the way forward—support that, frankly, has not been found in previous attempts at reform. At its heart is the principle that people are placed in the House of Lords to serve the public, and I look forward to debating those wider reforms with Conservative Members, but not in this Bill.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Minister recognise that a recent survey of Church of England clergy showed the need to reform the participation of Church of England bishops in our legislature? Will he reflect on that, and on the fact that it looks like we are in danger of having bishops who, instead of focusing their efforts on the cure of souls, are more like mitred politicians? That cannot be good for any of us. Finally, we are talking about the Church of England in the Parliament of the United Kingdom. In that respect, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is correct about expanding the clergy's membership to include other denominations, or removing them entirely if that proves impossible, for reasons that are pretty clear.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Church has recognised the need for reform, particularly in terms of size, and today's debate is further evidence of why it is sensible to reform in stages.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): There has not been a single reform of the House of Lords over the last 14 years. Is my right hon. Friend as surprised as I am that Conservative Members now want huge reform of the second Chamber?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: After the past 14 years, they now show a new-found enthusiasm for reform and change.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will give way once more, and then I need to make some progress.

Dr Spencer: The Minister is generous in giving way. There is a fertile debate on this side of the House, and the Government should reflect on the fact that Opposition Members tend to think independently. Does he not think that the idea that a step-by-step process will work at all is for the birds?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I cannot comment on the coherence of the Opposition in the course of that process. What we have seen so far is a pretty incoherent effort, but perhaps it will improve when we hear from the shadow Minister.

This Bill is about making immediate, long-overdue progress. The House of Lords existed for centuries as a nearly entirely hereditary House. There was an attempt to introduce life peers as long ago as 1869, with a further attempt to introduce life peers and remove the hereditary element in 1888. Despite those efforts, it was only with the passage of the Life Peerages Act 1958 that non-judicial life peers began to join the other place.

Some 40 years later, a Labour Government introduced a Bill to end the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. The events that smoothed the Bill's passage led that Government to accept an amendment on the principle of the removal of hereditary peers. The amendment retained 92 hereditary peers on a temporary basis, until further reforms to the other place were brought forward. Despite attempts at further reform, that temporary measure is still in place.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): One of the dates the Minister missed was Labour's pledge, which has stood for over 100 years, to abolish the House of Lords. That pledge was reiterated by the Prime Minister only a couple of years ago. Is it still Labour's intention to abolish the House of Lords? Does he understand the cynicism about further progress, given that the pledge has not been honoured in over a century?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I cannot comment on the hon. Gentleman's cynicism about progress, but our manifesto clearly sets out the Government's position, which is that we should have an alternative second Chamber that is more representative of the nations and regions.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): In recent decades, major corporations that were family businesses, such as Ford in the United States or Peugeot in France, realised that recruiting from within the family and making a family member the chief executive was not necessarily a good idea. Is this not just the same thing?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It is great to have my hon. Friend's support. As the Leader of the House of Lords said when this matter was debated a few weeks ago in the other place, for the last 25 years, one of the arguments has been that nothing should be done until everything can be done. We see that same, tired, stale old argument once again at the heart of the official Opposition's amendment. That approach means that in 2024 we still have hereditary elements in our legislature.

Sir Gavin Williamson: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have already given way to the right hon. Gentleman once.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In a moment.

It is not right that what was seen, even in 1999, as a temporary arrangement should persist any longer. This Government were elected on a manifesto that was explicit in its promises that we would bring about immediate reform by removing the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. The Bill has a tightly defined objective, and a clear focus and aim that delivers on that mandate.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Minister talks about piecemeal reform and says the argument is stale, but surely the really stale argument is Labour's. The Labour party came into government with

[Mr Richard Holden]

an enormous majority and wants to reform the House of Lords, so why does it not get on and do it? Why do the Labour Government not set out some cross-party work that we can all get involved with, and introduce proper reform measures, rather than just tinkering at the edges, as the Bill does, for pure political advantage?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Who exactly speaks for the Opposition? Who knows. Rather than put that point to me, the right hon. Gentleman should take it up with the right hon. Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden), who proposed the amendment. Do the Opposition have any coherent position left?

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the legislation gives young people, such as the impressive A-level students I met at Little Heath school in my constituency, an equal chance to make the laws of this country from either House? How will he ensure that the legislation progresses quickly?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the situation for young people in her constituency. The Bill has a clear mandate, and I hope that hon. Members will back it in big numbers today.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's assurances that the bishops in the House of Lords will continue to play a role in our national life. We must not bow to calls from Conservative Members who resent that, because the bishops shine a bright light on aspects of our national life that require scrutiny. Will he confirm that there is nothing to stop the hereditary Members of the House of Lords who provide valuable contributions and expertise in that Chamber becoming life peers?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: There is no bar on that happening. When the new Leader of the Opposition eventually emerges from their parallel universe leadership contest, I am sure that they will have a quota, as all Leaders of the Opposition do. It is for them to consider that issue.

Sir Roger Gale: Some minutes ago, the right hon. Gentleman said that the young people of Torfaen believed in and wanted equal opportunity, a point reiterated by the hon. Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey). I am not quite sure how that equal opportunity squares with a Labour party that wants to stuff the House of Lords with its cronies. I cannot see any equal opportunity in that. That aside, this legislation, on which we will be required to vote, is ill thought through. Will the right hon. Gentleman accept that the hereditary peers who are Members of the House of Lords have made, and continue to make, a considerable contribution to the work of the upper House, and if so, has he given any consideration to, at the very least, ensuring that those hereditary peers who are abolished are given life peerages in a future Parliament?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: How can Members of the Conservative party talk about stuffing the upper House with people after the events of the last 14 years? I thought

irony had died. As for the right hon. Gentleman's point about life peers, I have just said that having been a hereditary peer is no bar to becoming a Member of the Lords. That will be a matter for the new Leader of the Opposition, having looked at the contributions individuals have made. I have not denigrated the contributions of hereditary peers—far from it. I have thanked people for their public service in the upper House, but it is for the new Leader of the Opposition to decide whether to put forward former hereditary peers as life peers. There will be no objection from Labour Members.

I have covered why the removal of the hereditary peers from the other place is overdue. Let me turn to why it is essential. It is indefensible in this day and age for people to sit in our legislature as a result of an accident of birth. Prime Minister Harold Wilson, putting forward a programme for change in this House in October 1968, said:

"the Government believe that reform should achieve the following objectives: first, the hereditary basis for membership should be eliminated"—[*Official Report*, 30 October 1968; Vol. 772, c. 34.]

All these years later, that first objective still needs to be fully achieved. It is time for the hereditary nature of the House of Lords to come to an end. The former Lord Speaker Lord Fowler put it eloquently:

"It is not a question of personalities; it is a question of whether appointment of the House based on heredity is the right solution for the 21st century, and I do not believe that it is."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 23 July 2024; Vol. 839, c. 388.]

As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), the Bill is not an attack on individuals in the other place. As I have said twice already, we recognise individual contributions. We are saying that we should reflect on the millions of people who were unable to make the same contribution as a result of the family they were born into. The time has come for change. If we are to maintain trust in our democratic institutions, it is important that our second Chamber reflects modern Britain. I hope Members will vote for the Bill this evening, and agree with me that it is indefensible, in this day and age, that over a 10th of our second Chamber is essentially reserved for certain individuals due to an accident of birth.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I am deeply worried about the Minister's arguments. If he talks in that way about accidents of birth, how can he possibly defend constitutional monarchy? If he questions the hereditary principle in this place, how can he defend the idea of a hereditary monarchy?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: If the hon. Gentleman had been here at the start of the debate, he would have heard exactly the same point made to me in the first intervention. I will repeat the two points I made in response. First, that is a completely different part of our constitution, and no monarch has withheld Royal Assent from a Bill since the reign of Queen Anne. Secondly, we have a constitutional monarchy that enjoys popular support. I gave the same answer to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) at the start of the debate.

Let me summarise this short five-clause Bill. Clause 1 removes the remaining hereditary peers from the House of Lords and puts an end to the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in that House. Clause 2 removes the

current role of the House of Lords in considering peerage claims, reflecting the removal of the link between hereditary peerage and the House of Lords. Complex or disputed claims will now be referred to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, under section 4 of the Judicial Committee Act 1833, instead of the House of Lords. Clause 3 makes consequential amendments, and clause 4 sets out the territorial extent of the Bill and when it will commence. The Bill will remove the remaining hereditary peers at the end of the parliamentary Session in which it receives Royal Assent. Finally, clause 5 establishes the short title of the Bill.

To conclude, the Bill fulfils an explicit manifesto commitment to deliver this reform to the House of Lords.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In my generosity, as the right hon. Member has asked so many times, I will, for the last time, give way to him.

Sir Gavin Williamson: The right hon. Gentleman has been truly generous. We know that he is a radical at heart, and that he has been suppressed by No. 10 Downing Street and the Whips' Office, but we want to see the radical come out of him. His manifesto has four paragraphs on constitutional reform. The first is a little waffly, but the second is very important, as it mentions the abolition of hereditary peers and the 80-year retirement age. Surely a retirement age provision could be a key element of the Bill. It could be added on to it, to help the right hon. Gentleman deliver more of his promised reforms. I say to the House that I am willing to defy my Whips to deliver the reform that many of us want to see.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Together, the right hon. Gentleman and I could form the new radicals. When we move on to the next stage of reform, I look forward to a similar amount of independent, enthusiastic support—support that he will no doubt demonstrate when we get a new Leader of the Opposition.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will take one more intervention.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I thank the Minister and his colleague, the Minister without Portfolio, for having made themselves available to Members of the Opposition—as well as to those in the Government party, no doubt—to discuss these things privately in a less dramatic environment than this one. One incidental by-product has been pointed out to me by that very important group of peers led by Lord Norton of Louth, whom I know the Minister is going to see, who are in favour of sensible and credible reform. They say that, by removing the hereditaries, he will be removing the only group of peers who are not appointed in a process that is subject to prime ministerial influence. That is not an argument for not doing it, but it might be an argument for putting the House of Lords Appointments Commission on a statutory basis. What does he think about that?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Even with the removal of hereditary peers, the Conservative party will remain the largest party in the House of Lords. As for reform of

the House of Lords Appointments Commission or any other aspect of reform, that discussion is clearly why the Government have chosen to take this more considered, measured approach. I was grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his constructive contribution when the Minister without Portfolio and I held our drop-in. I am more than happy for that dialogue to continue, both during the passage of this Bill and when we move to the second stage of reform.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I keep being persuaded to give way.

Chris Ward: I am delighted to see the Minister picking up from where Harold Wilson left off. Does he not agree that the key part of the Bill is about making our legislature much more relevant to modern Britain and modernising both Parliament and the country? Is it not inexplicable and indefensible to have hereditary peers in the 21st century in modern Britain?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is entirely right.

The second Chamber plays a vital role in our constitution, but people should not have a role in voting on and scrutinising our laws in Parliament by an accident of birth. This Government have been elected with a promise to put public service at the heart of politics, and this legislation, introduced in the first 100 days, shows that we are intent on driving that commitment forward.

On 21 February 1911, when the then Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, moved the Second Reading of what became the landmark Parliament Act of 1911, he said that

“we present it to the House as the first and the most urgent step towards a more perfect attainment.”—[*Official Report*, 21 February 1911; Vol. 21, c. 1911.]

I present this Bill, over a century later, in the same spirit—as the first and most urgent step that we can now take in the 2020s. I hope that I can count on Members in all parts of the House to support this Bill. In that spirit, I commend it to the House.

2.15 pm

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House declines to give a Second Reading to the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill because it is not an acceptable or effective method of enacting major constitutional change, because it proposes a significant alteration to the composition of the House of Lords which should not be considered in isolation from other changes, having regard to the undertakings given by the then Government in 1999, because it drip-feeds changes that hinder proper scrutiny of measures that could change the relationship between the two Houses, because it risks unintended consequences, does not reflect the lack of political consensus on House of Lords reform and does not provide for full consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny which would give the opportunity to consider the case for overall reform, seek cross-party engagement on proposals, and review the implications of all proposals.”

[Sir Oliver Dowden]

The British constitution is not codified. One might not choose to craft such a system if one were establishing a new country from scratch, but we are proud to be an old country. The checks and balances of the House of Lords—its tried and tested conventions—work. The House of Lords does not claim to be a democratic Chamber. That is the key point: this elected House has primacy. Of course, the British constitution does—and should—continue to evolve, but we should fix only what is broken and be cautious about rushing into change. Our evolution should start with questions of efficacy, not optics. We should be guided by the wisdom of past generations, and the continuity of history and tradition. As Edmund Burke wrote:

“We have an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors.”

The Paymaster General has described the excepted peers as “out of step” with modern Britain. Like the Blair and Brown Governments, this Government seem obsessed with change for change’s sake. We have seen it all before. We have seen this rebranding spun to give the impression of progress: the Law Lords replaced with the Supreme Court; the Lord Chancellor’s Department aping the US-style Justice Department; even Her Majesty’s Stationery Office recast as the Office of Public Sector Information. At best, it is cosmetic; at worst, it risks irreversible damage. As we saw with the changes to the House of Lords’ judicial role, rushed constitutional change leads to unintended consequences. We should, therefore, proceed with caution.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The role of hereditary peers in our democratic system is a bygone relic of a less democratic age. May I ask whether that is why the shadow Minister feels such an affinity for it?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I join the Government in paying tribute to the hereditary peers. The argument that I will elucidate in my speech, as set out in the amendment, is that if this Government are committed to reform of the upper House, they should consider all the consequences of that reform, and this House, and the other place, should have ample opportunity to consider it properly.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman has made great play of how our constitution should develop, but does he not accept that almost every Government, apart from the most recent one, have looked at the House of Lords and how it could be reformed? Many of us believe that the reform should go much further than that put forward by this Government, which we see as just a first step towards a properly elected, fully democratic upper Chamber that serves the people.

Sir Oliver Dowden: As we have seen in the debate so far, there is a range of views on both sides of the House about how we should proceed with reform. The argument that I am making is that this House should have the opportunity to consider all the changes together in the round before we rush ahead with constitutional change for the sake of virtue signalling and optics rather than what suits the needs of the nation.

Sir John Hayes *rose—*

Sir Oliver Dowden: I shall give way one more time.

Sir John Hayes: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Will he consider that political legitimacy derives from many sources but not entirely from democratic election for, if it did, we would not have life peers or a constitutional monarchy? Legitimacy is not wholly and solely a matter of being elected, or the Labour party would be abolishing the House of Lords *per se*.

Sir Oliver Dowden: It will not surprise my right hon. Friend to hear that I completely agree with him. As ever, he makes an erudite point.

Shaun Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I will make some progress and then I will give way.

Instead of proceeding with caution, the Government have done precisely the opposite. The Bill has had no pre-legislative scrutiny, no Joint Committee and no cross-party engagement. Indeed, Labour Ministers have explicitly refused to consult on the removal of excepted peers.

All that forms a pattern with Labour’s past constitutional tinkering. We have the Equality Act 2010, which both the Equality and Human Rights Commission and His Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary have said in recent months is too complicated and needs changing. There is also the Human Rights Act 1998, which, in departing from Britain’s common-law tradition, further expanded judicial review, undermining the very laws made by this Parliament and dragging the courts into answering political questions that should be a matter for the legislature. The same applies to Tony Blair’s successive surrenders to EU treaties. Those Acts created new problems for an old country, and this Bill risks doing exactly the same.

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Gentleman has been on his feet for five minutes and I am finding it difficult to follow him. Can he answer me directly: is he in favour of getting rid of hereditary peers and people who are in the House of Lords on birthright—yes or no?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I am strongly of the view that we should consider all these things in the round. There is merit here—that is why we are proposing a reasoned amendment—but the risk of proceeding in a rushed fashion is that we come to regret it, as we have on many previous occasions.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Shaun Davies *rose—*

Sir Oliver Dowden: I will make some progress and then I will give way.

In 1999, Baroness Jay, the then Leader of the House of Lords, said that a partly reformed Lords with only excepted hereditaries remaining would be “more legitimate, because its members have earned their places” and would have more authority. That was termed the Jay doctrine at the time. If the excepted peers go, what other conventions are at risk of change—the Salisbury

convention, or the restraint against vetoing secondary legislation? The lack of consultation and scrutiny, and the Government's piecemeal approach to reform, has meant such questions have the potential to be reopened.

Gareth Snell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) and then to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell).

Shaun Davies: The compromise of allowing the remaining hereditary peers to be in the other place is 25 years old. How much longer does the right hon. Gentleman need to consider the options and whether he is in favour of them?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that the reforms were introduced in 1999. By my calculation, the Labour party was in power for another 11 years and did precisely nothing further. I will come to this point in a moment, but the reason the hereditaries remained in the House of Lords in 1999 was to ensure that all these things were considered at the same time. The Government are breaking a principle that they agreed to previously.

Gareth Snell: The right hon. Gentleman rightly talks about the Salisbury convention. Is that his way of telling us that, as the Bill was a manifesto commitment—as pointed out by the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson)—Conservative peers will be voting for it to comply with the convention that he has said is so important?

Sir Oliver Dowden: Well—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The right hon. Gentleman would not want to break convention, would he?

Sir Oliver Dowden: The Paymaster General knows how much I respect conventions, but that is ultimately a matter for the other Chamber.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I will make some progress, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will give way.

We should not be surprised that the Labour Government have only introduced this short Bill because they have no clear plans for wider Lords reform. In 2022, the Prime Minister endorsed Gordon Brown's plans for an assembly of the nations and regions, but now that has been kicked into the long grass. Labour grandees such as Lord Blunkett have warned it risks mirroring "gridlock" too often seen in the United States. Lord Mandelson described the plan as a

"multi-layered cake...barely been put in the oven yet, let alone fully baked."

Lord Adonis observed that within Labour, "there is no consensus on reform"

and that it will be "difficult and controversial." Even the current leader of the Lords, Baroness Smith, admitted this year that an elected Chamber risked

"losing the primacy of the Commons."

Therein lies the dilemma for the Labour party and its new-found Commons majority. Perhaps Labour Ministers are starting to realise that Lords reform is challenging and difficult.

Graham Stringer: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I will make some more progress and then I will give way.

In 1999, the reforms recognised the challenge. In this July's King's Speech background brief, the Labour Government asserted that the continued presence of excepted peers is "by accident". That is simply not true. In 1999, Labour's Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine, told the other House that the presence of hereditaries was an intentional anomaly; it would ensure a future Government undertook proper and considered reform of the Lords. His fellow architect, Viscount Cranborne, called that

"the sand in the shoe".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 June 1999; Vol. 602, c. 791.]

Now, this Labour Government want to declare war on the past without a clear target in sight. As they cannot agree on what to do, the Prime Minister has gone for this chipolata of a Bill, the mantra of change serving as a tiny fig leaf to cover his embarrassment. The emperor has no clothes—perhaps other than from Lord Alli.

Graham Stringer: The right hon. Member is making a case on shifting sand, which seems to boil down to one of people not having had time to consider the issue. First, this reform has been in two Labour manifestos, one in 1997 and one this year, and it had overwhelming support from the electorate. Secondly, the compromise reached between the Labour party and the Conservative party in 1999 was nothing to do with the good work done by many hereditaries; it was to stop logjam, because the House of Lords was threatening to hold up Labour's programme and throw the Salisbury convention aside.

Sir Oliver Dowden: The purpose of the 1999 compromise was to ensure that we did not remove hereditary peers without considering the wider consequences. That is precisely my concern with the approach being pursued by the Government. This meagre Bill is not motivated by considered and enlightened principle. Labour wants to remove the independent and experienced voices of excepted peers so that it can parachute in a wave of new Labour cronies. It is change in the name of an Executive power grab, not change to serve the British people.

The excepted peers are immune from the needs of political patronage. They work in the public interest for the good of the nation. Edmund Burke once described them as

"the great Oaks that shade a Country".

The same, I am afraid, cannot be said of the saplings of the new Labour intake.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Oliver Dowden: I will give way in a moment.

I shall prove my point. Before the election, Labour sources admitted that

"we're going to need to appoint a dozen peers on day one to do big junior ministerial jobs that the MPs shadowing them aren't up to doing."

[Sir Oliver Dowden]

In 1999, Lord Strathclyde, the then shadow Leader of the Lords, presciently warned of

“the return of an almost medieval executive power—a noisome bramble-patch of presidentialism, patronage, private pressure, preferment and place”—

past words that speak truth today.

One central argument evinced by the Paymaster General is that no one should be in Parliament by “an accident of birth”. Yet, today’s Labour party reeks of the hereditary principle—the elevation of the nepo babies of north London, the coronation of the red princes: the Goulds, the Falconers, the Kinnocks, the Benns, the Eagles, the Reeves. Many of them are distinguished Members, but under Labour’s closed shop, it is hereditary peers out and hereditary MPs in.

The question this House must address is whether a wholly appointed Chamber and waves of new Labour peers will improve the governance of our nation. Will they mean a proper impact assessment of the cuts to the winter fuel payment? Will there be better scrutiny of the proposed French-style union laws? Or, as Michael Foot told the House in 1969 when opposing Harold Wilson’s Lords reform Bill, will it become just

“A second Chamber selected by the Whips. A seraglio of eunuchs”?—[*Official Report*, 3 February 1969; Vol. 777, c. 88.]

The Labour party apparently wants to apply that phrase to this House, given the diktat from the Labour Whips banning their Members from tabling amendments without permission. The Downing Street boys do not want dissent from either House of Parliament.

Mike Amesbury (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): What is it about defending the indefensible? The right hon. Gentleman talks about rushing, but we have been trying to reform the other place for over 100 years. It is not about personalities; it is about the principle of ensuring that in a modern democracy people do not become legislators by birthright. Surely the Opposition support that.

Sir Oliver Dowden: The Labour party was in power for 11 years after the 1999 changes. It completely failed to undertake this reform, and that was for a reason. We have a delicate and complex unwritten constitution of checks and balances, of principles and conventions, and when one starts to pick away at some of them, one realises the consequences of doing so. If we are to proceed down this path, it is important that Members—many on the Government Benches have been elected Members for only four months—have the opportunity to scrutinise the changes. This is a new Parliament and we should have the opportunity of proper scrutiny.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to the former Deputy Prime Minister for giving way. He is right: I have not been here as long as he has. I am enjoying his audition for the shadow Cabinet when the new leader arrives, but will he join me in the Aye Lobby this evening, yes or no?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I doubt I have much chance of joining the next shadow Cabinet. This is my swansong rather than my audition.

I have set out the reasons I oppose the Bill—it is rushed and we have not considered the wider consequences.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way to a sapling. The interesting thing about saplings, as I am sure he knows, is that sometimes we become oaks—I guess we shall have to see—and the reason there are so many saplings on the Government Benches is that we chopped down so many oaks from the Conservative party. Although we have not been in the House for long, many of us have been involved in the interests of our constituents and the conversations of politics for a long time. Does he agree that the House does not hold the collective knowledge of the whole country and that sometimes we may have formed views about what is necessary for the other place before reaching this Chamber?

Sir Oliver Dowden: I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman grows into a sturdy oak, like all the great oaks on the Benches behind me. There is a path to be followed to achieve that. Many people may well enter the House with pre-existing views, and that is of course the basis on which many of them were elected, but my argument is that we should consider the consequences of one change in relation to hereditaries for the wider composition of the House of Lords and the constitution.

Andrew Rosindell: My right hon. Friend rightly talks about the consequences of the changes. Has he also considered the effect of the removal of the Earl Marshal and the Lord Great Chamberlain of England, which were protected in the 1999 legislation introduced by the then Labour Government? Will my right hon. Friend commit to supporting their retention in the House of Lords on a constitutional basis?

Sir Oliver Dowden: That is a very important point. I believe that the Government have plans to address that in the legislation. Having those people, with their experience of organising coronations—as I saw during the coronation two years ago—is another part of how our constitution works. All of the elements work together, and if we pick away at one, there are unintended consequences.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To be clear, the Lord Great Chamberlain and the Earl Marshal will not continue to sit and vote in the House of Lords under this Bill, but they will continue with their important ceremonial functions.

Sir Oliver Dowden: The risk is taking away something that has formed part of the fabric of our constitution. The role of those two officeholders has been essential to the role of the Crown, and preventing them from fully playing their part in the House of Lords may have unintended consequences that are deleterious to the interests of the nation.

Hereditaries and appointees aside, I would argue that the precise composition of an unelected second Chamber is a second order issue. Both the Government and Parliament should be considering how we can better improve the scrutiny powers of the revising Chamber. We need a strong Government, but we need a muscular Parliament too. All Governments should be held to account, particularly one with the biggest gap in history between their number of MPs and their popular vote. We should particularly consider how Parliament can

better scrutinise the quango state—unaccountable tiers of government that are ballooning under this Labour Government.

Lords reform is challenging. For a century, no one has cut the Gordian knot—certainly not Gordon Brown. The system we have inherited from the turn of the millennium still works, proving the strengths and adaptability of the British constitution.

Constitutional change is an area where one should tread lightly. It requires proper consultation, engagement and consideration. On that basis, as set out in our reasoned amendment, the Opposition will oppose the Bill, not to defend the privilege of old, but in defence of a strong and independent Parliament that stands up to an over-mighty Executive, and for our nation's long-standing liberties and freedoms.

2.38 pm

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): It is a delight to speak in this debate. I first wish to praise one of my predecessors, Lord Bruce Grocott. Since the 1999 compromise, he has tried his best to achieve the step-by-step constitutional change that the shadow Minister mentioned, by abolishing the by-election for the hereditary peers. That was the first step Lord Grocott suggested.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): At least those peers were elected by someone, unlike all the other placemen.

Shaun Davies: If the right hon. Gentleman is patient, I will come on to the farce of the by-elections that have taken place for the hereditary peers.

For me, Lord Grocott epitomises what is great about the House of Lords—somebody with experience, a contribution to make to our national life, and who was appointed by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to the other place. As we have heard from the Opposition, hereditary peers do make valuable contributions in the House of Lords, and nothing would stop those people being selected by the Leader of the Opposition or the Prime Minister to go back to the House of Lords, should that be their wish.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there may well be an opportunity for all the Conservative MPs who might need to stand down because of restrictions on second jobs? They feel so strongly about the contributions that hereditary peers make, and some seats may be opening up for them in the near future.

Shaun Davies: I am surprised that Conservative MPs are able to get second or third jobs when they do not do their first job very well at all.

A second Chamber in the manner that I have described could be a vital force in delivering effective and considered progressive change, whereas the ancestry and bloodline entitlement is for the birds. It does not stand up to 1924 standards of accountability, let alone 2024 standards. As I said, my noble Friend Lord Grocott has tabled on a number of occasions a private Member's Bill to remove the by-election process for hereditary peerages, and it was supported time and again by many peers. That Bill—the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) (Abolition of By-Elections) Bill—was filibustered by a handful of hereditary peers.

Indeed, the last time a Labour Government won a landslide majority and tried to abolish hereditary peerages, the other place, which is unelected, threatened to disrupt the Government's agenda, and forced them to compromise by keeping 92 hereditary peers. The Opposition leader in the House of Lords said in 2021 that the tactic was to “make their flesh creep” in order to stop the Government's programme. Hereditary peers and the obstruction of democracy have consistently gone hand in glove. Fortunately, the Minister has taken the first step towards reforming the House of Lords.

As many Members will be aware, of the 92 hereditary peers in the other place, there is not a single woman. It is perhaps no coincidence that when by-elections come around, that all-male electorate keeps on electing more men, who then go on to elect more men. That does not sound like progressive change to me; it sounds like an old boys' club that has changed very little in several hundred years. Not only does election on the basis of bloodline lead to worse outcomes, but it is wrong on principle.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Shaun Davies: I will not. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will catch Madam Deputy Speaker's eye in due course.

I am proud to play my part in the democratic process, as somebody who was elected by the people of Telford. There is a strong message here for young people in our constituencies: “If you want to become a Member of the legislature, either in this Chamber or the one down the corridor, you can do so based on your contribution to public life and your skills, not your bloodline.” In one by-election, there were six candidates but only three voters. That is an absolute embarrassment for democracy. What view must other countries take of us?

There are many areas in which the United Kingdom is a world leader or aspires to be one—our education system, civil liberties, creative and business sectors and many more—but the House should agree to modernise and transform this area. It is right that the House of Lords be reformed. No doubt, over the course of the years and decades to come, more reforms will come through, but this is a fundamental first step that the people of this country have voted for the Government to deliver. I congratulate the Minister on introducing the Bill so quickly. I look forward to voting for its Second Reading tonight.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.44 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have been calling for reform of the House of Lords with a democratic mandate for decades. The Bill is a welcome step forward, and one that we support. These measures are long overdue, and we are grateful that they have been introduced so early in this Parliament. Fundamentally, we Liberal Democrats do not believe that there is space in a modern democracy for hereditary privilege. The last significant reform of our second Chamber was introduced years ago. Although we would ultimately like to see a fully democratically elected upper Chamber, this legislation is a very welcome step to modernise the upper House.

[Sarah Olney]

In maintaining the right of hereditary peers to sit in our legislature, we are one of only two nations in the world in which membership of a second Chamber is decided by virtue of hereditary privilege. The principle of inherited membership of the other place is deeply antiquated, and we welcome the Government's move to remove that ludicrous practice. Reform of our upper Chamber has been a long-standing Liberal Democrat policy. In fact, our stance on reform of the second House outlives many of the historically significant peerages that the current hereditary peers establishment maintains. Forty-nine per cent of the current hereditary peerages were created in the 20th century, while only 29% of hereditary peerages predate the 19th century, and the most recent were created in 1964—post-dating the Life Peerages Act 1958—so this legislation does not wash away our history or destroy tradition. The statistics alone should dissuade any argument about upholding of heritage. This reform is simply a move towards a more democratic form of politics. We must do all we can to restore public trust in politics.

Mr Holden: How can the hon. Lady call it “more democratic” to have a purely nominated Chamber?

Sarah Olney: Regrettably, the right hon. Gentleman has not been listening to what I have been saying. Liberal Democrat policy is to have an elected second Chamber. We welcome these measures as a step towards a democratically elected Chamber.

Sir Roger Gale: I have long advocated—with, I think, the support of my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (Sir David Davis)—the abolition of the House of Commons, the abolition of the House of Lords, and instead four national Parliaments, each with a First Minister, and an upper House dealing solely with defence, foreign policy and macro-taxation, which was the original purpose of Parliament. Why is the hon. Lady prepared to go half hog rather than the whole hog?

Sarah Olney: I must say, I regret that the Conservatives did not win a mandate in July for the kind of wholesale reform that the right hon. Gentleman is proposing. As I say, the Liberal Democrat policy has always been for an elected second Chamber. That is not what the Bill delivers, but we are looking for the Government to go further—far further than the Conservatives did in the previous 14 years. [Interruption.] I find it so extraordinary that Conservative Members are suddenly all converts to the cause of Lords reform when they have done nothing about it for a decade and a half—it is insane. I say to both right hon. Gentlemen who have intervened on me that Liberal Democrat policy is for an elected upper Chamber, but getting rid of the hereditary peers is a welcome first step, and that is why we will support the legislation.

We must do all we can to restore public trust in politics after the chaos of the last Conservative Government. By removing this unelected and undemocratic aspect of our Parliament, we will move closer to that goal.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Lady's argument would hold far more water if the Liberal Democrats adopted the position of not nominating

anybody for the upper House until it was wholly elected. However, every single council leader up and down the land who has led a Liberal Democrat-Conservative group—sometimes of only three people—has suddenly found themselves draped in ermine and voting in the upper House. Her principle and her party's actions are very wide apart.

Sarah Olney: I want to be very clear: the Liberal Democrats support the idea of a second Chamber. Under the current system, it is an appointed and elected Chamber; we are here today to support the principle of an elected second Chamber, and we are supporting the first step in that direction. We support the principle of an upper Chamber, and are very glad that there is Liberal Democrat representation within it, but that does not mean that we do not support the idea of changing the way in which people are introduced to the upper House. That is the principle that we are here to support.

Honestly, I am finding it difficult to work out what the Conservative argument is here. Do they want to abolish the House of Lords, do they want it to be elected, or do they want to keep everything exactly as it is? We support the Bill because it is a welcome first step towards a broader range of reforms that we have supported since 1911—which, as I have said, pre-dates many of the hereditary peerages that Conservative Members seem so keen to maintain.

Not only is the concept of inherited privilege one of fundamental, antiquated inequality, it exacerbates the distinct gender imbalance of the second Chamber, with not a single woman among the current hereditary peers. Removing the right of those peers to sit in the other place would make that gender imbalance slightly less severe, moving from 70% of peers being men to 67%. Parliament should be a body that represents and reflects the diversity and richness of the people and cultures that make up our country. This legislation, which would remove the last remaining hereditary peers' membership of the other place, is a significant step towards a more representative Parliament.

If successful, the Bill would have a significant impact on the size of the House. In 2017, we supported the findings of the Burns report, which recommended measures to manage the exponentially increasing membership of our second Chamber. By removing the right of hereditary peers to sit in the other place, we would see a significant reduction in the size of the House, moving it back towards a more sensible size. Liberal Democrats are supporters of that change and the move towards a smaller upper Chamber.

While we are grateful to the Government for the introduction of this Bill and intend to support its progress through the House, we also recognise and acknowledge the commitment, wisdom and contributions brought by some hereditary Members of the upper Chamber. We thank them for their work, yet hope they can agree that we can no longer ignore the entrenched inequality that the continuation of hereditary membership of their House brings. The Liberal Democrats have a long-standing commitment to reforming our second Chamber with a proper democratic mandate. I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues, both in this Chamber and the other place, are working together to push for broader reform as soon as possible. We are glad that the Government's manifesto committed to other reforms, including changes to the appointment process, addressing

the national and regional composition of the second Chamber, the introduction of a mandatory retirement age and a participation requirement, and we ask the Minister to set out a timeline for those reforms.

The Liberal Democrats have consistently spoken out against the current system of prime ministerial appointments, which engrains patronage, reinforces the elitism of British politics and contributes to so many people losing faith in our system. We would like the Government to reassure us that they will not be following in the footsteps of the former Conservative Government, who ignored the findings of the 2017 Burns report and presided over a House of Lords that has ballooned in size. There have been suggestions that the Government's plans for reform of the other place include a requirement for any nomination for a peerage to be accompanied by an explanation of the candidate's suitability. Will the Minister commit to that requirement, bringing the appointment of peers more in line with the process for other honours—such as knighthoods—with political parties providing an overview of the relevant skills, knowledge and experience of the candidate?

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Could the hon. Lady tell the House how many life peerages were given out by the California lobbyist Sir Nicholas Clegg?

Sarah Olney: No, I cannot. That happened in a previous Parliament and has no relevance to this current piece of legislation, which is about abolishing the hereditary peers.

Luke Taylor: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is surprising to hear the confusion from Conservative Members regarding our position on this Bill? We have figured out how to win under first past the post, costing so many of their colleagues their seats, but we come here with the ambition to change the voting system to a much more progressive, fair and proportionate one. In the same sense, the way to deliver a fully reformed House of Lords is to engage in the process and change it from within.

Sarah Olney: I thank my colleague for his intervention, which underlines that what the Liberal Democrats want is a fully reformed House of Lords—an elected second Chamber. We think that that will better serve the people of this country, restore some of the gravitas and dignity of the House of Lords, and make it a more effective second Chamber. Ultimately, that is what we should all be looking to achieve.

The Liberal Democrats continue to support the findings of the 2017 Burns report, which claims that the House should be cut to 600 peers and outlines ways to ensure that happens. While the removal of hereditary Members is an important step in that process, we will continue to push the Government to continue with further reform in the future. In particular, we look to them to uphold their manifesto commitment to introduce a retirement age, a measure that further aids the reduction and subsequent management of the size and membership number of the House of Lords. We also want the second Chamber to have proper democratic legitimacy.

Sir Gavin Williamson: I am curious as to whether the Liberal Democrats would be open to amendments that look to take the reforms proposed by the Government

that step further. It is very important that we work together to make sure we get the best form of upper House.

Sarah Olney: We will certainly be participating fully in Committee, scrutinising the legislation to see whether suitable amendments can be tabled, but that will be a Liberal Democrat initiative. It is something we will certainly play our part in.

We want the second Chamber to have proper democratic legitimacy, ultimately moving towards the replacement of the House of Lords with an elected Chamber. We believe that moving to a fully democratic, elected Chamber is essential to strengthening the integrity of Parliament and the authority of our second Chamber.

Dr Ben Spencer: The hon. Lady is being very generous with her time. The Liberal Democrats clearly have a very formed view of the reforms that they want, so what number of Lords would be in the elected upper Chamber? *[Interruption.]*

Sarah Olney: I have to confess that I missed the hon. Gentleman's question, because I was distracted by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). I will just reiterate that we want to see broader reform of the House of Lords, with a democratically elected second Chamber.

Dr Spencer *rose—*

Sarah Olney: I am not giving way again. More broadly, we are supportive of wider electoral reform, and look to the Government to support our pledges to modernise our electoral system. We want to strengthen democratic rights and participation by scrapping the Conservative party's voter ID scheme, expand political and democratic engagement by extending the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds, and take big money out of politics by capping donations to political parties. We call on the Government to enshrine the ministerial code in legislation, giving Parliament the powers to hold Ministers to account and protecting politics from corruption and sleaze, and we want this new Labour Government to be bold in transferring greater powers away from Westminster and Whitehall. We believe that local authorities know best what their communities and towns need, and we want this Government to acknowledge that by boosting their authority and powers.

I hope we can all agree on the inappropriateness of hereditary status as a qualification for membership of a modern parliamentary democracy—that being the son, grandson or great-grandson of a former courtier, colonial administrator or 20th-century businessman is neither reason nor justification for a seat in a democratic Parliament. I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues therefore welcome the Bill and are grateful to the Government for taking swift action to make our political system fairer. Through this legislation, we hope to see the most significant modernisation of the upper Chamber in a quarter of a century, and while we will continue to push the Government to introduce bolder and broader parliamentary reforms, this legislation signals a serious move towards more representative, more democratic and fairer politics. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are proud to support this Bill as it moves through the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I give Members a small reminder that this is a very specific Bill, dealing with the hereditary Members of the House of Lords, and therefore that speeches need to focus on that topic. I also remind all Members—it is sad to be saying this to Front-Bench spokespeople—that when you use the word “you”, you are referring to the Chair. That is not how we conduct debate in this House.

2.58 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your guidance on acceptable conduct in this place. I think it is very important, and I am grateful to be able to make what I hope will be a relatively brief contribution to the debate on this Bill.

It will come as no surprise to Conservative Members that I fully support the Bill in front of us, which I think is a sensible, rational and timely first step towards reform of the other place in a way that gives us time—as the right hon. Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) has so eloquently argued for—to consider other things as we go along. There is a time for evolution and a time for revolution, and at the moment, it is time for evolution in how we amend the House of Lords. It is a question of how we take the first steps towards removing the most indefensible part of that House and of our constitution, while allowing ourselves the time and space to consider the other issues that have been raised and the commitments we made in our manifesto. I gently remind Conservative Members that that manifesto delivered a majority Government—you could say that consultation was had, and therefore we enact our policies.

I enjoyed the contribution of the right hon. Member for Hertsmere. I do not ask him to speak for his party because it is in flux. However, I ask Conservative Members not just to complain about the scope of the Bill, especially the lack of reform—I welcome their support for reform of the upper House; it has been a long time coming, but better late than never—but to consider whether they can defend the right of 92 people to sit in the upper House by virtue of their birth.

Those 92 peers have been almost exclusively white men. When the House of Lords Act 1999 was passed, five women were allowed to continue as hereditary peers in the House of Lords, the last being the Countess of Mar, who retired in 2020. As my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) said, whenever the opportunity for a by-election arose for one of the seats held by women, the woman was replaced by a man. More than 200 candidates are on the roll of eligible peers who could stand in by-elections for those seats, had the House of Lords not amended its Standing Orders. I will take an intervention from any Conservative Member who can tell me how many of those on that roll are women. Anyone? No. The answer is two. Fewer than 1% of those eligible to fill those hereditary seats are women.

I have no doubt that Conservative Members share my concern about the inequality that arises if we say that a white man has a potential privilege when he is one of the 92 or when he is a member of the 200 families who, by 100-year-old letters patent, have been in a position to secure one of those seats. To me, that is the most

indefensible aspect. It is not necessarily about who those people are. I do not doubt that every single member of the hereditary peers group, whether in my party or not, has expertise and a skillset that they can bring to bear. However, if, upon their expulsion, they wish to continue to contribute to public life, all parties will have nomination lists during this Parliament. They can use them, if they wish, to bring back their best and their brightest. Of course, when those hereditary peers are no longer Members of the House of Lords, they are entitled to do what we have all done and present themselves to the public for election to this place, with a mandate.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Conservative Members are clearly unembarrassed by the total lack of women among the hereditary peers. Does my hon. Friend agree that they should be embarrassed by the total lack of women on their Benches right now?

Gareth Snell: I am not sure that any Labour Member needs to quantify Conservative Members' embarrassment; they do it for themselves.

The hon. Gentlemen seem to be confused about whether they want more or less reform. I think we know that the answer is that they do not want any reform, but they create a smokescreen of wanting to act faster and with more zeal than Labour Members simply because they wish to ruin the Bill. They want to press amendments that are not relevant and not in the Bill's scope. They want to make arguments about retirement ages. When the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) argued that there should be a retirement age of 80, I am sure that he had not spoken to his right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), who is 81, although, to look at him, one would not think he was a day over 60.

Andrew Rosindell: I am puzzled. It is clear that the hon. Gentleman does not like the current system, but he does not explain how our legislation would be better for removing those people who have so much wisdom, experience and knowledge. How will our country's legislation benefit from the change?

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not agreeing with him. There is a lot of wisdom and experience in this place that can be used to improve our legislation. Even with the removal of the 92 hereditary peers, there will still be 650 peers, who have incredible insights and specialisms. The Bill removes a group of people whose only entitlement to be in the House of Lords comes from, as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson said, a birthright many hundreds of years old, and from being selected by their friends to sit with them. The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) may not agree with me, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Telford pointed out, the election process in the other place is a farce. There are often more candidates than electors. It is almost akin to the Tory party leadership election.

Pete Wishart: The only other group that seems to reserve a place in the House of Lords is millionaires—party donors. Sixty-eight out of 284 political appointees between 2003 and 2013 gave £58 million to political parties. What will the hon. Gentleman do about them?

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to stray outside the scope of the Bill. Madam Deputy Speaker has been clear that the Bill is specifically about hereditary peers. The Government have committed to reform the appointments process for the House of Lords. Everything does not have to be done in the same Bill. As the former Deputy Prime Minister pointed out, the pace needs to be considered, so that there are no unintended consequences, about which he is rightly concerned. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) can chunter at me from a sedentary position, but when we are considering hereditary peers, we are looking at the 92.

If anyone wants to justify reserving seats in the House of Lords for 92 white men, I will take an intervention now. Conservative Members do not want to do that because they do not want to defend the indefensible. They want to complain and bellyache that they do not like what we are doing. They dress up their complaints as process concerns about unintended consequences and make spurious arguments about the Earl Marshal and the Lord Great Chamberlain. That all shows that the Conservative party has simply run out of steam and ideas. All Conservative Members can do is chunter and complain about what we want to do.

Sir Roger Gale: Setting aside the hon. Gentleman's ageist remarks, which I find deeply offensive, let me consider the point that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) made. Why is it okay for the Labour party to maintain the Prime Minister's patronage to appoint party cronies to the House of Lords while abolishing the hereditary peers, who do a good job?

Gareth Snell: I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman if my suggestion that he did not look a day over 60 was ageist—perhaps I should have said “over 50”. I find it difficult to take an argument from Conservative Members about crony patronage and the House of Lords when the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson put hundreds of people in there. He did so against the advice of the House of Lords Appointments Commission, yet Conservative Members said nothing at the time and were happy about it. Now, all of a sudden, it is an absolute problem that needs to be resolved.

I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General has made it clear that, after we have completed the process of removing the excepted hereditary peers, the Government will move on to other parts of House of Lords reform, which will make the appointments process more transparent. That will allow us to have a considered debate about the way in which that process can happen. While we have prime ministerial patronage, it must be transparent. Frankly, Conservative Members can give no lessons to any of us about transparency in prime ministerial patronage. Boris Johnson packed the House of Lords with his friends and cronies against the advice of officials, and Conservative Members had nothing to say about it.

Sir Gavin Williamson: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that further reforms will be coming down the line. That will entail further legislation, and we know how precious legislative time is. Can he—or perhaps the Paymaster General—tell us when the subsequent Lords reform Bills will be introduced in this Parliament?

Gareth Snell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support. There will be more legislation. I am not a Front Bencher, but I know, because our manifesto said that we were committed to further reform, that that time will come. I am sure that there will be legislative time and that he will have an opportunity later in the debate to put the question to Labour Front Benchers directly, or perhaps to table a business question for a Thursday morning.

To draw my comments to a conclusion—

Mr Holden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gareth Snell: I would rather not, if that is okay—anyone else but the right hon. Gentleman. He was only 10 votes away from potentially getting a peerage himself, so perhaps for that reason he may not want to comment on the appointment process.

Mr Holden: The hon. Gentleman has had a nice laugh at my expense, but he knows what it is like to lose an election and to move seats. He made a good point about the Labour manifesto including the removal of hereditary peers, but as my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) made clear, the same paragraph includes the introduction of a retirement age at 80. Will the hon. Gentleman welcome any amendments to introduce that in this legislation?

Gareth Snell: Again, I am surprised I have to explain to the right hon. Gentleman how legislation works. A Government do not legislate on their whole manifesto in one Bill at the beginning of a Parliament. Those on my party's Front Bench have said, and I fully accept that this is the right way to do it, that there will be a sequence of reforms over time, starting with the expulsion of the hereditary peers. That is the simplest way to start this process, allowing time and space for considered debate about the other proposed reforms that were in our manifesto and were supported by the British people.

In conclusion, all this Bill does is seek to end a 27-year anomaly that first came about when the Conservative party objected to previous reforms. By voting for it tonight, we can start to right that wrong, and we can start ourselves on a process of reform of the House of Lords. I look forward to welcoming all my new reforming friends to join us in the Aye Lobby this evening.

3.11 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Before I begin my remarks, I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I have a meeting with a Minister at the Department of Health a little later, so I will have to slip out for part of the debate.

I slightly hesitate to say this in the presence of my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), because I would love to describe myself as a romantic old Tory who believes in the Peel dictum that we should keep the best of what we have and reform only where necessary. However, I am afraid that that ship has probably sailed and we are now full steam ahead into the 21st century, and there is much in what

[Simon Hoare]

the Paymaster General said to support the principle that he seeks to advance. In a modern legislature, can we justify—beyond its being an attractive traditional anachronism—having 92 or whatever hereditary peers?

It is frankly nigh on impossible to make that argument, apart from as a romantic attachment, although my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) gave it his best shot. He made some very important points, particularly in quoting Burke. I have to say that I am distressed to hear that, when our leadership issues have been settled, he will be leaving the Front Bench—he was just starting to show such promise, and I am sure great things beckoned. He is a great mate, and he will be much missed.

I am afraid that the argument the Minister deployed is not the best one or what I was expecting to hear him say. He is an accomplished author: he has written a book on Nye Bevan, an award-winning book on Harold Wilson and a book about Attlee. He may possibly be able to hear those heroes of his spinning in their graves, because his approach to Lords reform would translate as Wilson having a “lukewarm heat of technology”, Attlee saying, “Well, I’ve created a little bit of a welfare state, and I think we’ll just pause there for 30 years and see how that goes, because some people may not like it”, or Nye Bevan saying, “Do you know, I’ve opened a cottage hospital in Cwmbran, and that’s quite enough: let’s just pause for a moment and see how that works.” If you are going to do it, do it!

I make this point with the greatest respect and politeness, because I admire the right hon. Gentleman enormously. After 14 years in opposition, decades since Harold Wilson and over a century since Lloyd George’s price list of viscountcies—and heaven knows what else when he was selling peerages to try to keep the old Liberal party in power—the right hon. Gentleman says, in a tantalising Lords reform version of the dance of the seven veils, “I want to show you this little bit of what we’re going to do, and there’s more to come after the interval, but we don’t how long the interval will be.”

My right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) is a former Chief Whip, so he knows full well the pressures on legislative time, and the Cabinet Office has done well to secure a legislative slot so early in the Parliament to deliver some constitutional change and reform. What a missed open goal to deliver the things that most of us—including, I think, the right hon. Gentleman—would like to see.

The right hon. Gentleman—I say this as a fellow boy from south Wales—told us that there is nothing better than when we see men and women of good will who wish to take part in our national life having the opportunity to do so. That is what we all want to see—a socially mobile, inclusive, engaged democracy—if for no other reason than that it means that, through that mechanism, we can destroy and put away those on the extremes, who only ever fill the vacuum when those women and men of good will do not step up to the plate.

Removing the 92 hereditary peers will still leave appointment to the Lords up to patronage—being a great mate of a party leader. Across the House we should be absolutely frank about how all party leaders all of the time have used the House of Lords as a way of

getting rid of the awkward, the bed blockers or whoever. I have to say to Labour Members that, while we should all beware of Greeks bearing gifts—I can say that as somebody who is a quarter Greek—they should beware of a Labour Chief Whip offering them a peerage, because the Government will change the age qualification. It is the unkindest retirement present for Margaret Beckett, John Spellar and others. They said, “Please go to the House of Lords and make way for a new, young, able thruster,” and then, “Oh, we’re frightfully sorry, but you’re now too old to take your seat.”

Shaun Davies: To damage the street cred of us both, I am very fond of the hon. Member, as he knows—we go back a long way—but does he agree with me that perfection should not be the enemy of the good, and he should vote for this measure as a down payment on future reforms?

Simon Hoare: I say to the hon. Gentleman, whom I nearly called my hon. Friend because he is a friend, that I am more than likely to vote for this Bill on Second Reading. I possibly should have told my Whip about that beforehand—there is my peerage gone. Notwithstanding the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) is one of my oldest and dearest friends, I must say that his reasoned amendment seems to have been written more because of the need to write something, rather than actually to make a case to persuade, which is entirely atypical of the way he usually works.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge made the important point—I do hope that those on the Treasury Bench and the Government Whips have listened—that this is an opportunity to consider proper amendments to make this a more material exercise.

We live, thank God—I say this as a Roman Catholic—in a multicultural, multi-religious society. We have an established church, and I do not think anybody would advocate for its disestablishment at this stage. However, it is surely an anachronism, just because of the sees to which they have been appointed, for the Archbishop of Canterbury and others to sit as part of the legislature. The only other country that has clerics in such a position by dint of office is Iran, which I suggest is not a country that we should seek to emulate very much. Let us have a faith Bench or faith Benches, but let those Benches be of mixed faiths and truly representative of the faith groups doing so much good in our country.

A number of the hereditary peers have been doing sterling work. I think, in particular, of my noble Friend The Earl Howe and His Grace the Duke of Wellington, whom Labour Members were praying in aid just a few months ago, of course, when His Grace was leading the campaign against the then Government to improve water quality and sewerage. I suggest that his expertise in and knowledge of water quality in chalk streams and so forth should not be lost.

I do take on board the sincerity that the Minister claims—this is not a personal thing or a class war; it is a matter of principle. I think the House gets him on that. I do not think he needs to make that point any more. But I do hope that there may be an opportunity for a supernumerary list outside the normal leaders’ nominations—birthday or new year honours—so that those hereditaries who wish to continue their service, and not all will, can

have conferred upon them a life peerage. That would make good much of what the Minister has said with regard to his principal motivation and that this is not a personal thing.

Sir Roger Gale: Will my hon. Friend agree that if this legislation is to go through, there should be a provision to ensure that all the hereditary peers are offered a life peerage as part of the package?

Simon Hoare: One can make a perfectly reasonable argument to say it should be offered to all. One can make an equally good argument that it should be offered only to hereditary peers who are fulfilling a House of Lords duty—chairing a Committee perhaps, or if they are active on their party's Front Bench. My right hon. Friend has made an important point and I am sure that the Minister will consider it. It would certainly be an act of good grace and it would be an act of charm, both of which I know are characteristics with which the Minister is fully imbued.

Sir Roger Gale: I do not wish to detain the House, but when I raised this point during the Minister's remarks he indicated that it would be perfectly proper and possible for a leader of a party to put forward hereditary peers for life peerages, but that is not the point. The point is that there should be a separate list in this legislation to accommodate all of them.

Simon Hoare: I am going to stay mute on the "all" point, but my right hon. Friend echoes the point I was endeavouring to make, which is that a list of conversion, as it were, from hereditary to life should be considered by His Majesty's Government, outwith leaving it to leaders of any party to nominate for a new year's honour or a birthday honour, because that would clog up the system for those who are new to public life—echoing the point the Minister raised—where people want to make a contribution and may have caught the eye of the powers that be in order to secure a nomination.

I think there is a job of work that needs to be done. There are a number of ways in which one can land on the right solution, but it should not just be a case of, "Thank you so very much indeed for your service. Please return the ermine to the Lord Great Chamberlain. Your retirement party has been postponed because we could not find a room to have it in", or whatever it may happen to be. I think there is a way which is elegant, which is kind, which is graceful and which has some democratic underpinning, because at least it will have gone through the appointments.

I close by saying that this is a missed opportunity, and the Labour Front Bench needs to consider that. I appreciate that they have the distorting effect of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who did take up a little Labour bandwidth. We all got constrained by delivering Brexit, or trying not to deliver Brexit. And then we all had the big national distortion of the pandemic. But to offer this dance of the seven veils, after 14 years of opposition, and on an issue that people in this place and outside have been talking about for over a century, suggests to me a lack of detailed preparedness by the Government in some policy areas. It cannot have been a shock to Labour that they won the election; it may have come as a pleasant surprise that they won so comprehensively, but it really cannot have come as a shock that they were likely to win the

general election whenever it came, irrespective of how hard my colleagues and I were working to ensure that did not happen:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune",

or misfortune in my party's case, but we are where we are.

I hope that amendments are forthcoming—I do not think it is too late to work cross-party on this—to buttress this proposal and deliver some of that democratisation of the House of Lords, and to make sure it is more regionally reflective. I listened to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) talking about the number of white men. I will be careful as he is helping me on a constituency issue, for which I am grateful and I want to put my thanks on the record, but my party has given the country three female Prime Ministers, the first Prime Minister of Jewish heritage and the first Prime Minister of the Hindu faith, so I am not entirely certain that we need to take lessons from the Labour party on how to bring people who are not necessarily used to public life into public life.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman makes my point quite succinctly for me. Yes, there were three female leaders of his party, but they were elected; none of them had the opportunity to take up one of the 92 seats in the House of Lords. That is the anomaly that needs to be resolved.

Simon Hoare: Labour were very keen to stop the Member for Stoke Newington being elected, and doubtless she would have been donning ermine at some point, so again I think the hon. Gentleman is on slightly thin ice. I say to the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), who is looking confused, that I am talking about the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). I say to him, "Keep up, 007!" I do not know whether he noticed it during the election campaign, but there was quite a lot in the media about it. He should look it up—the House of Commons Library is frightfully helpful on these sorts of things.

So I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere, with huge reluctance and sadness, that I am more than likely to sit this one out, as the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee—and I am sure that the Committee will want to look at this in more detail when we are up and running. But the underlying principle that the Minister has set forward is a compelling one. It is a sadness, a disappointment and a surprise that he is not taking this opportunity, after 14 years preparing in opposition, and after a century of making the case from the centre-left of British politics, and with a massive Commons majority, and that this timid little church mouse of a Bill is the best that he can offer us this afternoon.

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

3.27 pm

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is the privilege of my life to give my first speech in the House of

[*Claire Hazelgrove*]

Commons as the first Labour Member of Parliament for the Filton and Bradley Stoke constituency. Having been a candidate since 2022, it still feels rather surreal to be on this side of the election and to say those words, and in truth I hope that standing here in this awe-inspiring place will always feel at least a little surreal.

I could not be more grateful to fellow residents for the time that thousands of them have given in speaking with me and my volunteer team on their doorsteps over the years already, and for putting their faith in me to serve them well. But no matter how people voted, I will work hard every day to serve all residents as an active, impactful and approachable MP that they can be proud of.

I come from a family of teachers, NHS workers and RAF service members, and their sense of public service runs deep in me. I have spent my life working with and for those who too often do not have enough of a voice on issues that matter to them—on global poverty, on opportunity, on the environment and on the housing crisis.

I am at my core a campaigner and advocate. I wholeheartedly believe in the power of community, and that lived experience is as valid in shaping policy and public services as holding multiple degrees in that same subject. I see this role, which I am honoured to hold for a time, as being a vital jigsaw piece, joining together with others to make life fairer for people across our community and our country. The NHS workers, the charity workers, the teachers, the carers, the innovators and the volunteers—I could go on—are the ones who bind us. That is certainly the case across our rich tapestry of towns and villages just north of the city of Bristol in glorious South Gloucestershire.

I am determined to put the whole of the Filton and Bradley Stoke constituency—named after the oldest and youngest towns at the time of its creation, and including many distinct and vibrant communities—on the map. It is the home of Concorde and the future of flight, with our aerospace companies setting the standard nationally and internationally. It is the home of the lifesaving NHS Blood and Transplant, the innovative University of the West of England and the vital Ministry of Defence Abbey Wood. It is also home to Wallace and Gromit, more places called Stoke than one could count after a few great local ciders, and a palpable belief that better days still lie ahead.

People in my constituency do not ask for too much. We want security, stability and fairness, and to know that if we work hard, we have the same chance as anyone else to fulfil our potential. We want to know that we will be able to provide for our families through good wages earned from decent jobs, and to enjoy life and give back in our own way. I am incredibly grateful for the fact that even though they have been up against so much in recent years, people in my community chose to keep their faith in better. I will work hard every day to repay that trust.

With that in mind, while it is almost impossible for any two people, let alone 75,000 of us across a constituency, to agree on everything all the time, I will always be up front with fellow residents, will listen, and will share what decisions I am making and why. I believe that how we do things in politics matters almost as much as what we do. I appreciate my part—my responsibility—in doing politics differently and having better conversations.

On that note, I give thanks to my predecessors. Jack Lopresti championed defence, and I know that he will be glad of this Government's continued support for Ukraine. Before recent boundary changes, some local residents were served by Luke Hall, and briefly by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North East (Damien Egan), when he was the last Member for Kingswood. My true thanks to them and their predecessors for their service.

I also want to give my personal thanks to two other former Members of this House who have been important in my journey to this place. Sally Keeble was the nearest Labour MP to me when I was growing up in a village that still does not have a Labour MP. She took me under her wing and first encouraged me to think about standing to serve in this place. I also thank Tony Blair, whom I had the privilege of working closely with for a few years at his Institute for Global Change. His approach to considered and considerate leadership has taught me a great deal. It was the last Labour Government's response to the Make Poverty History campaign that showed me that politics at its best can be an unparalleled force for good, and that significant change can happen when people power meets political power. That is when I first found the Labour party.

I got into politics, like many, to make a difference, but I was driven every day by the simple belief that someone's background should not determine their life chances and life choices. That is why it feels fitting to give this speech today, in a debate that is fundamentally about how we make our Parliament better and fairer. While I am a great supporter of British institutions and traditions, there is clearly no place in a modern Parliament for people—largely men—who can vote on legislation as a birthright, because their father did. As a new officer of the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people, and as a soon-to-be member of the upcoming group focusing on political and media literacy, I will work hard and across the divide to help others to feel as confident, capable and comfortable as anyone else in these spaces. I hope to show that if I can stand here today—a girl from a village who had, and still has, a simple belief in making life fairer—so can anyone.

I am fully committed to serving local people well, putting our priorities at the heart of the agenda and breaking down barriers to opportunity, so that everybody has their chance to thrive. I end by thanking my family, friends, campaign team and community, who inspire me every day.

3.34 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): What a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Lady's immensely accomplished speech. She is absolutely right that politics and Parliament can be a force for good—particularly, to go into the detail of what she said, when people are driven by a shared sense of fairness.

I shall speak today about legitimacy, efficacy, dignity and continuity. First, I will deal with legitimacy. Authority is legitimately exercised by those of us here who are elected, but not all those who exercise authority are elected, and not all legitimacy depends on direct reference to the people. The right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) serves as a Government Minister who is appointed by His Majesty, and was chosen to serve by his Government and his party. He is elected to this place as a Member of Parliament, but he is not

elected as a Minister; he is appointed, and exercises all kinds of power on that basis. I do not challenge his legitimacy; I accept it as part of our democratic settlement. Under our separation of powers, many people exercise authority who are not elected at all. Judges are not elected, but are appointed on the basis of their competence, knowledge and experience, and they exercise power using their wisdom.

All of us in this Chamber know of authority derived not from election or from the people. A lot of people here will be parents. Mothers and fathers exercise all kinds of authority, but they are not chosen to do so by those over whom they have that authority. We might call that authority by accident of birth, or at least of someone else's birth. Authority and legitimacy need to be debated in a much more measured way than they have been in the debate so far.

I have heard many wise speeches from all parts of the Chamber over the time I have spent here, and I have heard many daft speeches, too. There is nothing dafter than someone saying that they will vote for a provision that they do not believe in because it makes the House of Lords more democratic, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) did, when it does not in fact make the House of Lords more democratic at all. It is not more democratic to be appointed by a party leader or nominated by one's peers than it is to be born to sit in the House of Lords. Let us have a sensible and mature debate about this and consider legitimacy in the round.

Let us also talk about efficacy. The House of Lords plays a vital role in our constitution by ensuring that the Government are held to account, and by providing a creative and, by and large, helpful tension with this House. That has not been convenient for Governments of any colour. When I was a Minister in previous Governments, many times I had to negotiate with Members of the upper House—from all parties, by the way—in the same way that I engaged with colleagues from across this House to get legislation through. That tension is critical, because it allows scrutiny of what is brought before this House and agreed here, and by and large the system works. It is awkward and difficult—it is probably not what we would contrive if we were to design a system from scratch, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) said—but it has proved generally effective over time.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con) *rose*—

Sir John Hayes: I see that my right hon. Friend is itching to intervene.

Jesse Norman: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his excellent speech. I want to make a simple point, which is that we are naturally respectful of evolution in nature because we see that it leads to progressive improvement, in general, in species, and diversification, but we are extraordinarily foolish when we consider the evolution of our institutions. The House of Lords has become, over time, a remarkably effective scrutineer of legislation, in its diverse ways of selection. He makes an argument on legitimacy; does he share my view that the House of Lords' legitimacy comes not only from the exercise of authority effectively, but from a certain expectation as to expertise and the degree of care and attention with which people are brought into that House?

Sir John Hayes: Of course my right hon. Friend is right that change is inevitable and change is constant, in the words of Disraeli, but that change needs to be built on an understanding of what has gone before, exactly as my right hon. Friend says. Evolution in our thinking builds on what we know and adds to it incrementally. For the most part, constitutional change is better when it is incremental and when it is founded on consistent and measured dialogue between people across the House—the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden).

Paul Waugh *rose*—

Sir John Hayes: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who was an admirer of mine in his previous life. I wonder whether that admiration is constant, too.

Paul Waugh: I was indeed. I was going to share with the House the secret that I used one of my references in a report to endorse the right hon. Gentleman as a candidate. He makes the point, in agreement with the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), that incrementalism is a good thing; surely this is an incremental Bill that takes the first step towards a bigger reform.

Sir John Hayes: This is why I do not agree with the radicals on the Opposition Benches. This will come as a surprise, but I am not, by temperament or politics, a radical. One of my great political heroes, Joe Chamberlain, began life as a radical, but like most sensible people, he moved to the right over his life, and in the end became a Tory, or at least a supporter and member of a Tory Government. I do not share the view that we can conjure some kind of ideal system by throwing all the balls up in the air and seeing where they land. As the hon. Gentleman implies, incremental change is born of an understanding that gradual alterations to our constitutional settlement are, by and large, better. That is what most Governments have done over time; indeed, the Blair Government, to which the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove) referred, took exactly that view when they reformed the House of Lords, retaining the hereditaries on the basis of the very sort of incrementalism for which I argue.

Luke Taylor: I apologise for going back to a point the right hon. Gentleman made earlier, but he made the argument that ministerial appointments and appointments to the House of Lords are decisions that we take on behalf of our constituents as part of our representative democracy. Does he agree that we politicians are then held to account by the electorate in the elections that follow? Former prime Minister Liz Truss was held to account for her decisions on appointments to the House of Lords, and her decision to appoint to the Cabinet people like Kwasi Kwarteng, who immediately crashed our economy. Does that not show that there is democratic accountability for the appointments we make, either to the Cabinet or to the House of Lords? The unusual nature of the hereditary peers marks them out as the odd appointments out in the House of Lords; they face no accountability, and they cannot be taken into account in the democratic process.

Sir John Hayes: I tried to follow the hon. Gentleman's argument. As far as I can work out, he said that elected people are accountable, but they do daft things sometimes.

[*Sir John Hayes*]

There is not much evidence to suggest that Members of the House of Lords have been less wise than Members of the House of Commons. There have been wise people here and wise people there. There have been good decisions there and good decisions here—and bad ones, too. The hon. Gentleman is right, of course, that we are directly accountable to our electors, and I treasure and honour that. The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke said that she revered her connection with not just her voters, but her constituents, and so do I.

I will make some progress because I know that you of all people, Madam Deputy Speaker—note my use of “you” in this context—will not want me to truncate my remarks. Having said that, I know that others, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), are very keen to contribute, and he will not forgive me if I use up all this time. Let us talk a bit about efficacy. The average hereditary peer is younger than the average peer. A higher proportion of hereditary peers are active members of the House of Lords, serving on Committees, on the Front Benches of both parties or as Whips. A much higher proportion of hereditary peers contribute to speeches and amendments than life peers. Purely on the grounds of whether they are doing their job well, there is no real argument for getting rid of this small number of people.

There may be a better argument—notwithstanding my resistance to radicalism—for looking again at those Members of the House of Lords who, once appointed, never go. That is the reform that I think I could vote for.

Sir Gavin Williamson: The Labour party had that in its manifesto, and said that it would introduce it as part of its reform of the House of Lords. Does my right hon. Friend think that it would be good if it supported such an amendment?

Sir John Hayes: I would be interested to see what amendments come forward, given my right hon. Friend’s remarks. There is a strong argument for having an expectation that if someone is appointed to the Lords, they do their job. That is the kind of amendment that even I, with my deep-rooted conservatism, could be persuaded to support. On the basis of the efficacy argument, the Bill does not do the job.

Let us speak of dignity. Bagehot described the House of Lords as one of the “dignified” aspects of our parliamentary democracy. Let us translate that into what we know about it in our age: debate in the House of Lords tends to be measured; its amendments, though sometimes forceful, by and large are withdrawn in the end in deference to the elected House; and the expertise in the House of Lords is undoubted, as peers are drawn from many parts of our communities. That includes the hereditaries. The parody of hereditary peers, which I suppose is rooted in the old days of backwoodsmen, that they are somehow a privileged elite who take no great interest in the affairs of our nation and bring no great skill to the consideration of those affairs, is just that—a prejudiced parody.

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is always good to have a mention of Bagehot in any constitutional debate. Bagehot draws the distinction between the dignified and the efficient parts of the

constitution, but I thought that my right hon. Friend was making an argument that the House of Lords is no less an efficient part of the constitution, because of the effective way in which it scrutinises legislation and, in particular, in which the hereditaries play their role within the House. In a sense, would he not improve on Bagehot’s distinction by blending the two a little in the case of the House of Lords, which he is so ably defending? Does he share my view that, if the Labour party is preparing to nominate vast numbers of its own life peers, it might consider the question of whether they should make a commitment to attend the House for any period of time, rather than just taking the honour and absconding?

Sir John Hayes: Dignity and efficiency are not necessarily incompatible—my right hon. Friend personifies their marriage. He is right to say that there is something ugly about the idea of a Government of either party simply stuffing the House of Lords with their friends or donors. Let us be honest: that is not something one can accuse the other side of this Chamber of without acknowledging that it has become a habit in Parliament over time. Let me qualify that for a moment. There is not a power or policy in the history of man that has not understood the importance of patronage.

Patronage is a part of the exercise of power, but the way it is handled—how measured the application of favour is—is a matter of dignity. There is something fundamentally undignified about replacing the relatively small number of hereditary peers who, as I have said, are proven to do a good job. I noticed that when some of them were cited, the Minister, with his usual candour and decency, nodded in approval. Those peers being replaced by placemen seems to me to be fundamentally undignified.

Let us now talk a little about continuity. The House of Lords represents a link to our past. That may trouble some people in this House, but it does not trouble me. I am a Tory, so I believe that society needs to marry a respect for the past, consider the present and meet the needs of “future generations”, in the words of Burke. That connection to what has been is an important part of our constitutional settlement, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere set out. Lord Roberts rightly described the measures before us as

“cutting the link with our collective past that goes back to the period of Magna Carta”.

The Duke of Wellington, who has been referred to favourably already in this debate and whose great-great-grandfather defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, now sits in the other place. Are we not right to recognise that that legitimises our connection with the past, to use legitimacy in another way? It makes that link real, powerful and, I think, desirable for that reason.

To conclude—notwithstanding begging your favour, Madam Deputy Speaker; I do not want to test your tolerance to its limits—let me say, without acrimony, because I have already made clear that I respect the Minister and his record in this House, that I suspect what drives the Bill is not a desire to maintain dignity, or for greater efficacy, or even the rather narrow-minded view that the only legitimacy that matters is democratic legitimacy, although that does of course matter, but a preoccupation with modernity.

Shaun Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Hayes: No, I am going to finish now.

A vapid fascination with now—imagine that. Of course, those philosophers on the Labour Benches will know that “now” is an illusion, as now becomes then in an instant, does it not? Yet the politics of now have an extraordinary appeal for faint hearts and weak minds. I know there are not too many of those in the Chamber, although rather more than one might ideally wish. That fascination with modernity leaves me only able to finish by quoting Marcel Proust.

Pete Wishart: Oh, please not! [*Laughter.*]

Sir John Hayes: I know there are students of Proust littered among the saplings on the Labour Benches. If they are truly to become oaks and leave their acorns in the soil, they need to read Proust more. Proust said that “the most deplorable prejudices have had their moment of novelty when fashion lent them its fragile grace.”

It is a prejudice that drives the Bill. It is a prejudice that does the House no credit—or at least, I should say, does the party opposite no credit.

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

3.53 pm

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove) for such a passionate maiden speech. She will be an excellent representative for her constituency. It is a privilege to stand here to give my own as the first woman to represent Knowsley in Parliament.

My predecessor, Sir George Howarth, served Knowsley with dedication for over three decades. In his maiden speech, he promised to

“shout and make a fuss”—[*Official Report*, 26 November 1986; Vol. 106, c. 289.]

for his constituents. He certainly kept that promise, serving not only as a loyal constituency MP but as a Northern Ireland Minister under a Labour Government. I have another illustrious predecessor: the MP for Huyton from 1950 to 1983, Harold Wilson, who served as a Labour Prime Minister. Harold transformed our economy and industry, founded the Open University, and started us on the long road to equality that we are still travelling. He left a more equal society than he inherited, one in which far fewer got by on too little. I am so honoured to follow in his footsteps.

Knowsley made me who I am. I was born and raised in Cantril Farm, a so-called slum clearance estate. My nan lived in the flats there, and I went to Brookside school, where my auntie Jean was a cleaner. My dad worked at Ford, on the production line, and with his secure, well-paid, unionised job, my mum and dad could give me a better life than they had had. Then, as a teenager, I got jobs in Liverpool, in Brian’s diner on Stanley Street, and at the Beatles shop, where I met Paul McCartney a few times. I started club nights where I DJ’d, and one of them—Liquidation—is still going.

However, I am here today as a proud trade unionist. It is the trade unions that built the Labour party. I am proud to be a member of Unite and the GMB, and I am proud to be a former political director of Unite and

adviser to the general secretary of the TUC. The unions are my second family, and it is because of them that I have come from the council estate to the parliamentary estate. I know why I am here: to speak for my class, the working class. I will not forget who I am or where I came from. It is my duty to stand up for the people of Knowsley and to champion our strengths—our dignity, our resilience and our sense of community. I will never talk down my part of the world or its people.

Our streets are soundtracked by the La’s and China Crisis. Our parks and estates have nurtured footballing legends such as Peter Reid and Steven Gerrard. We have produced the finest writers and actors of my class: Alan Bleasdale, Phil Redmond, Sue Johnston, and Stephen Graham. They all showcase Knowsley’s creative talent. Last Friday I met Lord Derby at Knowsley Hall, the place that gave my constituency its name.

The so-called local toff and the former council estate kid spoke about how we can work together for the betterment of Knowsley. Knowsley Hall, where Shakespeare performed for Queen Elizabeth I, still represents our rich heritage, now revived by the Shakespeare North playhouse. Nowadays, alongside the people of Knowsley, I count as constituents two tigers, six lions, 11 rhinos, and a horde of cheeky monkeys who will take the wipers off your car at the safari park.

In modern manufacturing, the Jaguar Land Rover car plant in Halewood not only provides jobs across my constituency, but is currently at the forefront of electrification. We have 100-year-old family firms with solid apprenticeships that lead to skilled jobs, such as JJ Smith and Hemsec, pioneers in net zero construction. I will fight for investment in firms like these and jobs to take pride in, which can provide a good life.

I am proud of Knowsley, but I will always be honest about what stands in our way. Knowsley is the second most deprived constituency in the country. When Governments have walked away from us and left us to manage decline, we have picked ourselves up and helped one another through sheer force of will, determination, resilience and solidarity. We now have a Government who will not walk away, a Labour Government who are on our side. In Knowsley, we have great women who lead community institutions that take care of our people every day, such as Racheal Jones at One Knowsley, Marie Stuart at Southdene community centre, Jackie Croft at Centre 63, Pam Richards at the Safari Kids Club, Caroline Grant at The First Step, and Margaret Roche at SHARE.

In 1986, when my predecessor took his place, only 6% of school leavers in Knowsley got a job. That kind of unemployment scars families for generations. We have never recovered from the devastation of deindustrialisation under Thatcher and 14 years of austerity. We still face lower wages, higher poverty and fewer opportunities, and we need secure, unionised jobs on decent wages so that people can get by and their kids can get on. It is not much to ask, but it is everything. That is why Labour’s plan—the new deal for working people—is so close to my heart. It will be the greatest transformation in rights at work in a generation.

In Knowsley we dream big, but the opportunities are not always there. Teachers and school staff in Knowsley work incredibly hard, but the fact is that there is no A-level provision in my constituency. No child should grow up under a Labour Government thinking that

[Anneliese Midgley]

they are not good enough to do an A-level, and I will do everything I can to change that, alongside delivering more and better apprenticeships.

My politics is the politics of people and of the shop floor, the bus stop, the school gate and the supermarket. From Huyton and Kirkby to Prescott, from Stockbridge village to Knowsley village, and from the Johns estate to the Tower Hill estate, I say to my constituents: “You are my priority. I will not take you for granted. It is the honour of my life to serve you, and I will do my very best for you.”

4.1 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow such a moving and strong maiden speech by the hon. Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley). I could tell by how she spoke with such passion about Knowsley that she will always be a fierce advocate for her constituents, and make sure that their priorities are properly heard in this House and that the Government do everything they can in order to address them. There is a connection between the constituency I represented for 14 years and hers, as I had the great privilege of representing many of the Jaguar Land Rover workers at the engine plant, which fell within my former constituency prior to the boundary changes. It goes to show how important it is that we always work across parties in pursuit of our common interests, because the success of so many great engineering firms, such as Jaguar Land Rover and BAE Systems, has an impact on all our constituencies. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady on many shared issues in the future.

This debate is an interesting one, because it offers the Government and this House the opportunity for real change—maybe I am like some of the people who read the Labour manifesto and believed that it was actually going to deliver change. The manifesto has an enormous number of pictures of the Prime Minister with a fine range of clothing provided by Lord Alli—32 pictures, I believe. Certain aspects of it give me real enthusiasm, and one is about constitutional reform. I appreciate that constitutional reform is probably not the thing that drove many people to vote one way or another, but it is a very important part of what the manifesto says. It sets out some important areas of change and reform.

However, when we look at what the Government have brought before the House, we see that this Bill is not about radical change. It is not about trying to take the opportunity that has been talked about many times in the past, including by the coalition Government and the previous Labour Government. We have already heard about the history over many decades or even a century. Reform and change have been promised but not delivered, and I cannot help but feel that this is such a moment. The Paymaster General will know that parliamentary time is always scarce. We love to think that it can be manufactured, but he will know that he will not get many opportunities to bring forward legislation on the House of Lords. Indeed, I would expect this to be the one and only time he gets to bring forward such legislation.

On the composition of the House of Lords, the scope of the Bill is very wide, and I would argue that that opens the opportunity to take a slightly more radical

step forward in this legislation. I have rarely been referred to as a Tory radical—I put this down to my socialist roots and my socialist family—but I feel that more can be done here. I want to speak on a number of areas. The first, which is particularly important to me, is the injustice of the fact that there are 26 bishops in the House of Lords. An Anglican could say, “Well, they are representing me well”, but I think it is fundamentally wrong that my children, who are Catholics, have no form of representation in that Chamber. Yet the Government will not eradicate this injustice. How can it be right that legislation that was passed in the 19th century is not looked at afresh? Why are English bishops allowed to sit in the House of Lords but not Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish bishops?

Mr Holden: My right hon. Friend is making a fantastic point. He will know that it was in the Tudor era that reform of the House of Lords started, when the majority of bishops were removed, leaving these 26. The Paymaster General made a point about reforms not having been properly continued since 1999, but actually, when we are looking back to the 16th century, we can see that some of these reforms really need to catch up with modern times.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Indeed, and I want to encourage the Paymaster General. He has the potential to be known as a great reformer of the Labour party—he will write books about himself in the future—but he needs to be brave. He needs to be bold. I know that he can persuade his friends in the Whips Office to be bold. Fundamentally, we have a big opportunity. There is an unfairness. There is an injustice. So many people of so many faiths, and so many people of no faith at all, see that there are 26 bishops in the House of Lords. They do not reflect what the United Kingdom looks like today, so if the Government are not willing to table an amendment, I will table an amendment to remove those 26 bishops from the House of Lords.

Gareth Snell *rose*—

Sir Gavin Williamson: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support me in that mission to make the upper House a fairer and more reflective Chamber.

Gareth Snell: I thank my Staffordshire colleague for giving way. If he carries on with this strain of radicalism, he might even have a book written about him by the Paymaster General—scant as it might be. Is he taking his point to the final degree? Is he now advocating for the disestablishment of the Church of England, because that is where that argument ends up?

Sir Gavin Williamson: No, they are totally different things. There will be no disestablishment of the Church of England, but we need to lance the boil of the frankly ridiculous fact that we have clergy automatically sitting, as of right, in one of the Houses that make up this Parliament. To me, that is not right. It happens in Iran, but it does not happen elsewhere. I cannot see the justification for it, especially when it does not reflect the nations and regions of this country. Strong arguments have been made across this House, including on the Labour Benches, about the fact that hereditary peers do not reflect the make-up of this country. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) made a persuasive

argument about the fact that they are nearly all male, and that only 1% of them—I think he mentioned—were female. Well, there is a similar challenge with those bishops. Of course, nowadays, only 2% of the British population attend Anglican services on a Sunday. More people declare that they have no religion than actually attend a church. Britain is a very different country today from how it was in the past.

Sir Roger Gale: In an earlier intervention, my right hon. Friend said that this Bill is an opportunity missed, and that such legislative opportunities do not come by very often. For the moment, the Cabinet Office has this Bill. Might I suggest that replacing 92 hereditary peers with what my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) called “placemen” is not reform? Would it not be a good idea if Ministers gave a clear undertaking this afternoon that they will accept amendments of the kind that my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) proposes?

Sir Gavin Williamson: I very much hope so. I know the burning radicalism within the Paymaster General’s stomach, and I know he wants to make a difference, but I seem to be more committed to delivering it than he does. I am very keen to make sure that we deliver what he promised on page 108 of the manifesto. I want to see that delivered.

The Paymaster General knows that he will not have another opportunity to legislate on this issue, but he has this opportunity to make a difference, because so many of the things mentioned in the Labour manifesto can be delivered within the scope of this Bill. He has heard that there are Conservative Members with the reforming zeal he once had as a young man, which he seems to have forgotten with the trappings of office. We want to fan the flames of radicalism in him.

Adam Jogee: Even I, as a loyal Labour Member, would say that there are more fun things to do before bedtime that read the manifesto, which I see my near neighbour has considered very seriously indeed. For him to amend the Bill, it has to have had its Second Reading. Will he vote for the Bill tonight?

Sir Gavin Williamson: I want to make this a proper Bill that reflects the hon. Gentleman’s manifesto. I will give way again to the hon. Gentleman so that he can answer this. If the Bill were amended to reflect the Labour manifesto, would he join me in voting for those amendments?

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my near neighbour for giving way.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Will he vote for his manifesto?

Adam Jogee: Listen, 20 votes hold, and I will give my answer in a moment. It is not for me to set Government policy, but I look forward to the right hon. Gentleman joining me in the Lobby tonight and getting this Bill through.

Sir Gavin Williamson: What I will be doing is the work to make sure that this House has the opportunity to vote on a Bill that will deliver proper reform of the

upper House. Whether that is in areas set out in the Labour manifesto, such as a retirement age of 80 years, which is in paragraph 2 on page 108—

Sir Roger Gale: Shame!

Sir Gavin Williamson: Only in the House of Lords, let me be clear. It is also vital to introduce participation requirements, and I look forward to working with Ministers to make such amendments.

Shaun Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Gavin Williamson: I will give way, if the hon. Gentleman makes it clear whether he would vote for an amendment that reflects the manifesto commitments he was elected on, if I am in a position to table it.

Shaun Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman vote for the Bill before the House this evening? The Minister has been very clear that this is the first step of constitutional reform.

Sir Gavin Williamson: I have made it clear. Will the hon. Gentleman vote for his manifesto? He is frightened to deliver his manifesto because of what the Whips will do to him. Labour Members have been told that they are not allowed to table amendments. They have been sat on so oppressively. When I was Chief Whip, I always encouraged as much debate as possible, across the House and including from my own Members, as I know how important it is to have a broad, wide-ranging debate. It is slightly depressing that there seems to be a more heavy-handed approach.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Gavin Williamson: Is there no one new to give way to?

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab) *rose—*

Sir Gavin Williamson: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Dave Robertson: I thank my neighbour, the right hon. Member for Great Wyrley, Penkridge and Stone—apologies, I might have got that the wrong way around—for giving way. He has been selectively quoting from the Labour party manifesto. He says the manifesto says we will introduce a retirement age for peers, but fails to mention that the sentence starts with the words:

“At the end of the Parliament.”

I know the Conservative party had a problem sticking to Parliaments lasting five years and that we have had a lot of elections recently, but as far as I am aware, this Government do not intend to have quite so many elections. We intend to be here and pass a large amount of legislation. Will the right hon. Member response to that point?

Sir Gavin Williamson: I hate to correct my neighbour, but as I have the Labour party manifesto in front of me, I will read it to him.

“The next Labour government will therefore bring about an immediate modernisation, by introducing legislation to remove the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. Labour will also introduce a mandatory retirement age. At the end of the Parliament in which a member reaches 80 years of age, they will be required to retire from the House of Lords.”

[Sir Gavin Williamson]

So the manifesto talks about when the Member will retire not when the legislation will be introduced. We know the Paymaster General is an aspiring radical, potentially—

Pete Wishart: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is there anything within your power or your gift that can make the right hon. Gentleman stop with this inconsequential rubbish?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. It is not a matter for the Chair, but I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is coming to the end of his remarks. I remind hon. Members to stick to the motion and that their content could better match the matter before the House.

Sir Gavin Williamson: As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, the motion is incredibly broad. I have listened to many inconsequential speeches made by the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), and I look forward to another inconsequential speech by him later.

The Bill presents an opportunity to deliver significant and important reform that will have a lasting impact. For me, it is important to recognise the injustice of one faith group being disproportionately represented in the House of Lords in a way that does not reflect today's society. However, equally important reforms could be undertaken, such as bringing standards for people taking on financial interests in the other place in line with those of this House, ensuring we look at participation, as set out in the Labour party manifesto, and looking at a retirement age for those in the other House.

I appreciate there has been much enthusiasm in this debate, and I am sure there will be much enthusiasm going forward, but legislative time is precious. The Government have a mandate to deliver change, but I encourage them to take more significant steps, whether on the removal of bishops, the retirement age or other reforms that will make the other place a better place.

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

4.18 pm

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove) and for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) who gave excellent speeches, showing real love for their communities. I look forward to serving alongside them in the years ahead—country first, party second.

I know others may think it is the case for them, but I must admit to the House that I have the immense privilege of representing the most beautiful constituency in Wales, and therefore the entirety of the United Kingdom. From the spires of St Davids cathedral, to the classic car shows in Cresswell Quay, Dobby's grave in the sand dunes of Freshwater West, and the pastel-coloured houses in Tenby, Pembrokeshire is iconic. Even the little-known playwright William Shakespeare posed the question as to

“how Wales was made so happy as T' inherit such a haven.”

If that were not enough, Lord Nelson declaimed that we have the “finest port in Christendom”. That is praise indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We have been discussing constitutional reform extensively in this debate and Pembrokeshire has always been interwoven with the story of our individual, but united, four nations: the Welsh monk Asser summoned by Alfred the Great to leave the great settlement of St Davids to advise him at court; the birth of Henry Tudor in Pembroke castle who would later return from exile to land his army near Dale and march to Bosworth Field; and the siege of Pembroke castle by Oliver Cromwell in almost the final act of the English civil war, beginning a period of 12 years of the protectorate reigning supreme.

Since my election on 4 July, some of the more charitable correspondents have taken the opportunity to observe that I am a slightly unusual person to be a Labour MP. I come from a farming family and there were not many Vote Labour posters around where I grew up, but times have changed and, as the son of a fierce, strong and wonderful Welsh woman, who is in the Public Gallery today, I was proud to be part of the red wave that subsumed Pembrokeshire, Wales and our United Kingdom. My wife and I chose Pembrokeshire as our home. I chose to join the Labour party, and now, perhaps to my father's despair, I choose to vote and do away with hereditary peers. I say sorry to my dad, who is sitting in the Public Gallery today, but I am here to serve the many, not the few.

Talking of family, I wish to acknowledge my wife, Poppy. It is not fun being a political spouse—not that I would know—and she has bigger fish to fry in the law courts. She has been a tower of strength—a real and meaningful support—and I am so grateful that she is on this journey with me.

We do not get to this place alone, and I want to thank all those true believers who stood with me and campaigned in the rain, the sleet and the snow, on the beaches, across farms and across our many rural communities to deliver a Labour MP and a Labour Government. I am grateful to them all.

As with the history, the experiences and the tribulations of the great figures of Pembrokeshire's history, our county has seen its fortunes rise and fall. The fishing industry was once the largest in our United Kingdom. The establishment of the Royal Naval Dockyard during the Napoleonic wars in Pembroke dock cemented our county's military legacy, which lives on to this day in Brawdy barracks and Castlemartin range.

The latter part of the 20th century saw the rise of the oil industry and the transformation of Pembrokeshire's economic fortunes, with four oil refineries on stream by the early 1970s. Oil has given way to gas, and the Port of Milford now has two liquefied natural gas terminals, one gas-fired power station and one oil refinery. More than 20% of the UK's energy comes through the port. With the rise of renewable energy and the potential for floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, we are in a unique position to give true meaning to the term a “just transition”. We have the talent, the skillset, the resources, and I will use my voice in this House at every given opportunity to ensure that Pembrokeshire will not only benefit from but spearhead the industries of the future.

On the subject of fortunes rising and falling, I wish to pay tribute to my predecessors, Simon Hart and Stephen Crabb. Both were dedicated servants of the good people of Pembrokeshire and had long and successful careers in this House. They flew high, with both serving as

Secretary of State for Wales and holding other Cabinet positions. Their most notable acts were Stephen's bid to be Prime Minister and Simon's unenviable task of holding together a fragmented Tory party as Chief Whip. I wish them both well, and I hope that Simon, the quintessential countryman, can find time for his alternative pursuits, given that his favoured sport has become something of a *bête noire* for my party.

As I bring my maiden speech to a close, I wish to paraphrase the words of a man greater than me and one who has already been mentioned in this debate: the inspirational and history-making Harold Wilson. He said that the party on the Government Benches is driven every day by "a moral crusade" and that, without that mission, that purpose and that cause, we are nothing. In my county, where we have the highest child poverty rates in Wales, those words are as true now as they were then. I will use my time in this House to fight for fairness, to deliver real change and to stand up for all the people who live, learn and work in the wonderful community that sent me to Parliament. The work is urgent, the time for action is now, and I am here to serve.

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

4.25 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): Hello! It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell), and I extend my warmest regards to all the Members making their maiden speeches today.

First, I would like to acknowledge my predecessor, Duncan Baker. He was an attentive and hard-working Member, and I wish him well in his future pursuits in industry. Before him, Norman Lamb served in this House for 19 years and left an extraordinary legacy in the realm of mental health, a cause that he continues to be a dedicated advocate for. It was in no small part Norman's commitment to speaking the truth to power and giving a voice to the voiceless that made him such a hero to the people of North Norfolk, and which attracted me to politics fully seven years ago, when I was first elected as a county councillor—and I draw Members' attention to the Register of Members' Financial Interests in connection with my continued role there.

I am immensely grateful for the trust that residents across North Norfolk have shown in me: trust to represent them here, but also trust to play a part in the deep transformation we need in our politics if we are going to make positive change for society. This is an extraordinary place, but I cannot do what I have promised to do for my constituents—we cannot really do what we have been elected to do—without giving it the shake-up that is long overdue.

When people in the beautiful constituency of North Norfolk cannot live well, in good accommodation, with access to transport and employment and healthcare as part of a vibrant society, it is all of us who are failing them. I am thinking of the former resident I met on the train just last week who said to me, "I just want to come home, but there aren't the jobs and there isn't the transport." I am also thinking about Kit, who made me my wonderful Liberal Democrat tie, and about the need to protect the precious Norfolk broads that she lives

near; about Lisa in North Walsham, who is living in constant anguish because of the supply risks to her life-dependent medication; and about Don, a 99-year-old in Sheringham who is pinning his hope on a new kind of politics for the sake of his grandchildren.

The Bill introduces much-needed reform of the House of Lords, which we Liberal Democrats of course support, but we know that it does not go far enough. We must establish a fully elected upper House—elected using a fairer voting system—as soon as possible.

The House of Lords is only one part of our broken system, which needs to see urgent, radical reform. The structure and organisation of government itself must evolve to be fit for the modern age, and that transformation must extend beyond government to the wider public services and administrative systems that serve our citizens. Continuing with the current siloed structures of government is to ignore the technological advances of the past 50 years and fail to embrace the logarithmic advances in the future we are already living in. This evolution is about bringing policy and service delivery closer to the everyday lives and needs of people at every stage of their journey through life.

The current structures are having a very real impact in rural areas like mine, where our public services are in dangerous decline. Benjamin Court, a re-ablement centre in Cromer, has fallen into the gap between two silos—social care, managed by the local authority, and health services, overseen by the NHS—leading to its closure. That is not to mention the desperate need for a properly networked rural public transport service, which is key to enabling access to everything from employment to healthcare, but it is out of those departments' scope and is instead left languishing at the bottom of the pile of priorities by a near-bankrupt county council. These problems make the lives of my constituents harder every day. We cannot go on like this.

But there is a solution: we can bring the design and delivery of services closer to the needs of citizens and there are plenty of precedents to go on here. In the industrial revolution, Thomas Edison made a profound contribution to rewiring the way that industry was organised. Prior to electricity generation, which he helped to develop, there tended to be only one motor in a factory. Industry had to be organised around a single source of power, usually a steam engine, with every machine that needed power connecting directly to the central drive shaft in the ceiling above. Components could be made, yes, but they then had to be transported elsewhere and assembled, usually by hand.

Energy was the central organising principle of industry, but electricity made it possible to pipe power to anywhere on the factory floor. It meant that machines could be placed wherever they were needed, becoming more precise, efficient and specialised, and it led to mass manufacturing, with the product as the central organising principle of industry.

Over the past few years, we have gone through another revolution that is potentially even bigger—the communications revolution. It is powered not by the invention of electricity, but by data. Since the advent of the consumer web in the 1990s, people have come to expect a higher degree of personalisation in their interactions with organisations and services. Data gathered from a wide range of sources—not just digital—is driving innovation and enabling more

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tailored, proactive experiences for users. This ability to be more pre-emptive and personalised does not even need people to be digitally enabled.

Data has enabled the rewiring of industry, not around the production line or the product, but around the citizen, or user experience. That has caused profound change in the overall architecture of many modern organisations, but it has had limited impact on the way that Government and the state are structured. There are great innovations taking place to try to integrate services and make them more patient or user centred, but without fundamental change in the underlying structures of power and public services, their effects will be limited.

From tackling climate change and preventing sewage spilling into the sea, to helping people get work and get about—let alone get a dentist appointment—so much of the change this country badly needs is not limited to one pillar of the state, but cross-cuts different Departments. Perhaps it is time to move away from the traditional silos of Secretaries of State for Education, for Health, and for Transport, and instead adopt a more citizen-focused model. Imagine Secretaries of State for the citizen experience, for wellbeing and prosperity, for children or for data and privacy.

If people in North Norfolk are to get the changes they deserve to our rural health and social care provision, to access and prosper in the jobs of the future and to trust politicians as the custodians of our natural environment, we need to be prepared to rewire the structures of politics and public service delivery around the needs of the people they—and all of us in this House—serve.

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

4.32 pm

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): I congratulate all hon. Members on their excellent maiden speeches this afternoon. It is a great honour to stand in this place today to deliver my own maiden speech as the Member of Parliament for the community I am proud to call my home, Glasgow North East. It is also satisfying that my first contribution is as part of a debate about such an important matter close to my heart, as will become clear.

As is customary, let me commence by putting on record my sincere thanks to my immediate predecessors in the constituency before its boundaries were redrawn, namely Anne McLaughlin and David Linden, who cared deeply about our communities and have diligently served our constituents. I also wish to briefly thank some other predecessors, who in their own way have been a source of inspiration and support over the years, among them the formidable Michael Martin, well known as a former Speaker of the House. It would have been interesting to hear what contribution Lord Martin of Springburn and Port Dundas would have made to today's debate on the relevance of hereditary peers in our democratic process, after all being himself a man made good through personal advancement, not by the quirk of birth, but through dedicated service and merit.

More recently, the north-east of Glasgow was represented by Willie Bain and thereafter by Paul Sweeney. Willie Bain and I go back a long way. In fact, he was the

person who showed me the ropes at my first door-knocking session. Willie's sharp legal mind served him well as a shadow Food Minister and later as a shadow Scotland Office Minister. He was a stalwart for his communities, but on a more personal level, he has always been a great mentor and a source of advice, and that is why I am proud to call him my friend. Paul, who continues his public service as a Member of the Scottish Parliament, is a zealous champion of the built environment of our native Glasgow. As Paul alluded to in his maiden speech in this place in 2017, he is another example of how the Labour movement has offered opportunities for the advancement of working-class people through education over the past century.

Above all, I wish to pay tribute to one former Member who not only fought hard for my community and delivered change, but, more than anyone, encouraged me into the world of politics: Margaret Curran. I worked as a caseworker for Margaret. Her commitment, drive and determination to improve the lives of those she served had a large influence on my political awakening. She must have seen in me a like-minded spirit who cared passionately about those we serve, because it was her guidance and encouragement that led me on the road to becoming elected to Glasgow city council in 2012, and now to this distinguished place.

But my political journey started much earlier. The seeds of my political awareness were sown within my community and through my family. I grew up in Easterhouse and have lived all my life in the north of Glasgow—an area, like many parts of my home city, with an abundance of beauty. It is represented not only by the breathtaking splendour of Hogganfield loch, but by the countless communities and individuals who daily go above and beyond to help those in need and improve the amenities within our communities. There are organisations such as the Cranhill Development Trust; Rosemount Lifelong Learning; Denmilne Action Group, a collective of Easterhouse residents who have transformed their community through tackling litter and neglected green spaces; St Paul's Youth Forum; Provan hall house—a medieval building dating back to the 1470s and arguably one of Glasgow's oldest buildings, it has recently been renovated under the stewardship of the partnership tasked with its full restoration, which I had the honour of chairing—and the Springburn Alive and Kicking project, which is an excellent support in breaking down social isolation for many elderly residents. Those are but a few of our wonderful organisations.

My utmost thanks go to those people and communities for selflessly caring and looking out for each other, and for having placed their trust in me. Without them, I would not be here, and I will work tirelessly for them every single day. In short, the real beauty of my constituency lies in its people. Ultimately, to paraphrase the city of Glasgow's unofficial motto, it is the people of Glasgow North East that make it such a wonderful place.

As I was preparing for this speech, I thought a lot about my family—my husband, daughter and grandchildren, who are all my personal rock, but also my parents and my siblings, especially my younger brother David, who sadly passed away a couple of years ago due to pancreatic cancer. As the illness progressed, he was asked to take part in new medical trials. Although he knew that his diagnosis was too far advanced for him to benefit from the trials, he did not hesitate to participate,

as he hoped that his contribution would help others face a different outcome in their own cancer journey. David bore his journey with a quiet, resolute dignity to the end. His selfless example and dignity will always remain the benchmark for how I will conduct myself as the voice for my constituents in this place.

Like many of my constituents, I grew up in a typical working-class Glasgow household—a big family, a small home, but lots of love. That began with my parents. Sadly, both my parents suffered from tuberculosis, forcing my elder siblings and I to leave school at an early age without qualifications in order to seek employment to become the family's breadwinners. However, in my late 30s, I had the chance to take an IT course at John Wheatley college that gave me the opportunities to change my life. It is only fitting that this significant milestone in my life was made possible at a college named after yet another of my predecessors, who did so much to improve social housing in our country under our first Labour Government.

Education and further education are a route out of poverty. It gives you a sense of achievement, self-belief and the confidence that anything is possible. Education, no matter at what age, can be a catalyst that sets you off on a journey that you could never have imagined—in my case, a journey from the factory floor to the Palace of Westminster. I am living proof that no matter your social background, with the right opportunities and access to education, encouragement, hard work and determination, together with a vision shown by a progressive Government—like the current one—who have the very best interests of our people at heart, anyone can succeed and achieve their personal goals.

That brings me back to the topic of this debate: the removal of the last of the hereditary peers from our Parliament and from democracy itself. Those remaining 92 peers stand in direct contrast to me and my constituents. Opponents of these changes often say that removing those peers will mean losing experience, but to them I would say: I agree that this Parliament needs more knowledge and understanding of the world, but that should not come from an elitist class with a biased view of the world. Instead, that experience should come from a Parliament that is genuinely representative of modern and diverse Britain, drawn from people such as my constituents, who have sincere struggles, hopes and aspirations. I hope that my presence in this place and the removal of the hereditary peers from the other place will help to do that.

I now wish to address my constituents at home directly. I am forever grateful for the trust you have placed in me as your representative in the House of Commons. I will spend every day of the term of this Parliament fighting for you, be the voice for those who have felt disenfranchised, and I will always do what I believe is best for our community. I will work across this House, where possible, to raise awareness of injustice and fight for equality, and I will never lose sight of your priorities and the duty you have given me to serve you.

After a decade and a half of social and economic decline, we must recognise that the challenges that lie ahead for this new Labour Government are vast. However, I am convinced that with their ambitious and exciting programme of change laid out in the recent King's Speech, this Government will succeed in delivering economic stability, growth and social cohesion, as well as providing

employment and educational opportunities and a sense of renewed hope that life will change for the better—not just for the privileged few, but for all.

4.43 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke). I listened with great interest to her personal journey and her remarks about the transformative power of education, and she gave a very touching tribute to her brother, which I am sure the whole House appreciated. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), whose speech was a tour de force around his constituency and all the things he hopes to achieve in this Parliament. I wish him personally all the best for his time in this place.

I thank the other Members who made maiden speeches: the hon. Members for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove), for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) and for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley). I say to the hon. Member for Knowsley that if she gets the decks out again, we will see if we can get the Deputy Prime Minister to come and join her; and to the hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire that it is maybe not best to tick off your dad in the Chamber—that is a little tip as the hon. Member goes forward in this parliamentary Session.

The first thing we have to try not to do when we consider the Bill is laugh. We have to try not to laugh out loud at the sheer ridiculousness of considering in 2024 whether places should be reserved in our legislature for a curious subset of a particular class of person, based on birthright. We have to try to stifle the guffaws that accompany the fact that a modern, complex, industrial, advanced democracy such as the United Kingdom can still have barons, dukes, earls and various other aristocrats deciding the laws of the land because they are their fathers' sons. They secured that right in medieval times, perhaps because one of their ancestors won a decisive battle. This is parliamentary participation defined by the "Game of Thrones" principle, in which the great houses of olde England or olde Britannia knock seven shades of whatever out of each other for the right to run the country by breeding. In some way, they are our own Baratheons and Targaryens, but without the fun, the dragons and the box office appeal. It is time to break the wheel. For those down the corridor, winter must be coming.

There is no other legislature in the world that comes close to having people there through birthright, save perhaps the Senate in Lesotho, where I believe there are still places reserved for the tribal chiefs. That is the sort of company we keep.

My other initial main thought about the Bill is: is this it? We have heard about other things to come, and have been told that we should be patient because other Bills will be introduced. We have heard that from the Labour party for 100 years. For more than 100 years, Labour has promised to abolish the House of Lords, but there it sits, bigger and more bizarre than ever, awaiting the arrival of the new Labour Lords. Where is the Brownian vision of a senate of the regions and nations? Where is the "almost federalism" that we in Scotland were promised during the independence referendum? It is certainly not in the Bill. This meagre rubbish has not even got the credibility to call itself a reform. We will probably have

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to wait about the same amount of time that has elapsed since the barons and earls won those decisive battles for the Labour party to introduce meaningful reform.

We are getting not abolition of the House of Lords, but the long grass from the Labour party in this Parliament. A consultation is about to be embarked upon as Labour prevaricates once again. Nobody in this country believes that the Labour party is remotely sincere about abolishing the House of Lords. From the contributions we have heard so far, no one can believe that Labour Members are in favour of genuine reform of the House of Lords. Even the watering down of the watering down has been watered down, as the proposal for a mandatory age limit of 80 for House of Lords Members has been dropped. That happened because the Government found that they are disproportionately hit by the proposals; their cohort in the House of Lords is older than that of the Conservatives. It is no wonder that few people take them seriously.

What we have down the corridor is an embarrassment, an unreformable laughing stock, a plaything of Prime Ministers and the personification of a dying establishment that represents another age. With all its ridiculous cap-doffing deference, it represents almost the exact opposite of the values of my country. I am so proud that my party will never put anybody in that red-leather-upholstered, gold-plated Narnia.

While we can laugh at the hereditaries, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and other Conservative Members are quite right to point to the ridiculousness of having 26 places reserved for Church of England bishops. We are the only legislature in the world that has places reserved for clerics other than the Islamic Republic of Iran. We can take comfort from the fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury is not going to embark on some sort of religious jihad, but what strange company to keep. If there was an intra-parliamentary union of serving clerics, it would be exclusively comprise Church of England bishops and ayatollahs.

It is not even the hereditaries or the Church of England bishops that concern me most. The group that concerns me most in the House of Lords is the appointees—the donors, the cronies and the placemen who end up with a role in running our country and making the laws of this land because of prime ministerial patronage. People have a place in our democracy whose only qualification seems to be an ability to give substantial amounts of money to one of the three major establishment political parties in this House.

We have evolved a legislature that is at least partly designed by one person: the Prime Minister decides who has the opportunity to take a role in running this country by appointment, based on lists drawn up by him and other British party leaders. No other party leader or Head of State has this power anywhere in the world. It is a prerogative that would make a tinpot dictator in a banana republic blush, yet we on these Benches lecture the developing world about good politics and democracy.

The temptation is to stuff the Chamber full of friends and the politically useful. It is a place to reward the servile, thank the time-servers and compensate the downgraded. Only this week, we are considering such an example; there is talk of Sue Gray ending up with a

place in the Lords as some sort of compensation for her sacking. I suppose that when she goes down there, she will get an ermine coat to accompany the envoy's ostrich feather for when she visits her most northern territory, Scotland, as the British envoy. Already, her loyal subjects are practising their haka to welcome their new envoy when she makes that journey north.

To see how bad things could get, we need only remember Boris Johnson's list, which was full of friends, donors and former staff—a list that could not be more gratuitous. Notionally, there is a House of Lords Appointments Commission, but it is an utterly toothless body that Boris Johnson simply ignored. It has done nothing to stop the accumulation of cronies and donors: 68 out of 284 nominations from political parties between 2013 and 2023 were political donors handing over £58 million to the political parties, and 12 of those appointed gave over £1 million. That was the price during “cash for honours” in the early 2000s. We might think inflation would at least be factored in when it came to getting a place in the House of Lords, but not a bit of it: the going rate is still £1 million.

“Cash for honours” led to one of the most dramatic police investigations during the 2005 to 2010 Parliament, when a sitting Prime Minister was questioned by the police under caution. Some of his staff were actually arrested. We might think that, after all that, the establishment parties would be a little more circumspect, but not a bit of it; the cash keeps coming in, and the peerages keep getting rolled out. Even as recently as 2021, I asked the Metropolitan police to investigate the Conservative party when we found that 22 of the Conservatives' biggest financial contributors had been made Members of the House of Lords in the past 50 years.

This Government have no plans whatsoever to do anything about the appointees in the House of Lords, save to make more of them. One of the reasons we are getting this Bill so early in this Parliament—the Conservatives are possibly right about this—is to clear the place out, so that the Labour party can put in more of its donors, cronies and place men. It is making sure that there are spaces available, and that the other place does not look so big.

The House of Lords is the most absurd, ridiculous legislature anywhere in the world. Famously, it is second in size only to the National People's Congress of China. Bloated, ermine-coated, never been voted—it is the antithesis of everything we know about democracy. Increasingly embarrassing, probably corrupt and certainly rife for all sorts of abuse, it is an institution whose time has surely come.

We put forward a reasoned amendment to the Bill, because we want to hold the Labour party to its historical commitment to abolishing the House of Lords. Unfortunately, that amendment was not selected, but there will be opportunities as the Bill goes through the House to come back to the issue. I say to the Government, “Yes, bring forward your step-by-step incremental changes, but what the general public want is meaningful action on the House of Lords.” A YouGov poll out yesterday showed that the vast majority of the British people no longer want the House of Lords. They specifically and defiantly want it reformed. It is not good enough continuing to pass the buck for another 100 years; something has to be done. I say to Labour, “Pick up Gordon Brown's report, for goodness' sake, and have a look at what he says.” The Labour Government should try to enact some

meaningful reform. Who knows? It may even make them popular again. It seems to be what the public want. This could be something that they do that the public would actually genuinely support.

We have waited centuries for action from the Labour party and we have got next to absolutely nothing. Now is the time for action. No more prevarication—take real action, and get dealing with that place down the corridor.

4.56 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): This is a simple Bill with a simple objective, and I commend the Minister for bringing it to the House. I thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for her cross-party support for this Bill, as it is vital that measures of significant constitutional impact have support from across the House.

I wish to make three main, largely straightforward, points, which will tackle head-on the amendments tabled by the right hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) and for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden). First, I will touch on the constitutional aspect of the Bill, then, secondly, the part it plays in rebuilding trust in our politics, and finally I will address the objections raised by Opposition Members, including the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart).

On the constitution, the continued existence of hereditary peers in the upper Chamber is an unsustainable anachronism in the year 2024 and a clear affront to modern democracy. We must remember that we are talking about 92 Members in the other place who, for life, are able to legislate, merely by accident of birth. They do not owe their role to their abilities, and they are unaccountable. That is not to denigrate the hard work of hereditary peers, but we must be clear: we have a farcical situation whereby the continued existence of the hereditaries leads to by-elections in the second Chamber that are possibly the only by-elections where the entire electorate can easily fit into the back of a taxi. Removing the last remaining peers was a clear manifesto commitment from this Government this year. This change will dramatically improve the way that Parliament reflects the country, and it will reform an upper Chamber that has grown out of all proportion to this place.

Too much of the debate today has been about Burke, Bagehot and romantic Conservatism and not enough about democratic accountability, legitimacy and representation. I heard Tory radicals talk about their zealous ambition for reform of the upper Chamber, so it is astounding that there was no mention whatsoever in the Conservative party manifesto of House of Lords reform.

That takes me on to my second point. It is vital that we rebuild trust in our politics by making sure that our parliamentarians are representative and accountable, and that transparency is at the forefront of our dealings. The continued existence of hereditary peers in the other place is in stark contrast to each of these values. On representation, there are 88 hereditary peers: 45 Conservatives, 33 Cross Benches, four Labour, four Liberal Democrats and two non-affiliated. Their political composition in no way reflects the views of the country at large. The average age—I must stress that this is the average—of Members of the upper Chamber is 71. The average age of people in the country is 40. Indeed, 324 Members of the second Chamber will be aged age 80 or over on 1 June 2029. Let us be clear: there are no female hereditaries; not one. On their accountability,

hereditaries are elected by their peers, which leads to the possibility of a by-election with an electorate of three, as my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) mentioned. That is three peers deciding who else has the opportunity to legislate in this Parliament for life.

Speaking to the objections from those on the Opposition Benches, the amendment from the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) laments that the Bill does not abolish the other place in its entirety. We heard the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) mention that. Let me say to them that reform of the other place has always been piecemeal. To that end, I welcome this measure as a swift initial reform, and I take heart from the comments made by Lord Khan of Burnley, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, who confirmed on 23 July that the Government are committed to other reforms, including a mandatory retirement age, a participation requirement and, importantly, reform of the means by which peers are appointed, as well as an alternative second Chamber that is representative of the regions and nations. That is precisely the ambitious agenda for the other place that I wish to see.

As a north-west MP, an anti-corruption specialist with more than a decade of experience and a member of the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, I reassure the House that I firmly believe that all those welcome steps will not only modernise the upper Chamber but ensure that the means by which individuals are appointed to the other place are made more transparent.

On the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden), let me say that this Bill is not about avoiding scrutiny of the Government or the work of this House. I and many of my colleagues value the work done by our colleagues in the other place, and I remind him and Conservative Members that when the House of Lords Act 1999 passed through this place 25 years ago, the retention of the 92 hereditaries was

“interim...until the second stage of House of Lords reform has taken place.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 March 1999; Vol. 599, c. 207.]

Indeed, removing the hereditaries would have a minimal impact on the overall political composition of the upper Chamber. We have seen those on the Conservative Benches blowing hot and cold, demanding radical reform while at the same time asking for caution. Let us be clear: this Bill must be the first in a number of steps towards modernising our politics in this place. The Bill is a manifesto commitment for which there should be no unnecessary delay in moving it through the legislative process.

I was astounded to hear the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) mention that hereditary Members in the upper House do not form part of a privileged elite. That simply would not wash on the streets of Bolton West. We are talking about earls, viscounts, dukes and marquesses who are there to legislate for life simply by dint of their birth. This vital reform will ensure that workings across Parliament are dragged kicking and screaming into the 21st century. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.3 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I start my contribution today by thanking our colleagues in the House of Lords for their work and public service in their vital role scrutinising and editing the legislation that we put together in this place. Prior to my first election in 2019, I did not know that much in depth and detail about the workings of the House of Lords and its value to our parliamentary system. In the past five years, I have seen a House of Lords that has been effective, using the expertise that it draws upon, in holding up legislation and ensuring that it works and that we make good decisions, leading to good laws for our country going forward. It is important to recognise the contribution that Members of the House of Lords make and continue to make, and we thank them for that.

It is important that we have a strong second Chamber, but that does not mean there is no need for reform. I very much support reform of the House of Lords. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) made comments in his speech about unaccountability; in a sense, the fact that most Lords are appointed as life peers because of their expertise or the work they have done means that their accountability is what got them there in the first place, and the fact that they are unaccountable gives them a degree of freedom in ensuring that we make the best laws.

I support the Government's Bill to remove the 92 hereditary peers, all of whom are men and retain a role in legislating because of their birth. This is very much not a criticism of those peers. I have had the pleasure of working with many, and with one, Viscount Craigavon, particularly closely. Over the years he has done incredible work with the all-party parliamentary groups for Sweden and for Finland, of which I have been chair or vice-chair.

Although I support the Bill, it takes a ham-fisted approach to reform. If it is going to be done, do it properly. The idea that it is going to stay narrow and that this will be a quick fix to move things forward is, given the scope and depth of the debate, for fantasists. On further reform, I absolutely do not support an elected upper Chamber, which I think would cause all sorts of problems, not least in terms of parliamentary supremacy.

The life appointments add real value, as seen in the current and previous Parliament. There are people like Sir Patrick Vallance, who is now a Labour Minister and was previously chief scientific adviser. He is known for his work on covid and I look forward to seeing his work in the other place. Lord Harrington was brought in as a Minister in response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, and he responded to the difficult challenges in that respect and helped to provide support. Lord Cameron was brought in as Foreign Secretary—my, do we not wish we had Lord Cameron as Foreign Secretary now? Most recently, the Labour Government brought in Baroness Poppy Gustafsson as an investment Minister, given their lack of business expertise and experience on the Front Bench. I thank the Baroness for helping to support the Labour Government with regard to the needs of business.

We should consider the numbers in the House of Lords. We should look at how much people attend and participate. We should look at the funding. We should look at the retirement age, at the composition and at whether there should be a role for religious representation.

As is set out in the reasoned amendment, which I shall support, measures to modernise and reform the House of Lords should be taken now. This is a missed opportunity, but I hope it will not turn out to have been, because once we have passed Second Reading and the Bill goes to Committee, we are going to see amendments tabled by, interestingly, Opposition Members, by the sounds of it, that will uphold the Government's manifesto commitment, because they are being so timid in what they are trying to achieve. Rather than prioritising their need to be seen to be doing something, the Government need to start learning to do things right.

5.7 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I welcome the new Government's steps to reform the other place. Nearly 30 years on from the changes enacted under the previous Labour Government, I am pleased to see this one finish the job when it comes to hereditary peers. As colleagues have pointed out, they are a fundamental anachronism in our constitution that undermines the legitimacy of not only that place but this place as well. For that entire time, in vote after vote, individuals have been making their impact on legislation not with a democratic mandate but solely because of their ancestry. It is a principle that cannot stand. I share the disbelief of some colleagues at the suggestion by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) that a focus on or obsession with the democratic principle is narrow-minded. I am afraid that is the sort of talk we would have expected in the Victorian era, at the time of the Great Reform Act. It is from another time and place.

The Bill takes another much-needed step towards the democratisation of our Parliament. I appreciate from the amendments tabled that some would like to have seen a repeat of the 1649 English republican Act of Parliament that abolished the other place entirely in one fell swoop, proclaiming that

"the House of Lords is useless and dangerous to the people of England."

I hasten to add that most of us today have too much respect for the hard work of Members of the Lords to share those sentiments.

This reform is progress. After 14 years, the Conservatives left the other place a bloated mess—as has been pointed out, the second largest parliamentary assembly in the world, behind only China's National People's Congress, and the only second chamber in the world that is larger than the first. In 1999, when the last Labour Government removed the vast majority of hereditary peers, some said that the ones remaining were the stone in the shoe to encourage further reform and democratisation. I am encouraged that the Minister said that, while removing the stone, they are already thinking about changing the shoe.

It is high time that the public have a say in who votes on laws passed in their name. Elections give mandates to make law, not birthright or patronage. Ordinary people vote for and remove people when they want. I am proud to have stood, as are many colleagues, on a manifesto that called for a complete overhaul of the other place, including making it more representative of the nations and regions that make up our great country.

There are many other things that our constitution needs reform on. I need to put on record my belief that this should be the start of a journey to greater electoral

reform. Although the franchise has been expanded, with first past the post it is still too restrictive. Voters should be able to change the outcome of elections every time they go to the polls but, unfortunately, too many are trapped in constituencies where their vote for this place still does not count.

I have much respect for Members of the other place, whatever their background, for the diligence with which they carry out their duties. They acted as a bulwark in recent years as Conservative Governments played fast and loose with the constitution, with one hand clutching the prerogatives of the sovereign and the other challenging the fundamental independence of the judiciary—that was not long ago. The work of scrutiny and constitutional guardianship can and should be done by a Chamber of the people that the electorate has had a say in choosing. The Bill is an important step towards that. It is mature, sensible and overdue, and I commend the Government for bringing it forward speedily.

5.12 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I am a big fan of reform, and I detect, with the exception of one or two Members, appetite for reform of the House of Lords. But if the Government are going to do a job, they should do it properly. The Government, who often lament having waited 14 years to come back to power, have had plenty of time to get themselves organised and ready for the reform of the House of Lords.

Some of us of a certain age remember the last reform 25 years ago. The Paymaster General said earlier that this was just phase 1; no, this is phase 2. I cannot wait 25 years for phase 3. We want to get on with it, and the country wants to get on with it. I think that the country will appreciate this phase of reform, but they will say, “Hang on, Prime Minister. The Labour party stood on a platform of removing cronyism.” As other Members have rightly said, the country is sick and tired of the cronyism of cloth of ermine. It feels like cash for cloth. We are done with it. We have had enough of it. We want this sorted.

This is an opportunity for the Government: if they are not going to do it at this phase, they have a Parliament of four years ahead. Will they commit, as a Government, to go from phase 2 to phase 3? They can have the debate around the country about what the House of Lords should look like, but I urge them, on behalf of tens of millions of people who want proper reform of the House of Lords, to get on with it, please, and not to wait another 25 years.

5.14 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I am grateful to be called in this important debate. I have a little bit of experience of this issue, having served as a special adviser in the House of Lords, working with the now Leader of the House of Lords when she was on the Opposition Front Bench. I also worked with Baroness Stowell of Beeston and as special adviser to Baroness Evans of Bowes Park, as well as with some hereditary peers, including Freddie, Lord Howe and Patrick, the Earl of Courtown. It is important to acknowledge, as many Members have, the service that all Members of the House of Lords give to our country.

Ministers perhaps did not understand exactly where I was coming from when I intervened earlier, but my point has been made by Members from across the

Opposition Benches. Why go for piecemeal reform when the Government have the space to ask the country what it wants? Why not put something forward with the legislative time available, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) said? We could have a proper debate, as the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) said, on the future of the country.

Gareth Snell: The right hon. Gentleman has made a number of contributions this afternoon and I have listened to them all, but I am not clear whether he supports the removal of hereditary peers from the House of Lords. Perhaps before he concludes his speech he could put it very clearly on the record whether he supports the principle of removing hereditary peers.

Mr Holden: I thank the hon. Member for his question. I do support their removal, but as part of a broader package of measures. I think that is the issue at stake today which Members on the Opposition Benches are concerned about. This piecemeal reform, which will remove people who are there by an accident of birth, will leave people in the House of Lords who are also there by accident or, in the case of bishops, by faith. It will leave the issue the public are perhaps most concerned about, which is pure patronage. Those two issues have been left totally to one side in the speeches made by Government Members. If we are to look at this issue properly, we need to look at it in the round.

We have had piecemeal change over the last few years. I was working in the House of Lords when voluntary retirement was introduced. That was built on many measures over the years, including the Life Peerages Act 1958, which was passed by a Conservative Government. If we are going to consider changing the situation in the House of Lords and what it is going to be, other conventions will be called into question. Surely it would be better to deal with the whole issue and get it right, than to have to legislate two or three times, or make further changes down the line? Why not get something that the whole House and the country can have a proper debate on and reach proper agreement, and then legislate in one piece?

Dave Robertson: I am taken by the right hon. Gentleman's talk about getting it right, which was a phrase also used by the previous speaker, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice). They both suggest taking the time to get it right, but surely that is what the Government are committed to doing. The Government are committed to the removal of hereditary peers, as was made very clear in the Labour party manifesto that was so widely supported across the country. Wider reform of the House of Lords should surely be subject to consultation, not just with people in this place but around the country. Surely, if we are to get this right, we need to take time over the consultation.

Mr Holden: I totally agree with the hon. Member. It is interesting that the Bill has not been subject to the pre-legislative scrutiny that would normally come forward, because of the broader implications for the second Chamber. I want it done properly, as a full package. I do not think slice-by-slice reform is what the country wants. I have some sympathy with those on the Liberal Democrat Front Bench who see the Bill as a step in the right

[Mr Holden]

direction, but I fundamentally disagree with them. We need a full package of reforms to see where we wish to end up.

Gareth Snell *rose*—

Andrew Rosindell *rose*—

Mr Holden: I will make a touch more progress before I take another intervention from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), but I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend.

Andrew Rosindell: My right hon. Friend is making some extremely valid points. I agree with him that if there is going to be change, it should be done altogether, but I am slightly concerned by the radicalism of this measure. I did not find that anybody on the doorsteps in Romford actually wanted to make this such a big issue and radically change our constitution. Did he find that in Billericay?

Mr Holden: I certainly did not find it in Basildon and Billericay—or in Romford when I visited it with my hon. Friend, or, indeed, in other seats across the country—and I think that our constituents will be slightly baffled. When it comes to a big piece of constitutional reform, why should this Government want to come forward with, potentially, a multiplicity of different Bills throughout the current Parliament, rather than putting something to the public to have a look at now, and then having a look at it right at the end? What constituents have been mentioning in recent weeks and months is their concern about the winter fuel payments or about what might be in the Government's new Budget, particularly the jobs tax, which they fear will hit jobs throughout the country.

Gareth Snell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Holden: I do not want to take up too much of the House's time, so I am trying to reduce the number of interventions that I take.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) hit the nail on the head when he said that this was a proper missed opportunity, but my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) made some important points. As he said, when we legislate we have to do so carefully, because we are fundamentally changing the nature of what we are looking at. Proper reform has been wanted by generations of politicians on both sides of the House, but particularly those in the Labour party. I do not understand why at this stage, with such a large majority and with time on their side, the Government are not seeking to put those changes through properly.

Gareth Snell *rose*—

Mr Holden: I will give way again.

Gareth Snell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. Perhaps I can help him. As a former special adviser in the House of Lords, he will know that carrying out reform in that House is incredibly complex. There appears to be a general consensus across all parties in this House on the eradication, or rather the expulsion, of the hereditary peers. If it were part of a larger combined

bid, the right hon. Gentleman would risk losing that principle, because there would be more for us to fall out over and disagree on. Inevitably, his party would vote against it in Committee and on Third Reading, which would leave the whole package potentially at risk.

Mr Holden: I think that the hon. Member is missing my point. We have to see this as part of a package. Lord Irvine spoke about it in 1999. The hereditary peers were being kept there as the stone in the shoe, and should not be removed until the wider reform was settled. The Government have a very large majority in this House. They can certainly get stuff through if they wish, and I urge Ministers to consider that comprehensive reform. I understand what the hon. Member is saying—why not do it slice by slice?—but I think that the entire point of the hereditaries being there shines a light on the greater issues we are facing in the House of Lords, as was mentioned earlier by, for instance, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) when he was talking about the religious Members of the Lords. If we are going to do a package, let us do a proper package.

It also concerns me that, having proposed a retirement age in their manifesto, the Government are apparently not seeking to legislate on that now. Why not? The scope of the Bill in relation to membership of the House of Lords is clearly wide enough for the purpose. In the Canadian upper House, for instance, the retirement age is 75, and in this country there is a mandatory retirement age of 75 for judges. I should be interested to hear from Ministers how they can justify a mandatory retirement age of 75 for those who interpret the law, but cannot justify it for those who make the law—not democratically elected, as Members well over that age have been in this House, but appointed. That is where the similarity with judicial appointments comes in. If the Bill is passed, Members of the House of Lords will be purely appointed. Obviously, there is already a retirement age for Lords Spiritual.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): The right hon. Member has made repeated references to the grand package of House of Lords reform that he would like to see. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) has already highlighted the problem, but we have seen it historically. In the coalition Government, the Liberal Democrats put forward their historic package of reform, and it was the Conservatives who put the bullet in it, because they did not agree with everything in it. Surely it is much better to get done what we all agree on than to present a package of reform that ends up dying at the hands of those who disagree with it.

Mr Holden: The hon. Member makes an interesting point. I know there have been fractures in Downing Street recently, but I do not think that anybody would suggest that the Labour party, with a majority of over 170, is a coalition in the same way that the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition was between 2010 and 2015. The Government have the time and space to introduce change. The key point is that it has to be part of a package, which is what Lord Irvine said in 1999.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Our majority is 174, but who's counting? As far as I can tell, the Conservative party's manifesto did not mention House

of Lords reform—I may have missed it, so I apologise if it did mention that. Could the right hon. Member please tell me the Conservative thinking on House of Lords reform? A big package of House of Lords reform has been mentioned, but I am not any clearer about what that might entail.

Reading the 1999 debate on the House of Lords reform that was pushed forward by the Blair Government, I was struck by the fact that many Conservative Members opposed that reform on the basis that it did not go far enough. Is the call for further reform actually a smokescreen to do nothing and, therefore, to preserve the hereditary principle? All of us, including the right hon. Member, would agree that we should eliminate that principle.

Mr Holden: What we are discussing today is a policy of the Government. My party is in opposition, because its manifesto was rejected by the public at the last general election. We are discussing a policy of the Government and what was in the manifesto on which the hon. Gentleman stood. It will be interesting to see whether he and others will back the manifesto on which they stood if amendments are tabled by the Opposition. We will have to see about that over the coming weeks.

Gareth Snell: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Mr Holden: Not again.

Currently, Members of the House of Lords are there by birthright or appointed by God, as it were, or the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is going to pull out the hereditary peers, so it will just be him and God appointing people if this legislation goes through unchallenged. Putting even more power in the hands of the Executive—they have a majority of 174, as the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) said, although some of their Members come and go at the moment—is a really dangerous thing to do, and we are not looking at the comprehensive package of reform that was promised.

Labour Members have talked about things that happened 25 years ago, when I—even though I might not look it—was still in short trousers. We need to reflect on the fact that this is a very different time from then. I hope that those on the Government Front Bench will consider what those on the Opposition Front Bench have mentioned today and look at the broader package, rather than looking at this issue in isolation, because they have the time and space to do so. I think the public would like to see a proper package brought forward, and the Government should concentrate on the people's priorities, which are the cost of living and taxation.

5.27 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The House of Lords plays an important part in our legislative process. It revises legislation and, just occasionally, causes us in this House to think again. I support reform of the House of Lords, but I want that reform to lead to a better upper Chamber. This Bill does the opposite.

In 1999, the Labour party sought to remove all hereditary peers from the House of Lords. To get its legislation through, it struck a compromise with the upper House. That compromise—the Weatherill amendment—enabled 92 hereditary peers to remain until the Government came forward with a comprehensive plan for House of Lords reform. The then Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine, said that

“a compromise in these terms would guarantee that stage two would take place, because the Government with their great popular majority and their manifesto pledge would not tolerate 10 per cent. of the hereditary peerage remaining for long. But the 10 per cent. will go only when stage two has taken place. So it is a guarantee that it will take place.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 30 March 1999; Vol. 599, c. 207.]

Twenty-five years later, the House of Lords is unreformed. Despite winning majorities in 2001 and 2005, the last Labour Government did nothing to bring forward stage two of House of Lords reform.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Whatever has happened in the years and decades gone by, this is the question before us now: a step forward to help reform the House of Lords. We do not claim that we in this House are perfect; we only make steps towards it. The step before us today is a simple one, and one that I think that no Member of this House can disagree with. It is that no son should have a place in the Lords, by right, because their father gives it to them. That is what is before us, and surely the hon. Gentleman can agree with that.

Sir Ashley Fox: Therein lies the problem, in that we now want to talk about stage 2. Although the Minister promises a second stage of reform, that is exactly what you promised 25 years ago, and then you did nothing. Our fear is that you will get rid of the hereditary peers and that the issue of further reform will then get delayed because there is never enough parliamentary time and actually, there will never be a stage 2. Put quite simply, we are cynical about the promises that are being made. We think you will take the hereditary peers and then do nothing.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab) rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Just before the intervention is taken, I must mention the reference to “you”. Surely you are not responding to a question that I have just asked; you are speaking to the Chair. Please continue, Sir Ashley.

Sir Ashley Fox: I am happy to give way to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell).

Alan Gemmell: Would the hon. Gentleman care to comment on the 14 years of Tory Administration, which were full of reforming zeal and could have transformed this country in so many ways, yet failed my country so much. I just wanted to let the House know that no family in Central Ayrshire, other than potentially the distant descendants of the Earl of Eglinton and Winton, might support hereditary peers remaining in the other place. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will vote with us tonight and begin this important step of reform.

Sir Ashley Fox: I would vote in favour of the removal of the hereditary peers as part of a package, but not so that the Government can remove them and then do nothing, which is what they did 25 years ago.

I would like the Minister to explain how he believes his reform will improve the functioning of Parliament. Who will the Government put in place of the hereditary peers? More former MPs, perhaps? Donors or trade union officials? Perhaps some former councillors? The upper House already has a surfeit of all the above. If we

[Sir Ashley Fox]

want an effective upper House, we need diversity of experience: perhaps some people who have worked in the private sector or run a business could help the Front Bench. The upper Chamber has quite enough former politicians without the Prime Minister appointing more people to buy him suits and glasses.

Gareth Snell: I am very much enjoying the speech by the hon. Member. Is he making an argument that the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), should not be entitled to an appointment list, and is he making a commitment on behalf of Members of his own party that they will forgo any appointments that they are offered under this Government?

Sir Ashley Fox: I would not dare to answer on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton.

I fear that this Government are not motivated by a desire to improve the legislature, and that they have brought this measure forward for party political advantage. They want to be rid of the hereditary peers because 42 of them are Conservative and only four are Labour. Once they have driven this Bill through Parliament, their desire for further reform will cool just as rapidly as it did 25 years ago.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I was wondering, given that there are now so few Conservative Members of this Parliament after the recent general election, what proportion of the House of Lords the hon. Gentleman thinks should now be made up of Conservative Members.

Sir Ashley Fox: We are scrutinising the Government's proposal. That is the job of the Opposition. The Minister said in his opening speech that hereditary peers are indefensible, and I agree, but so is granting 26 bishops the right to vote in our legislature. For some reason, the Minister does not seem quite so opposed to their presence. Could this be because, almost whatever the subject, the bishops can be relied upon to vote with the Labour party? If he was consistent, he would want to remove the bishops as well as the hereditary peers, yet he is silent.

The whole point of the remaining hereditary peers, and their occasional inconvenient by-elections, is that they are a constant reminder of the unfinished business of Lords reform. They are a reminder of the promises that Labour made 25 years ago, which have still not been fulfilled. The reason Labour wants to remove the remaining hereditary peers is so that the reform can be forgotten.

This is a bad Bill. It weakens the upper House, it reduces scrutiny of the Executive, and it gives more patronage to the Prime Minister. That is why I cannot support it.

5.35 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I begin by declaring an interest as my wife, the noble Baroness Evans of Bowes Park—although she does not always make me call her that—is a Member of the other place. She was also Leader of the House of Lords for more

than six years, so I have perhaps had more dealings with Members of the other place, including hereditaries, than most. As a result, I have a view about how our two Houses operate effectively in practice, rather than the somewhat theoretical perspective we have heard from some of the newer Members of this House.

The House of Lords is an important revising Chamber, without the guillotines and time limits that are so common in our House, while recognising and respecting the ultimate supremacy of this House. In doing so, it can draw on the considerable knowledge and expertise of former defence chiefs, diplomats, scientists, engineers, businesspeople and, yes, those from whom this Bill seeks to remove the right to sit as peers.

The fundamental point, reflected in a number of contributions from Conservative Members and in the reasoned amendment, is that this Bill has been brought forward in isolation from wider reforms. It ignores the convention that constitutional changes are based on consensus, where possible, and it fails to provide time for a cross-party approach on wider reform. It is best described as piecemeal and, as such, conflicts with the commitments given in 1999, at the time of the House of Lords Act, that the hereditaries would remain until wider reforms came forward.

Well, there are no wider reforms in this Bill. Even the proposed retirement age of 80 has been quietly dropped. Perhaps Ministers have realised the challenge of interfering with letters patent issued by the sovereign, or perhaps their timidity reflects the lack of consensus on the Government Benches about wider reforms, as we saw in response to Gordon Brown's proposals.

Such reforms would have to consider the issues of giving greater power to the House of Lords and the impact this would have on the primacy of the Commons. They would have to consider the potential for legislative gridlock, the desirability of creating more professional politicians and, as many have mentioned, the rationale for retaining guaranteed places for bishops in the upper Chamber. Those are just some of the questions that comprehensive reform would need to address, and they require considerable cross-party consideration and analysis.

No one would create the Lords today, but the system works. This rushed legislation, which rather suggests a Government lacking a substantive legislative programme, will remove considerable experience. It reveals a lack of knowledge of the contribution made by Members of the House of Lords, such as my noble Friend Earl Howe, with whom I worked closely when he was a Defence Minister. He has served continuously on the Conservative Front Bench for 33 years, including 20 years as a Minister.

It ignores the role of the usual channels—the Whips and the business managers—in seeking to manage legislation at both ends. The Earl of Courtown, who will be known to many for his eight years of distinguished service as a Government Deputy Chief Whip, now continues that role in opposition. He and Lord Ashton of Hyde navigated the choppy waters of Brexit and covid in a House in which there is no Conservative majority.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Wild: I would give way, but I am not sure that the hon. Lady has been here for most of the debate, so I will not.

Earl Howe, the Earl of Courtown and Lord Ashton of Hyde are just three of the peers who bring great experience and ability to the other place. Many of the peers who will be removed are Cross Benchers.

Tom Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Wild: I am not giving way.

Finally, I want to say something about the commencement of this legislation. If passed unamended, the excepted peers will be unceremoniously booted out at the end of the Session in which the Bill is passed. After the service and commitment they have given to public life, surely it would be fairer for them to remain there until the end of the Parliament.

To conclude, before embarking on constitutional reform, there should be a proper period of consideration. It is a sign of the complexity of reform of the House of Lords that previous efforts have not attracted the necessary consensus, but the answer is not to bring forward piecemeal reform, pretending it has no wider consequence.

5.40 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Looking at the other side of the Chamber, I see the coat of arms of our late, dear friend Sir David Amess, who was murdered exactly three years ago today. He was a staunch defender of our traditions, our conventions and our British constitution. If he were here, I have no doubt he would argue to protect the institution of the House of Lords. I will be doing the same, and I am proud to do so.

The English constitution is not something that can be drafted today by a 21st century-style committee of experts. If we were to establish such a body, its product would be alien to us and offer far less respect and admiration than what we have today. Indeed, our English constitution—[*Interruption.*] Our British constitution is our birthright and the envy of the world. It is like a fine, intricate oil painting, with brush strokes meticulously painted by generation upon generation over a millennium. Our constitution depicts a priceless image of the values, the character and the way of life of the British people. I believe we must cherish and defend it, not discard it so easily without careful thought and attention to what we are doing.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks movingly, comparing our evolving and changing constitution to art, but are the measures set out in the Bill not just the latest in the evolution of that changing constitution, which will make it ever better?

Andrew Rosindell: If we are to change our constitution so radically—I believe the Bill creates a radical change—then that should be done with thought, care and attention, as well as consultation and careful consideration. As I pointed out to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) earlier, I do not think this is an issue on the doorstep anywhere. During the general election campaign, I do not think anyone raised the issue as a serious matter they wanted us to deal with. There are so many other issues, yet we are rushing to make a major constitutional change without giving it due consideration.

We share a deep intergenerational responsibility in this House that rests heaviest on the Government of the day. We are the custodians of our nation and all that belongs to it, and not its master. We have a responsibility to preserve our nation and its constitution—an obligation between those who have passed on, those who are living and those who are yet to be born. That is the importance of the hereditary principle, something that Members on the Government Benches, and indeed some on the Conservative Benches, fail to appreciate.

Tony Blair's new Labour Government took a three-inch-wide paintbrush to remake this great work of art of generations in their own image. They started a programme of thoughtless destruction, from the removal of the law Lords from the other place, with the creation of the Supreme Court, a notion alien to our constitutional heritage, to the culling of independently minded—I say those words clearly, Madam Deputy Speaker—hereditary peers and the appointment of partisan placemen.

It is no good for our constitution and it adds nothing to the work of our Parliament. It now appears that today's Labour Government have recklessly come to finish the hatchet job on an ill-thought-out constitutional revolution in the name of so-called modernisation.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman just made the point that the hereditary peers are a bastion of independence, and the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) said that many of the Conservative peers are long-serving Members of his party's Front Bench team. How can those two things be reconciled?

Andrew Rosindell: I have worked with Members of the House of Lords over many of my 23 years in Parliament. They are not seeking re-election, preferment or title. They are here to serve our country and to assist this place in making better laws. All the hereditary peers and life peers—from all parties—with whom I have had the privilege to work have always been there to serve. To discard that so easily without serious long-term consideration to the effects of doing this is reckless.

Our constitution is the most vital part of our shared British heritage, and the hereditary peers are an integral part of that, which cannot be replicated by modern means. Yet the argument in defence of hereditary peers cannot be based solely on history, however important that may be. From the Duke of Wellington, who has been mentioned, and the Duke of Norfolk, to the Earl Attlee, the Lord Northbrook, the Viscount Craigavon, who was also mentioned, and the Lord Bethell of Romford, the hereditary peers bring a wealth of intergenerational experience and knowledge to our Parliament. They have an inherited obligation and a duty to serve. They are also invaluable to our parliamentary democracy, holding the Government to account, scrutinising legislation and raising often forgotten issues of national importance. Many hereditary peers are shining examples of exemplary parliamentarians.

Shaun Davies: If I follow the hon. Member's argument correctly, is he saying that he would be in favour of reversing the compromise of 1999 and going back to having more hereditary peers in the House of Lords?

Andrew Rosindell: I do not object to the hereditary principle. I believe that hereditary peers play a vital part in the overall mix of the British Parliament. Indeed, the

[Andrew Rosindell]

hereditary principle is enshrined in our constitution via the monarchy itself. In fact, our Parliament is made up of the Crown, the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Those who argue to discard the hereditary principle should beware that the Crown itself is in peril if we continue to go down this road—[*Interruption.*] If I may continue, Madam Deputy Speaker, the removal of hereditary peers would be a grave loss to our Parliament and our country. It would be a purge of many substantial, independent voices that are immune to political patronage and work solely in the public interest for King and country. They do not seek to be popular or to win re-election; they exist to serve our nation.

It has been said that a fence should not be removed before we know why it was put up in the first place. Labour would have done well to heed this lesson from its last period of governance. Rushing to change our tried and tested system without considering the full consequences of its actions would be to commit an act of constitutional vandalism.

Why are the Government embarking on this action? What in God's name motivates them? Is it simply to eradicate dissent in the other place? If so, this can be described only as self-serving political radicalism. Not content with a simple majority of 157 in the House of Commons—although I think that figure has gone down now as the number of independents has risen—this Government seemingly aim to eradicate dissent in the upper House through this damaging legislation.

The Bill entails the removal of Conservatives, Cross Benchers, Liberal Democrats and non-affiliated peers—but only a small number of Labour peers—who often provide the most substantial dissent to and constructive criticism of the Government's legislative proposals. Worse still, I fear that the removal of the 92 hereditary peers is only the beginning. The next step would be the introduction of an age cap for membership, provoking an even more numerically significant second cull of dissent, enabling Labour to pack the other place with political appointments and abolishing any form of effective Opposition in the upper House.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman seems to be operating on the premise that all hereditary peers are Conservatives. Why does he think that people with entrenched privilege are naturally Conservative?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Interventions are made by colleagues who have been contributing and spending time in the Chamber and not just wandering in; the hon. Member got very lucky just then. Mr Rosindell, please go ahead.

Andrew Rosindell: I say to the hon. Gentleman that it is quite the opposite. There are many Members of the House of Lords—life peers and hereditary peers—who take the Conservative Whip but who frankly act like independents, doing what they believe is in the interests of our country. That can be said for many on the Labour side as well. He will find that there are many more rebellions and people voting in different ways in Parliament in the Lords than in the Commons, because they are there to serve and they do not face re-election.

For that reason, they are not subject to the usual pressures—lobbying, the Whips and all the rest of it—that we are all subject to, and that is why having that element is so important and is part of the mix that makes up the success of our Parliament.

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Rosindell: I will—one last time.

Gareth Snell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving in to my indulgences. This is an argument that could quite easily have been made during the passage of the original 1999 legislation: that the expulsion of the hereditaries would lead to a complete collapse of our scrutiny processes. Is he suggesting—I do not believe he is—that since '99 and the removal of the other hereditaries, the House of Lords has not been fulfilling its function properly? That is certainly not how I would see the current House of Lords. If he does not believe that, surely removing the existing 92 will not have an impact on the scrutiny that he and I think is so important.

Andrew Rosindell: We cannot turn the clock back, but very many good people were ejected in that first legislation under the Blair Government. The compromise was to keep the 92 there. I think that is a good compromise and I do not really understand the rush for change; we should keep things as they are.

It is patently obvious that the Bill is a precursor for a wider and scandalous programme to weaken Parliament's ability to hold the Executive to account and ride roughshod over our tried and tested constitution. Not only does the Bill open a slippery slope towards dissent-quelling, but it is an attack on the merits of the hereditary principle, which logically and inevitably leads to a fundamental undermining of the primary constitutional role of the monarchy itself. Maybe there are some Members on the Labour Benches who would like a republic, but I think the vast majority of British people would not want that, so to discard the hereditary principle is a very dangerous road to go down.

I urge the House to consider with the utmost seriousness the weight of intergenerational custodianship upon our shoulders when we vote on matters such as this, which are of grave constitutional significance. The removal of hereditary peers from the House of Lords would eradicate from the proceedings of Parliament some of the wisest and most dutiful servants of this great democratic institution. I believe the House should oppose this act of constitutional vandalism and continue to uphold the good and great conventions and traditions that have provided our cherished island nation with stability, continuity and wisdom for so many generations.

5.54 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I thank the Paymaster General for introducing the Bill, which I will heartily support later tonight. The point is worth making that this is not a personal attack on the hereditary peers, nor is it political, and the make-up of the hereditary peers is irrelevant. This is about the principle of having accountability in our decision makers.

The Liberal Democrat constitution begins by stating that

“no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.”

It is a humanitarian position to unencumber the hereditary peers from being disqualified from voting or standing in our elections. We have heard some incredibly powerful maiden speeches today, and I am honoured to follow the hon. Members for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke), for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley), for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove) and for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), who will, I am sure, be an incredible champion for his constituents.

I feel it is a humanitarian position to give the hereditary peers the ability to engage in the electioneering, the door-knocking and the campaigning that builds us as parliamentarians, understanding the views of people on the doorstep and giving us a more representative view of the people we represent, something that is currently denied to them. I feel that it is my responsibility to provide that pleasure to them.

It is refreshing to have heard the ambitions for reform from Conservative Members. I agree with the general principle that it is important that reform is broadly cross-party, and I look forward to working with them in the future to provide more transformative reform.

Tim Roca: Does the hon. Gentleman understand why some people might have some cynicism about the appetite for reform among Conservatives, when some Members talk about wanting a big package and others defend the hereditary principle in 2024?

Luke Taylor: While I heartily endorse the desire for a big package, I share the hon. Gentleman's cynicism about the appetite for reform among Conservative Members. I also note the desire from the Conservatives not to lose the skills of those hereditary peers who contribute to our lawmaking. I made the point almost three hours ago that I see the opportunity for those peers to take some of the places soon to be vacated by Conservative Members who need to step down because they cannot maintain their lifestyles. That may be one avenue for hereditary peers to continue to contribute.

The primary aim of my speech is to urge the Government to go further, and I echo the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) at the beginning of the debate on the need to improve Parliament. Again, some claim that they do not hear this on the doorstep, but perhaps they need to listen to their voters more closely. When I knock on doors, the disenfranchisement, the disappointment and fury with the behaviour of the previous Government and politics in general, echoes. The Bill is a step in the right direction to improve accountability and restore some of the respect that was trashed by the previous Conservative Government.

Alan Gemmell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that trust in politics is at a low point, in part because of the egregious failures of the Conservatives when in government. This is a small and initial step that we can take to start to increase trust in politics, and that is partly why my party won the election.

Luke Taylor: I heartily agree. This is a step in the right direction, but I am reassured by the nods and assurances given earlier in the debate by the Paymaster General that more reform and further measures will come later in this Parliament.

One measure that we should introduce, and which is relevant to the debate, is the capping of donations to political parties. That would end the £3 million price tag that was put on a seat in the House of Lords by the previous Government, and would start to restore trust that those who are here to make our laws are here on merit.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): The hon. Member is being generous with his time. I understand his point, but does he recognise, as those of us who are good Fabians on the Labour Benches do, that there is value in incremental progress, and that the Bill's proposals should be welcomed on their merits?

Luke Taylor: I agree 100%. I expect to be able to champion this measure on the doorstep, and to boast about speaking in this debate on making this incremental gain and removing the egregious historical anomalies still in our system.

I give special thanks to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), who made the key, almost blockbuster, point about the gender imbalance among those who are eligible to become hereditary Members in the other place, and about the sheer insanity of the hereditary peer cohort being entirely male. Protecting that astonishingly unequal status quo is utterly indefensible. I thank him for making that point, which should surely have ended the debate on its own.

I look forward to voting for the Bill's Second Reading tonight, but I implore the Paymaster General to bring forward as soon as possible further measures to reform the House of Lords. The Liberal Democrats will continue to act as a constructive Opposition, as I hope we have done today, and to push for more radical proposals for reform of the House of Lords, some of which have been teased by the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson)—I hope that I have pronounced his constituency right. I look forward to working with him to develop those plans. I hope that the measures before us will restore voters' trust, which the previous Government trashed. I implore the House to support the Bill.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Chris Curtis to make a short contribution.

6.1 pm

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: No notice was given of a point of order, but go ahead.

Jim Allister: Is there no etiquette in the House about somebody who has sat through the entirety of the debate being gazumped in the calling list by somebody who has recently arrived?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you so much for pointing that out. Unless colleagues have been bobbing from the beginning, they are unlikely to be called—there

[*Madam Deputy Speaker*]

are colleagues on the Government Back Benches who will not be called in this debate—but it is absolutely right that those belonging to the party that forms a majority in the House tend to be called earlier. You are most definitely on the list and will be called shortly. I call Chris Curtis to continue.

Chris Curtis: I rise to make a few brief points in this incredibly important debate. The most important point—one that we have still not spent enough time discussing—is the basic one that people should not be in this place on the basis of the hereditary principle. It is incredibly important that we move away from that for a variety of reasons, which I will come to. I will not pretend that the legislation goes as far as many of us would like it to—although, at the moment, most of us Labour Members think that elections are a pretty good way to decide things.

Mark Ferguson: Recently, while doing a media interview, I was confronted by comments from a Conservative Member of the other place who argued that hereditary peers were good for Parliament because it meant that there were more northerners in that Chamber. I am a proud northerner myself. Does my more southern Friend agree that although regional proportionality is important, hereditary peers are not the way to achieve it?

Chris Curtis: We could say many things about hereditary peers, but their being representative of the country as a whole is certainly not one of them. Many of us Labour Members think that elections are certainly good, and I hope there will be a point in the future when we can look at introducing them to the House of Lords, but in the meantime, there is no good argument for keeping the hereditary principle.

Let me turn to the importance of trust in politics. I worked in polling before I became an MP; I spoke to many people across the country, and unfortunately it was always amazing just how low trust in politics is. There are many reasons for that, which I hope we will continue to work on throughout this Parliament—we are doing some important work to address that lack of trust—but one of those reasons has to be the knowledge that people can make it to Parliament not because of what they have done in life, because they represent their communities and their country, or because they have a fantastic vision for what they want to do, but because of what womb they happen to be born from. I do not think that is right, and it is one of the reasons why we have seen that lack of trust.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a key point. Does he agree that when we have children in the Public Gallery, or when children from our constituencies visit, it is simply impossible to defend to them the principle of hereditary peers in the 21st century?

Chris Curtis: That is certainly true, and it brings me to my next point. This Friday, I will visit Watling academy, a fantastic new school in my constituency, and will chat to children of many ages who are getting their important education. I want to look them in the eye and say that if they work hard, they can have any opportunity in this country—the opportunity to end up in any place. The hereditary principle works against that.

We have heard many arguments today from Opposition Members. We have heard that the Bill goes too far, and that it does not go far enough. The truth is that it is a good piece of legislation, and we hope that we will have the opportunity to go further in future.

Claire Hazelgrove: Given my hon. Friend's expertise in polling, for the benefit of this House, could he shed any light on whether there is any public support for continuing the hereditary principle?

Chris Curtis: I cannot remember the exact numbers off the top of my head, but they round down to a very low number. From what I have heard in this debate, it seems that people who believe in the hereditary principle are vastly over-represented in this Chamber.

We have heard that some people think the legislation is moving too fast, and others that it has been moving too slowly. The truth is that we have been talking about this issue for decades, if not centuries, and now is the right time to make this important change. This Bill is not the end of the conversation—it will go on for many years to come—but that is no reason why we should not make this important change today and get rid of the hereditary peers, creating a more democratic, more representative place that can carry on making the important laws that the country needs us to make.

6.7 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I believe in taking a positive approach to politics. Not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good is a good principle, and in that spirit, I welcome the Bill. However, I must confess that it is a pretty lukewarm welcome, because this Bill is not a really significant or radical step. Effectively, it is a tweak. We could call it a bit of glorified admin, because it tidies up a thread that has been hanging since 1999. It does not tackle several of the other inequalities and inconsistencies in the composition of the House of Lords. Members across this House have highlighted some of those today, such as the presence of the bishops and the appointment of life peers, so while I welcome the Bill, there is huge room for improvement.

House of Lords reform is absolutely long overdue. Three hours or so ago, somebody referenced Asquith in 1911; we have been waiting a really long time. When the Minister introduced the Bill several hours ago, he referenced the next steps in the reform process, and I very much hope we do not have to wait 25 years—or, indeed, 113 years—to find out what those next steps are. Reform is also widely supported, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) just said, and it is essential to improve the functioning of our democracy. By the way, there are many other ways in which we could improve the functioning of our democracy, but let us focus on House of Lords reform today. When the Paymaster General introduced the Bill, he spoke about a matter of principle for a Government committed to fairness and equality. He described going step by step in the direction of reform. I challenge him to tell us what the next steps are, to show us his workings and his road map, and to assure us that we will not have to wait 25 or 113 years.

Shaun Davies *rose*—

Ellie Chowns: I will not give way, and I will explain why. Like many other Members, I have been waiting and bobbing for hours to have a chance to speak—apart

from the moment when I left for a prearranged meeting with the Speaker. Several Members on both sides of the House have intervened frequently, thus putting others further down the speaking list. I know that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) would like to speak.

We need to know the next steps in House of Lords reform. I agree that these are questions of principle. The issue is not the individuals who currently serve in the House of Lords, many of whom are hard-working and experienced, and bring a lot of expertise and effort. That is not the point. The point is that unelected lawmakers should not be a thing. People who make laws should be elected. That is what democracy is about. It is a fundamental principle, and I find it extraordinary that the Bill does not adopt it. The Government are sometimes a little selective in applying the principles for which they nail their colours to the mast.

On the principle of unelected people not making laws, why do we still have bishops and life peers? There is no other walk of life in which someone would be appointed to a role for life. We should not have that in our Parliament. I challenge the Paymaster General to use the Government's huge and disproportionate majority—disproportionate given that it is based on a minority of votes—to take forward the principles of fairness and equality, and to get rid of not just the unfair and unequal hereditary principle, but the unfair and unequal principle of representing certain religions and not others, or of representing any religion. I challenge the Government to get rid of the unfair and unequal principle of giving political appointees life peerages. Will the Paymaster General do that? Will he also set out steps for replacing the House of Lords with an elected house of citizens? Will he take steps to introduce a fair electoral system for this Parliament, so that every vote cast in this country has equal weight?

6.12 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): We have had a lively debate and some wonderful maiden speeches. I noted some telling and impressive phrases—phrases that I think very few in this House could disagree with. Yet the House, in its actions, implements that which it disagrees with. What were those phrases? One Member talked about the need to move to “a more democratic form of government”. Good. Someone else mentioned “strengthening democratic rights”. Good. Another Member talked about “advancing democratic control”. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) said that “unelected lawmakers should not be a thing”. Good. However, the phrase that struck me most poignantly was about the principle of electing those who govern us.

This House has spent an afternoon debating the rights and wrongs of having hereditary peers, but there is a part of the United Kingdom where the primary issue is not whether the legislature has the right make-up but why 300 areas of law are made by a foreign Parliament. Those laws are made not by this House or the other House, or by the legislative Assembly in Stormont, and that is the product of the protocol agreement made by the previous Government and continuing to be implemented by the current Government.

Laws affecting fundamental issues, that govern most of our economy, that govern our entire agrifood industry and that control much of our environment are not made

in this House—they are not made with the contribution of hereditary and non-hereditary peers—but by foreign politicians who no one in this nation elects. *[Interruption.]* Someone says, “Wrong debate”. It is not the wrong debate when we are talking about the fundamentals of what it means to have democratic legislatures. There is nothing more fundamental than the principle that we should be governed by those we elect.

The position of all the hereditary peers in the House of Lords may be indefensible—that is my own inclination—but at least they are United Kingdom citizens making laws for United Kingdom citizens. My constituents live under a regime in which many of the laws are made not by United Kingdom citizens and not by those elected by us, but by those elected in Hungary, Estonia or wherever.

This comes down to practical illustrations. Just a few days ago, a statutory instrument about pet passports was laid in this House that imposes not a UK law, but an EU law. It means that any Member of this House or any citizen of Great Britain who wants, for example, to come and visit the wonderful Giant's Causeway in my constituency and bring with them their best friend—their dog—must, subject to EU law, have a pet passport, have it inoculated according to EU demands, belong to a pet scheme set up under that law and have the documentation inspected.

I am using this debate to draw the attention of the House to the fact that, yes, it is right and necessary that we debate the apparent anachronism of hereditary peers, but there is a far more compelling issue that this House should be preparing to address. I will be bringing a private Member's Bill to this House that will give it the opportunity to address those issues, and when I do, I hope that the same enthusiasm for basic democratic principles will be shown for the principle that we should be able to elect those who govern us.

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

6.18 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is my privilege to wind up the Opposition's case on the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill. In their first 100 days, the new Government have come out of the general election at lightning speed, but at times they have found themselves struggling to keep the wheels from spinning off the wagon. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that this gesture at constitutional modernisation is being rushed through Parliament without pre-legislative scrutiny, without meaningful cross-party engagement and without proper consultation.

This is a five-clause Bill with no detail on the next steps. The Government had 14 long years in opposition to ponder how to complete the changes from when they last addressed the matter in the House of Lords Act 1999, yet we see a Bill without ambition. It is incomplete, and without due consideration of the wider implications, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) set out so eloquently. It is a Bill that provokes questions that are not answered despite repeated assertions to the contrary; and, sadly, in line with many aspects of Labour's first 100 days in power, there is no clear plan. There is the hope of one—

[John Glen]

I acknowledge that—but the complexity and variable geometry of our constitutional settlement and history and traditions need serious examination.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I admire the right hon. Gentleman's elegant efforts to slide past the 14 years when his party was in charge and had an opportunity to change some of these things, but I also note that he is circumventing having to try and defend the indefensible, which is the idea that people have a birthright to be in our Parliament. We are surely long past that point, and if he agrees he and his party should be supporting our party's proposals.

John Glen: I am not hiding at all from that; I am saying that it must be one part of much wider reforms, which many Conservative Members would agree with. If we are to make a large number of changes, it is only reasonable when taking the first step to want to know what the next steps are, because we then address the final overall effect on our constitution and national Parliament.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): If the right hon. Gentleman is so keen for the Government to set out additional steps, why was he not so keen for the Government of the last 14 years to set out any steps? He described this Bill as lacking ambition; how would he describe the last 14 years when his Government did absolutely nothing to reform the House of Lords?

John Glen: I was a member of the Government for seven years and did quite a lot in financial services and other aspects. I totally recognise that significant steps forward were not taken on this matter and I do not deny the need for reform, but doing this in one step without stating what the further steps will be is not the right way.

Several hon. Members rose—

John Glen: I will make a bit more progress before giving way to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), who, like me, has been here for well over four hours.

Making one's maiden speech is a key moment, and I pay tribute to the five or six Members who have done so amid 22 speeches from across the House, including some excellent contributions. I turn first, however, to my parliamentary neighbour and friend my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), the newly elected Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, who expressed very well the challenges of defending the hereditary principle, but in his usual way pointed also to the lack of coherence and made the case for a series of ambitious amendments that could be made to the Bill. He also made a very reasonable point about the case for life peerages for the hereditary peers who have made such a significant contribution, and that merits further consideration.

I turn now to some of the maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove) made a brilliant maiden speech; she talked of her experience working for the Tony Blair foundation, her commitment to fairness, her enthusiasm for financial education, and her devotion to her constituency. I wish her a long career in this House. The hon. Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) spoke of the warm affection she

had for her background in the trade union movement and her commitment to the people from the council estates and the working class that she comes from. I also noted her commitment to apprenticeships and the energy transition, and I wish her well in this place. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) on his maiden speech, too, and his commitment to serve the many not the few, even if his perspective differs somewhat from that of his father, who many of us will know.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) said that the Bill did not go far enough. I suspect he would want to take it to a different place than we would, but I wish him well in his time in the House. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke) spoke of her deep commitment to Glasgow and paid a moving tribute to her brother David and the inspiration he has given her to serve here.

There were a large number of other thoughtful speeches, which I will not have time to go over. I just say that it is right, as we all know, that there is a constant review of parliamentary institutions; at times, evolution is in order so that they remain relevant to the public that Parliament is designed to serve. The Government's view of this evolution has also been on a journey. In September 2022, the Prime Minister, who was then Leader of the Opposition, made a speech at the launch of the Brown report making the case for abolishing the House of Lords entirely—I acknowledge that is a principled position—to replace it with a new elected Chamber. He was reported as saying that he would do that to “restore trust in politics”. The question that many will be asking today is: what happened? Here Labour is, in government with an enormous majority, and what is its big idea or grand plan to deliver on all that?

Tom Hayes: Today, Conservative colleagues have said that the reforms go too far but not far enough, and too fast but not fast enough. They have said that we should abolish the hereditary principle and that we should keep it. What is the official Conservative position? May I ask whether what we have seen today is exactly the reason that the Conservative manifesto said nothing about the hereditary principle?

John Glen: If the hon. Member takes the trouble to read the reasoned amendment, he will know the position of His Majesty's Opposition. Let me get back to what his Government have not done. Their plan is simply to kick out 92 peers from the other place. I am afraid that just will not cut it.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Will the shadow Minister give way?

John Glen: No, I will make some progress, as there is not much time.

As with many areas of policy, and as witnessed in these first 100 days, the Bill exposes that, despite all those months sat on the Opposition Benches, the Government do not have a coherent plan with the next steps set out.

Gareth Snell: Will the shadow Minister give way?

John Glen: I will in a moment. I said that I would, so I will. As Lord Adonis has reminded us, “there is no consensus on reform.”

The Government did have, as they kept telling us when it was the other way round, 14 years to deliver. They had 14 years to come up with that plan. Now they have an enormous majority, and they have just set out one step.

Gareth Snell: I thank the shadow Minister for giving way. He has diligently listened to all the debate this afternoon, and I thank him for that. He talks about a package of reforms. The last reform that his party brought forward in 2014 was a very small reform, with the expulsion of people for non-attendance, the right to resign or retire and the expulsion of those who committed a crime. Since then, 187 Members have retired or resigned and 16 have been expelled for non-attendance. If that was perfectly acceptable as a stand-alone reform without consideration of the consequential impacts, why is this Bill any different?

John Glen: I am sorry, but it is the hon. Gentleman's Government who are now in charge of the agenda before Parliament. It is for them to be accountable for it. I am so challenged by the poverty of ambition that exists on the Government Benches. We are given to believe that they are planning a new wave of peers, and the Prime Minister's former chief of staff has reportedly been overheard saying that she is top of the list. The Prime Minister was previously reported as trying to make our political system better, because it had previously been undermined by "lackeys and donors" appointed to the other place. Sadly, it seems that as soon as he got into Downing Street, he discovered the Government's own lackeys and donors were already waiting for him. I think that reflects this Government's wider approach and attitude to constitutional reform and our institutions.

Pete Wishart: I am glad that, at last, somebody else has mentioned the donors, because to me they are the biggest problem we have with the House of Lords. Will the right hon. Gentleman back an amendment that says something along the lines of anybody who has given any more than, say, £20,000 to a political party should not be able to get a place in the House of Lords?

John Glen: I do not think we should rule out people who are successful in all walks of life, but I would look seriously at all amendments from colleagues throughout the House.

We need to come back to the facts of the matter. The House of Lords is not there as some ornamental, archaic decoration in our Parliament: it is an embodiment of Magna Carta—of power that devolved from beyond the Crown and beyond the Executive. So what is next? Is this all just a foreboding of the kind of parliamentary flagellation we can expect from this new Government? Well, not if we on the Opposition Benches can help it.

Our reasoned amendment recognises that this Government have no recognition of the need for a reasonable process for constitutional evolution and reform. Our amendment is about the careful and considerate review of change, as well as the acceptable or effective method of enacting major constitutional change. Surely it is reckless at least, and grossly irresponsible at worst, to seek to cast aside the experienced and independent voice of excepted hereditary peers, so many of whom play a crucial role in scrutinising parliamentary legislation in our nation—and some of whom have played an

instrumental role in delivering government—without setting out a clear, coherent plan or narrative for what comes next, which should be scrutinised, discussed and refined. I hope colleagues will join me and support the Opposition's amendment.

6.31 pm

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): It is a pleasure to close this important debate on the Second Reading of the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill. The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) reminded us in his contribution that today marks three years since the murder of our friend and former colleague Sir David Amess. I am sure that the thoughts of all of us across the House are with his family.

I thank Members from both sides of the House for their thoughtful and measured—at times—contributions to the debate. It has been a debate many years in the making, and it is an important moment in the history of this country's legislature.

I want to take the opportunity to congratulate all the Members who made their maiden speeches today: my hon. Friends the Members for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Claire Hazelgrove), for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley), for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) and for Glasgow North East (Maureen Burke), and the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone).

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire recalled campaigning at the general election in the great Welsh weather, which reminded me of the rally I did with him in the pouring rain on that first weekend. Happily, I remembered my umbrella.

I am sure that all those who made their maiden speeches today will make a fantastic contribution to this Parliament and to their constituencies, which they talked so passionately about, and I wish them all the best with their parliamentary careers.

As we heard earlier from my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office, this important Bill delivers on the Government's manifesto commitment and is the first step in bringing about wider reform to the House of Lords. We firmly believe that the time has now come finally to end the hereditary aspect of the other place—a feature of our constitution that makes us an outlier among nearly all other democracies.

Ben Coleman: We are talking not just about today but about what happened 25 years ago. Looking back at today's debate, has my hon. Friend been struck, as I have, by Opposition Members' saying that this reform has come too soon, that there has not been enough discussion, that it will cause dire consequences and that we should be looking wider? Those are not arguments from today but from 25 years ago. Does she not think that the Conservatives should be straight and not just fluff things—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Interventions should be short.

Ellie Reeves: My hon. Friend is right. Listening to some of the contributions today, it is not clear where Opposition Members stand. They talk about reform being too fast and then not fast enough. They talk about it going too far, and then not far enough.

Shaun Davies: Is it not the case that the only time there is House of Lords reform is under a Labour Government? In 1997 we had a mandate to reform the House of Lords. In 2024 we have a mandate to reform the House of Lords, and we should get on with it.

Ellie Reeves: There is lots of talk of reform from Opposition Members. They had 14 years, but chose not to do it.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The Conservative Government introduced a comprehensive Bill involving the election of peers. I was the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary at the time. It failed—notwithstanding the fact that I thought it was awful—because Labour withdrew its support for the timetable motion, which meant, as a constitutional Bill, it would have taken the Government's entire timetable. For that reason, the Government withdrew the measure.

Ellie Reeves: That was four Governments ago. It failed due to the timetabling motion and the fact that the Conservatives could not get agreement even within their own party.

There have been, and are, hereditary peers who have made real and lasting contributions to public life. However, this is a matter of principle. It is not right that anyone should be able to take up a seat in our legislature and vote on our laws purely by virtue of the family that they were born into. Instead, this Government are committed to a smaller second Chamber that better reflects the country it serves. This Bill brings us a step closer to achieving that aim.

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Lady talks about the family that hereditary peers happen to have been born into, and says that therefore it is wrong that they should have any influence over legislation. Is she therefore questioning the principle of Royal Assent?

Ellie Reeves: Absolutely not. I listened to the hon. Member's contribution; the royal family and the monarchy are one of our country's greatest assets. The contribution of the King and the working members of the royal family to public life in the UK is incredibly significant. The Government have enormous respect for the unique role that the royal family play in our nation. This reform does not affect the role of the sovereign. Ours is a model of constitutional monarchy that continues to be practised worldwide. By contrast, the UK is only one of two Parliaments in the world that retains a hereditary element. To seek to make any comparison between the two is not credible. The sovereign is our Head of State and provides stability, continuity and a national focus. Nothing in the Bill changes that.

Let me turn to the reasoned amendment tabled by the official Opposition. The Government have introduced the Bill to end the outdated and indefensible right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. I am sure that the House will agree that it is important for Parliament to give proper consideration to the Bill, which reflects a Government manifesto commitment, rather than to dismiss it out of hand. Although the Government are grateful for the contributions that hereditary peers and their predecessors have made to the other place, it

simply cannot be right that the second Chamber retains a hereditary element in the 21st century.

Let us be clear. Those on the Opposition Benches talked today about consultation and engagement. First, I will not take any lectures on consultation from the Conservative party, which rammed through a Budget without engagement with the Office for Budget Responsibility and proceeded to crash the economy that has left people in my constituency and across the country still paying the price in their mortgages and rents.

On the substance of the Bill, the right hon. Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden) could not even be clear, when asked, whether he is in favour of the principle of removing hereditary peers from the second Chamber. From the sometimes quite lively contributions from the Opposition Benches, one thing is clear: there is a wide range of views that are not always consistent with one another. The new-found, if at times slightly confused, zeal for the job of reform of the second Chamber is noted, yet Opposition Members had more than 14 years to bring about reform and never did so. Those on the Labour Benches laid out our commitments for reform in our manifesto, which was scrutinised by the public and then overwhelmingly voted for.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will she tell the House whether it is still Labour's ambition to abolish the House of Lords in its current condition and set up a democratically elected Chamber, yes or no?

Ellie Reeves: We set out in our manifesto that we want to see an alternative second Chamber that is more representative of the nations and regions. I will say a little more about that later.

Our manifesto was scrutinised by the public and then overwhelmingly voted for. This is a tightly drafted piece of legislation that directly makes provisions for the specific commitment to remove immediately the rights of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. I am confident that there will be no shortage of scrutiny from Members of this House and Members of the other place throughout the passage of the Bill. The effect of the reasoned amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Hertsmere would prevent the House from scrutinising the Bill.

Sir Gavin Williamson *rose—*

Sir John Hayes *rose—*

Ellie Reeves: I will give way.

Sir Gavin Williamson: If amendments come forward in Committee of the Whole House that reflect the aspirations of what the Labour party set out in its manifesto, will the Government work with Members to ensure they become a part of the Bill?

Ellie Reeves: What I am interested in is whether the right hon. Member, with his new radicalism, will be voting with the Government tonight.

The Government are committed to House of Lords reform and the Bill is the first step in that process. It has been said by Opposition Members that the introduction of the Bill breaks a commitment made in 1999 to retain

the hereditary peers in the House until the second stage of House of Lords reform has been completed. That agreement, to the extent that it was ever binding, was not entered into and does not bind this Government. It is not right that a discussion between political parties a quarter of a century ago should still somehow mean that it is illegitimate for the Government to bring forward the Bill today. This Government were elected on a manifesto commitment to bring about immediate reform by removing the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. It is right that we take time to consider how best to implement our other manifesto commitments, engaging with peers and the public where appropriate over the course of this Parliament.

Mr Holden: The hon. Lady has made the point at the Dispatch Box that conventions from 25 years ago should not stand today. Does she agree that that should also apply to other conventions made with the House of Lords, such as the Salisbury-Addison convention, which ensures that legislation gets through?

Ellie Reeves: The Salisbury convention means that measures that were proposed in manifestos cannot be blocked, but an agreement made a quarter of a century ago cannot now bind this Government and this House. This measure was a clear manifesto commitment, and it is important that we proceed with the Bill.

We heard a great many speeches today. Members including the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes)—I know he is keen to intervene—spoke of the experience and the contributions of hereditary peers. Let me make it absolutely clear that the Bill is not about individuals, but about fulfilling a manifesto commitment to remove the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. Of course this Government value the contribution of hereditary peers, but retaining 92 of them was always intended to be a temporary measure, and now is the right time to introduce this reform. The Government were elected with a clear mandate to address the issue, and the Bill is delivering on that.

Sir John Hayes: I do not support the removal of those peers, but if it were part of a bigger package of reform, one could at least argue, from the Minister's point of view, that it was a holistic measure in line with a manifesto commitment. This is a very partial reform, which focuses on the removal of those very hard-working and good hereditaries, rather than being part of a more creative and holistic solution.

Ellie Reeves: We said in our manifesto that removing the 92 remaining hereditary peers from the legislature was a first step towards achieving the reforms of the House of Lords that we wanted to see, and it is right that we do not delay that first step. The wording in our manifesto was clear: this would be an “immediate” first step, and that is what we are delivering in the Bill.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings and the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), among others, talked about our traditions. Any suggestion that the Government are somehow against traditions or the ceremonies of our past is nonsense. We value and respect our history, and its continued inclusion in our national life makes our country all the better, but

the continued reservation of those 92 seats for people who are simply there because of the families they were born into cannot be justified any longer. That is an important matter of principle.

A number of Members, including the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), wondered whether hereditary peers could be given life peerages. As my noble Friend Baroness Smith of Basildon said in the other place when the Bill was introduced, Members who leave as hereditary peers can return as life peers. There is nothing to prevent them from doing so if their party wishes to nominate them in the normal way.

Simon Hoare: That is all clear and understood. The point that I was making, along with other Members, was that it would be a gesture of graceful good will to make life peers of those who are currently hereditaries. Placing them on a separate list, outwith new year, birthday or party leader nominations, would be an act of generosity reflecting the work that they had done, and would underline the Minister's point that there is nothing personal in this.

Ellie Reeves: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and, indeed, for his contribution to the debate. That is not a commitment that we are in a position to make; it would be for the new Leader of the Opposition to nominate for peerages those whom he or she wished to nominate, in the normal way.

A number of Members, including the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), talked about wider reform of the House of Lords. As set out in the Labour manifesto, the Government are committed to replacing the House of Lords with an alternative second Chamber that is more representative of the regions and nations of the UK. That would be a major change to the functioning of our Parliament and our constitution, so it is right that it should be preceded by a significant period of detailed consideration and consultation. The Government will set out further details of that process in due course, including how we will seek the British public's input on how politics can best serve them. However, that should not prevent progress on other important and long-overdue reforms, including through this Bill and other initial reforms, to help deliver a smaller and more active second Chamber. The Government's manifesto made it clear that the measures in the Bill would be introduced to implement immediate reform, which is what we are setting out to do.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), too, talked about wider reform. I thank her for taking the time to meet me and the Minister for the Cabinet Office to talk about her concerns and her ambitions for further reform; I am grateful for that engagement. I want to stress that this is a new Government with a fresh mandate and a set of manifesto pledges that we are committed to implement. This Bill delivers immediate reform. As my right hon. Friend mentioned in his opening speech, part of the reason why there has been no further progress over the last 25 years is the argument that nothing should be done until everything has been done. We firmly believe in taking this first step as a matter of priority, and it is right that we take time to consider how best to implement other manifesto commitments that the Government have previously set out. We will engage

[Ellie Reeves]

with peers and the public, where appropriate, over the course of this Parliament and update the House in due course.

The hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) made a point about the commencement of the Bill. The Bill will remove the remaining hereditary peers at the end of the parliamentary Session in which it receives Royal Assent. The timing of the Bill's implementation ensures that the business of the House will not be undermined by the sudden departure of a number of hereditary peers in the middle of the Session. Subject to the timely progress of the Bill, we will give notice to existing hereditary peers to give valedictory speeches.

The hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) raised some concerns about the balance in the House of Lords if this Bill is passed. It is important to point out that no political party has held an overall majority in the House of Lords in recent times, and this Bill will not change that. The role of the Lords is to scrutinise and hold the Government to account in the context of the primacy of the House of Commons. The hon. Member is right to say that the Bill decreases the number of peers on the Opposition Benches, but the share of the Opposition's seats in the Lords will reduce from around 34% to around 32%. Given that the Conservatives will remain the largest party in the second Chamber, I am sure that hon. Members will agree that the Bill is hardly a power grab.

I very much look forward to engaging with the shadow spokespeople from the Opposition parties. I have welcomed discussing this matter with the hon. Member for Richmond Park and Members of other parties who made time to discuss the Bill at drop-in sessions last week. I look forward to further engagement with all those who attend the Committee of the whole House, especially given the important views that have been expressed today.

I stress again that this Bill is about finally removing an outdated and indefensible principle, and not about individuals. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office mentioned at the beginning of the debate, the current hereditary peers and their predecessors have made notable contributions to the other place, the merits of which we have heard in this House today. This is the first step in reform and not the last. The other reforms set out in our manifesto are more complex and it is right to take the time to properly consider their implementation. I know that the Leader of the House of Lords has outlined her commitment to meaningful dialogue with Members of the other place on further reforms to bring about a smaller and more active second Chamber.

The Government remain committed in the long term to replacing the House of Lords with an alternative second Chamber that is more representative of the nations and regions and of how the public can have politics best serve them. As the manifesto makes clear, it is right to start with this immediate reform, completing the work that we began 25 years ago. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 105, Noes 453.

[Division No. 19, 6.55 pm]

Question accordingly negated.

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

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

HOUSE OF LORDS (HEREDITARY PEERS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion five hours after their commencement.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion six hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Vicky Foxcroft.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Government of Wales Act 2006 (Devolved Welsh Authorities) (Amendment) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 21 May, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Vicky Foxcroft.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 (Disability Assistance) (Consequential Modifications) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 26 July, be approved.—*(Vicky Foxcroft.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

IMMIGRATION

That the draft Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (Juxtaposed Controls) (Amendment) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 29 July, be approved.—*(Vicky Foxcroft.)*

Question agreed to.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)),

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Lucy Powell relating to the House of Commons Commission.—(*Vicky Foxcroft.*)

Question agreed to.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Ordered,

That Nick Smith and Marie Goldman be appointed to the House of Commons Commission in pursuance of section 1(2)(d) of the House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

Spice-spiked Vapes

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Vicky Foxcroft.*)

7.15 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Research conducted by the University of Bath has uncovered that one in six vapes confiscated in schools contained the synthetic drug Spice. Using a device developed at the university—the world's first portable device that instantly detects synthetic drugs—Professor Chris Pudney conducted tests in 38 schools in London, the west midlands, Greater Manchester and south Yorkshire. Tests on just under 600 vapes confiscated in schools revealed that one in six contained Spice, while one in 100 contained tetrahydrocannabinol or THC, the psychoactive component of cannabis. Spice was found in confiscated vapes in nearly three quarters of the schools studied. The researchers say that the findings are likely representative of the situation across the country. What is more shocking is that when the vapes were confiscated, it was not because of a suspicion that they contained illicit drugs.

I recently met Professor Pudney to gain a better understanding of the wider issue and the device being used to detect synthetic drugs. Speaking to Chris and seeing the detection device up close, it struck me just how serious the issue is for young people. Many of the confiscated vapes containing Spice were made to look exactly like a normal product from a shop, and they are usually sold as containing THC. Children are therefore inadvertently consuming Spice while under the impression that it is cannabis.

Vapes containing THC are common in the United States, where they are legal in some states, but it is expensive and difficult to import them into the UK. Spice, on the other hand, is cheap and abundant in the UK. It is therefore in the interest of dealers to use this highly addictive substance under the pretence that it is cannabis.

Spice is highly addictive. It is a class B drug that is commonly used in prisons. Synthetic cannabinoids are associated with half of non-natural deaths in prisons. Addiction to Spice inevitably leads to serious high-risk health outcomes, including hallucinations, dizziness, chest pain, breathing difficulties and damage to vital organs. Spice users are frequently seen slumped on the street in a state of semi-consciousness, unkindly described by some in the media as seeming “zombified”. There have been numerous instances of children collapsing at school, requiring hospitalisation and intensive care, and tragically becoming addicted to Spice. The highly addictive nature of Spice makes it a gateway to criminal activity, coercion and abuse. Being in that state inevitably makes young people incredibly vulnerable, and one user described smoking Spice as like “being in a coma”.

This year, a group of schoolchildren in south-east London were hospitalised by an illicit vape, with one of them ending up in an induced coma. Headteachers have spoken about children collapsing in hallways. One school in London wrote to all parents following concerns about the risks of children experiencing severe health problems, and the same story is replicated across the country.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important subject in the House this evening. This is not just a problem in London:

[Andrew George]

in Cornwall, 750 illegal vapes have been seized in the last year. The assistant director of public health in Cornwall has said that is just the tip of the iceberg. It is a very serious problem and affects many areas, including mine.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank my hon. Friend for the intervention. I am just naming one area with experience of the issue, where headteachers have come forward. He is right: this issue applies across the country, and especially affects vulnerable communities. We all have them in our constituencies. That is why this is relevant to all of us.

The issue is far more common than previously thought. We need to increase awareness of it among parents and teachers, and I hope that this debate will go some way towards doing that. It is not just the health outcomes of Spice that are harmful, but the criminality and abuse that becoming addicted to such a drug can lead to. For young people who are vulnerable, that can include being pressured into drug dealing themselves through blackmail or other forms of coercion.

When I raised the issue at business questions last week, the Leader of the House assured me that the issue would be addressed in the tobacco and vapes Bill. I would like clarity from the Government on what that will look like. It is already illegal to sell vapes to children, and Spice is illegal for everyone. Which specific parts of the Bill will target illegal drugs and vapes?

Crucial to this issue is that the vapes that contained Spice were almost all refillable, not single use. Refillable vapes are rechargeable and feature an empty pod that can be filled with the liquid of choice. The Bill is largely focused on disposable vapes. It will hopefully introduce much-needed measures to restrict the flavours of vapes and stop the free distribution of vapes to children. Those are measures that the Liberal Democrats and I support and have called for.

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): On what you said about what more we can do in relation to young children, you are right—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. “You” refers to the Chair, but the hon. Lady is referring to the hon. Member. Interventions should also be short.

Dr Cooper: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just wanted to make the point that we need to be mindful that young people are in a time of cognitive development—a formative time, when it comes to what they understand. Banning the advertising of vapes to young children, and making sure that the packaging is not attractive to them, is incredibly important.

Wera Hobhouse: I agree with the hon. Lady. Young people are very vulnerable, and some parts of the Bill will address the issue, but I am talking today about refills, and what the Government intend to do about them and their ready availability on the internet.

The Metropolitan police have warned parents that many children get their hands on illicit vapes through social media platforms, such as Snapchat and Telegram. Gone are the days when someone needed to meet a sketchy person in a back alley to get hold of illegal

drugs. These days, the drugs are readily available over the internet, and that is a big part of the problem. The ease with which the drugs are trafficked via social media, coupled with the widespread prevalence of vaping in schools, is hugely worrying and demands immediate intervention. The tobacco and vapes Bill presents a timely opportunity to address the escalating threat, but amendments must be carefully considered to effectively combat the unique challenges posed by Spice.

The illicit vapes are almost always refillable, with the Spice liquid mainly obtained online. Changing the packaging of legal single-use vapes sold in physical shops will do nothing to address the issue. Too often, the Government reflex is to ban something without understanding the underlying issues. If the Government believe that putting an end to pretty packaging will have an effect on Spice, I ask them to think again.

One way in which we can push back against the problem is through education. We need to raise awareness of the issue so that the public has a better understanding of it. Having police in schools to talk to students, teachers and parents is crucial. Parents need to be aware of the signs that their child could be at risk. It is not just the public that needs more awareness of these issues; we politicians do, too. We are told that the Government are bringing in new restrictions on the sale of vapes to children, but further restrictions to something that is already illegal does little to assure experts that appropriate action is being taken. The Leader of the House mentioned that those restrictions would come alongside further measures, and I look forward to hearing what they will be.

I have some questions for the Minister. There needs to be an immediate raising of awareness on the issue. The Government must do more to inform students, teachers, parents and carers of the scale of the problem, and to warn them of the consequences of unknowingly consuming Spice. I hope that the Minister also realises that the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, in its current form, will do little to prevent the problem.

There are a few critical deficiencies in the Bill. First, it neglects online distribution networks. Its emphasis on traditional retail channels does not address the crucial role of online platforms and social media in the distribution of Spice-laced vapes. That omission allows illicit vendors to operate with minimal regulatory oversight. Secondly, the Bill misplaces emphasis on disposable vapes. Although well-intentioned, the proposed ban on disposable vapes overlooks the prevalent use of refillable devices for Spice consumption. That misdirected focus may even unintentionally exacerbate the problem by shifting demand towards refillable vapes, which are more easily manipulated for illicit purposes. Finally, the Bill underestimates the complexity of the illicit market. It does not account for the sophisticated tactics employed by drug traffickers, including encrypted communication, cryptocurrency transactions and direct-to-consumer delivery. That underestimation hinders effective enforcement strategies.

I suggest three provisions to amend the Bill before it is introduced. First, we must improve regulatory oversight for online platforms. We should mandate content moderation policies for social media platforms and online retailers in order to prohibit the sale and promotion of Spice-laced vapes. The Secretary of State should consider establishing a taskforce composed of technology company representatives and cyber-security experts to

develop and implement methods for detecting and disrupting online illicit substance distribution networks. We must allocate increased funding and resources to law enforcement agencies for online surveillance, investigation and prosecution of illicit vendors.

Secondly, we should expand enforcement strategies beyond retail channels—in particular, postal and courier services should be required to implement protocols for identifying and intercepting suspicious packages containing Spice-laced vapes. I know that is not easy, but we must at least consider that serious problem. Finally, we should require schools to implement educational programmes on the dangers of Spice, deceptive marketing tactics and the risks associated with online and street-level purchase. The NHS should provide funding for harm reduction programmes, including support services. With the help of Professor Pudney and the University of Bath, I would be very willing to work with the Government to establish a national campaign to educate young people about the dangers of Spice and to empower them to make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing.

Tackling this serious problem requires a targeted and proactive approach from the Government across various different Departments, including the Home Office, Health and Education. We must not forget that we are talking about already vulnerable young people who are made even more vulnerable by this serious problem. The tobacco and vapes Bill, in its current form, will not solve the problem. Amending the Bill with the provisions I have outlined is crucial to protecting young people from the devastating consequences of Spice. I am looking forward to hearing what the Government have to say today, but I am also looking forward to further co-operation. We all must be aware of the terrible risks we are facing by exposing young people to those dangers, but also to a life of serious addiction.

7.29 pm

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this important debate. I have listened carefully to her contribution, as well as those of the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) and of my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper), and I very much share the concerns that have been expressed about this matter. As Minister for Policing, I am really keen to gain as full an understanding as possible of the threats to public safety, including ones such as this, so while the subject matter of this debate is deeply troubling, I am grateful that it has been brought before the House this evening for consideration. I am also appreciative of the research undertaken by Professor Pudney, which has helped to identify this issue. Home Office and health officials have met him to discuss his findings, and we continue to consider any emerging evidence on the harms of illicit drugs.

I will start by making some general comments about vapes. First, vapes containing Spice are illegal, and no one should be buying or using those products—I will say a little bit more about that later. The Government welcome adult smokers switching to vaping as part of their efforts to give up smoking, but discourage the use of vaping by children and non-smokers. As the chief medical officer, Professor Sir Chris Whitty, has said,

“If you smoke, vaping is much safer; if you don’t smoke, don’t vape; marketing vapes to children is utterly unacceptable.”

The law currently protects children through restricting sales of nicotine-inhaling vapes to over-18s only, limiting nicotine content, labelling requirements and advertising restrictions. The Department of Health and Social Care is providing £3 million in funding over two years specifically to enhance the work led by National Trading Standards to tackle underage and illicit vape sales. However, non-nicotine vapes and other nicotine products such as nicotine pouches have much lower levels of regulation, and current levels of youth vaping and the targeting of products at children mean that further restrictions are needed.

That is why, as the hon. Member for Bath referred to, the Government will be introducing the tobacco and vapes Bill to address the high rates of youth vaping, alongside measures to make the UK smokefree. That Bill includes landmark policies to protect our children from the harms of vaping and the risk of nicotine addiction. Among other things, the Bill will stop vapes and nicotine products from being deliberately branded for, and advertised to, children; introduce a minimum age of sale of 18 for non-nicotine vapes and nicotine products to ensure they cannot be sold to children; ban the free distribution of vaping and nicotine products; and provide the Government with regulation-making powers to restrict flavours, point-of-sale displays and packaging for all vaping and nicotine products.

The measures in the Bill are intended to bring about definitive and positive change to stop future generations from becoming hooked on nicotine while ensuring that vapes can remain a means by which adult smokers can quit. However, I note the proposals for amending that Bill that the hon. Member for Bath has put forward. I am very happy to take those proposals away and discuss them with officials, as well as share them with the public health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne), because this is his Bill—he will be bringing it forward. I hope the hon. Lady will allow me to give her my assurance that all the issues she has raised will be considered.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Can the Minister confirm that the new Bill will take the age limit at which people can use cigarettes up gradually, as was proposed previously, and whether vaping will be caught in the same path? The Minister has referred to children, but children eventually become young adults and then adults themselves, and we need to prevent vaping from being an alternative. It just needs to be stopped.

Dame Diana Johnson: Again, I emphasise that the Bill is not within the Home Office’s purview; it is a DHSC measure. I will ask the Minister for Public Health to respond to the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) because I am not yet sighted on the whole Bill.

As the hon. Member for Bath said, the addition of Spice to some vapes is particularly concerning. Spice is a street name for synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists, or SCRAs. Other brand names are also associated with SCRAs, such as Black Mamba. However, despite the suggestion of a link in the term “synthetic cannabinoid”, there is no relationship between SCRAs and the cannabis plant.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

Let me be clear: vapes containing SCRAAs are illegal. Most SCRAAs, including Spice, are controlled as class B drugs via a generic definition under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The import, production or supply of a class B drug carries a maximum sentence of up to 14 years' imprisonment, an unlimited fine or both. Although legislation is in place, with punitive sanctions to tackle offences, including the supply of SCRAAs, there is something particularly concerning about the attempt by some criminals to peddle vapes containing SCRAAs that are designed to appeal to children. I want to talk about what we can do to deal with that. The hon. Member made some suggestions.

I am sure that we agree that early drug use significantly increases exposure to health and social harms, including substance use disorder or dependency later in life. One of the most effective approaches to preventing drug misuse and risky behaviour is through empowering and building resilience in children and young people.

Health education is a compulsory subject in schools and is taught as part of the relationships, sex and health education curriculum. Health education includes content on drugs, alcohol and tobacco. As with other aspects of the curriculum, schools have flexibility about how they deliver these subjects, so that they can develop an integrated approach that is sensitive to the needs and background of their pupils. For example, in areas where there are significant problems with drugs or vapes, a school can choose to dedicate more time to this topic.

The hon. Member may know that the relationships, sex and health education curriculum is currently being reviewed, and, as part of that, the Department for Education will explore whether any more content on this subject is required. The Education Secretary has said that children's wellbeing must be at the heart of the RSHE guidance and has committed to looking carefully at the public consultation responses and considering the relevant evidence before setting out next steps to take the guidance forward.

In respect of vapes specifically, the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care have taken a number of steps to increase the training resources and support available for teachers and schools. They have updated the curriculum to include the health risks of vaping and published new online content on the potential risks of vaping for young

people. I noted carefully what the hon. Member said about parents as well as young people needing to be educated, and also about politicians needing to have that education.

Wera Hobhouse: I was a secondary school teacher before I came to this House, and I know how difficult it is to teach properly in lessons that are often after the normal school time. Of course, this is one of the things we can do, but it clearly needs a targeted campaign. Does the Minister not agree that this problem is so alarming that we need to look at a dedicated campaign, rather than leaving it to lessons that I know reach some, but not many, young people?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Member obviously has a great deal of experience in education, and of what works with young people when teaching these really important but difficult subjects. Given the number of issues she has raised and approaches she would like adopted, I am very happy, as I said at the outset, to take that back and to look at the advice that officials will give me and the public health Minister.

I agree with the hon. Lady about parents as well as politicians needing to be educated on this matter. Information about the dangers of SCRAAs is readily available on Frank, which is the Government-funded national drug and alcohol advisory service. It explains that SCRAAs can be more potent than cannabis and that the effects may last for life. It also says that there may be unknown effects, because, as is important to note, we are at the early stages.

I again thank the hon. Member for raising this important and concerning matter. I hope I have made it clear not only that punitive measures are available to tackle those who illegally supply these dangerous drugs, but that the Government are alive to the dangers of children vaping more widely, as well as in these particular instances. Through measures planned to be introduced in the tobacco and vapes Bill, we aim to reduce the availability of vapes to children. As I have promised, I will certainly feed back to the public health Minister the issues she has raised about what should be in that Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

7.41 pm

House adjourned.

Division

HOUSE OF LORDS (HEREDITARY PEERS) BILL

A reasoned amendment was proposed,

To leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House declines to give a Second Reading to the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill because it is not an acceptable or effective method of enacting major constitutional change, because it proposes a significant alteration to the composition of the House of Lords which should not be considered in isolation from other changes, having regard to the undertakings given by the then Government in 1999, because it drip-feeds changes that hinder proper scrutiny of measures that could change the relationship between the two Houses, because it risks unintended consequences, does not reflect the lack of political consensus on House of Lords reform and does not provide for full consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny which would give the opportunity to consider the case for overall reform, seek cross-party engagement on proposals, and review the implications of all proposals.”—(*Sir Oliver Dowden.*)

The House divided: Ayes 105, Noes 453.

Division No. 19]

[6.55

AYES

Anderson, Lee	Hinds, rh Damian
Anderson, Stuart	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Andrew, rh Stuart	Hollinrake, Kevin
Argar, rh Edward	Huddleston, Nigel
Atkins, rh Victoria	Hudson, Dr Neil
Bacon, Gareth	Hunt, rh Jeremy
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Bedford, Mr Peter	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Bhatti, Saqib	Jopp, Lincoln
Blackman, Bob	Kearns, Alicia
Bool, Sarah	Kruger, Danny
Brandreth, Aphra	Lam, Katie
Braverman, rh Suella	Lamont, John
Burghart, Alex	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Cartledge, James	Lopez, Julia
Chope, Sir Christopher	Mak, Alan
Cleverly, rh Mr James	Malthouse, rh Kit
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Mayhew, Jerome
Cocking, Lewis	McMurdock, James
Cooper, John	McVey, rh Esther
Costa, Alberto	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Coutinho, rh Claire	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Moore, Robbie
Cross, Harriet	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Davies, Gareth	Mundell, rh David
Davies, Mims	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Davis, rh Sir David	Norman, rh Jesse
Dewhurst, Charlie	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	O'Brien, Neil
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Paul, Rebecca
Evans, Dr Luke	Philp, rh Chris
Fortune, Peter	Raja, Shivani
Fox, Sir Ashley	Rankin, Jack
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Reed, David
Freeman, George	Robertson, Joe
French, Mr Louie	Rosindell, Andrew
Fuller, Richard	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Garnier, Mark	Simmonds, David
Glen, rh John	Smith, Greg
Grant, Helen	Smith, Rebecca
Griffith, Andrew	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Griffiths, Alison	Spencer, Dr Ben
Harris, Rebecca	Spencer, Patrick
Hayes, rh Sir John	Stafford, Gregory

Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin

Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:

Paul Holmes and
Joy Morrissey

NOES

Abbott, Jack	Burke, Maureen
Abrahams, Debbie	Burton-Sampson, David
Akehurst, Luke	Butler, Dawn
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Byrne, Ian
Aldridge, Dan	Byrne, rh Liam
Alexander, Mr Douglas	Cadbury, Ruth
Alexander, Heidi	Caliskan, Nesil
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Ali, Rushanara	Campbell, Irene
Ali, Tahir	Campbell, Juliet
Allister, Jim	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Amesbury, Mike	Cane, Charlotte
Amos, Mr Gideon	Carling, Sam
Anderson, Callum	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Anderson, Fleur	Chadwick, David
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Chamberlain, Wendy
Aquarone, Steff	Chambers, Dr Danny
Arthur, Dr Scott	Champion, Sarah
Asato, Jess	Charalambous, Bambos
Asser, James	Charters, Mr Luke
Athwal, Jas	Chownes, Ellie
Atkinson, Catherine	Coghlan, Chris
Atkinson, Lewis	Coleman, Ben
Babarinde, Josh	Collier, Jacob
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Collinge, Lizzi
Bailey, Olivia	Collins, Tom
Baines, David	Conlon, Liam
Baker, Alex	Coombes, Sarah
Baker, Richard	Cooper, Andrew
Ballinger, Alex	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Bance, Antonia	Cooper, Daisy
Barker, Paula	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Barron, Lee	Costigan, Deirdre
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Coyle, Neil
Baxter, Johanna	Craft, Jen
Beales, Danny	Creasy, Ms Stella
Beavers, Lorraine	Crichton, Torcuil
Begum, Apsana	Curtis, Chris
Bell, Torsten	Daby, Janet
Benn, rh Hilary	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Bennett, Alison	Dalton, Ashley
Berry, Siân	Dance, Adam
Betts, Mr Clive	Darling, Steve
Billington, Ms Polly	Darlington, Emily
Bishop, Matt	Davies, Ann
Blake, Olivia	Davies, Jonathan
Blake, Rachel	Davies, Paul
Bloore, Chris	Davies, Shaun
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy</i> <i>vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Davies-Jones, Alex
Bonavia, Kevin	De Cordova, Marsha
Botterill, Jade	Dean, Bobby
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Dean, Josh
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Dearden, Kate
Brewer, Alex	Denyer, Carla
Brickell, Phil	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Dickson, Jim
Bryant, Chris	Dillon, Mr Lee
Buckley, Julia	Dixon, Anna
Burgon, Richard	Dixon, Samantha
	Dodds, rh Anneliese

Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Easton, Alex
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Farron, Tim
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Franklin, Zöe
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 German, Gill
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gordon, Tom
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hanna, Claire
 Harding, Monica
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom

Hazeltown, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Clive
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Martin, Mike
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 Maynard, Charlie

McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Munt, Tessa
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Murray, Susan
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee

Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Roome, Ian
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Seward, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sollom, Ian
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Jamie
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David

Taylor, Luke
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl

Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine

Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williams, David
 Wilson, Munira
 Witherden, Steve

Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Wrigley, Martin
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Martin McCluskey and
Taiwo Owatemi

Question accordingly negatived.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 15 October 2024

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

Scotland's Economy

9.30 am

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered Scotland's economy.

It is obvious that Scotland has the greatest of economic potential. It has some of the best universities in the world; a brilliant energy sector, with the skills and ingenuity to be at the forefront of the energy transition across the world; and the businesses of the future, such as the gaming industry in Dundee. People across the world love our country. Brand Scotland is a brilliant brand, and people across the world buy our products and, in the modern economy, our innovation and know-how. Most importantly, we value hard work, education and enterprise immensely, and I see that every day across my constituency of Glasgow East. In Scotland, we have always been, and will always be, aspirational. We also have the perfect raw materials for a modern economy. Despite that, Scotland's economy has barely grown over the last 17 years and Scotland's public finances are in a catastrophic state, with emergency in-year budget cuts imposed for the third year in a row.

Education is the foundation of a thriving economy. Scotland's education system was the envy of the world, but that is not the case now. Our universities face significant deficits. Universities Scotland and other experts have made that clear, with real-terms resources to teach each Scottish student cut by 19%, the lowest investment in teaching across the UK and underfunding of research activity by £328 million each year.

It gets worse. The SNP Government have failed to act on the recommendations from the Withers skills review. That recommended a series of critical changes to skills training in Scotland to make our economy fit for the future and our people able to get the work of the future. When it comes to giving people the skills to get good work, delivery of real training speaks much louder than talking and endless consultation.

As for schools, the respected PISA—programme for international student assessment—reviews compare Scotland's standards with those elsewhere in the world, and they show that Scotland's educational attainment is falling. The SNP's response—like a bad premier league footballer—is to blame PISA. With declining educational attainment, you might invest more in teachers—I should declare a minor interest here, because my children go to state schools in Glasgow—but that is not the case in Glasgow. The SNP council has cut 172 teaching posts from our schools this year, with the support of the Greens, due to its mismanagement of the city's finances and the Scottish Government's decisions to starve local authorities of much-needed resources.

That has real-world economic consequences. At least a quarter of businesses in Scotland report skills shortages and a lack of qualified candidates for roles. That means

less well-paid jobs and less economic growth in Scotland, and it puts Scotland at a real disadvantage against other countries.

The last Labour Government acted on Scotland's green energy potential. The amount of onshore wind capacity increased sevenfold, and our Government launched support for offshore wind, which was a brilliant success. I was excited to work on some of Scotland's first offshore wind projects. Brian Wilson, the then Labour Minister and Scottish Labour MP, who put so much of this in place, left a brilliant legacy. That shows the positive power of a Labour Government and Scottish Labour MPs fighting for Scotland year in, year out and day in, day out. The last Labour Government left Scotland and Great Britain with a thriving renewable energy supply chain and industry—the ideal foundations for the road to net zero.

The Conservatives' response, I regret to say, was stop-start support for renewables and a ban on onshore wind across England. They held one support auction that attracted no bids for offshore wind. It is negligence like that that means that people cannot afford to pay their bills, because wind and solar are now the cheapest forms of power. No one in their right mind would turn down cheap, low-cost, fixed-price energy over 15 years, but the Conservative Government seem to have done exactly that. Small wonder that our supply chain in Scotland is in turmoil.

Supply chain investors do not actually ask for much—just a fair bet, a reasonable measure of predictability, and a reasonable basis on which to conclude that there will be customers to serve over a reasonable period so that they can recoup their investment. The Conservatives failed to provide even that—the so-called party of business.

However, it is not all about the Conservatives. The Scottish planning system is slow and cumbersome. The principal legislation for large wind farms and electricity transmission projects remains sections 36 and 37 of the Electricity Act 1989. Wind farm developers have for many years complained about delays to consent for their projects. Consent for wind farms and transmission projects in Scotland is the responsibility of the Scottish Government. Delays put at risk the next wave of projects that are critical to economic growth and good jobs in Scotland and to getting energy bills down. All of this results in lost jobs and damage to supply chains. All of this means that people in Scotland are paying much more for their energy. And all of this puts Scottish business at a real disadvantage, because energy is a material part of their costs, and those costs are higher than they should be.

Turning to public finances, in September the SNP was forced to fill a £1 billion black hole in Scotland's public finances within the year—this is not part of planned year-on-year budgeting. They did so in two ways. First, they spent much of the remaining ScotWind receipts, which are not recurring income, but one-off, windfall income that was meant to be dedicated to the energy transition, which is absolutely critical for places such as Grangemouth and Aberdeen. They also made £500 million of cuts, slashing NHS funding and raiding the transport budget, when our transport system is already incredibly unreliable. That is the result of short-term, quick-fix solutions to balance the books, with no long-term plan, no public sector pay strategy and no vision for our economy. After 17 years in power, the SNP has failed to

[John Grady]

grasp the concept of proper budgeting and long-term thinking. I would not recommend marriage with the SNP: for the honeymoon, you would be offered the Orient Express, but you would not even get the National Express—you would be hitchhiking on the M8 in the rain.

When faced with brutal budget cuts, surely the Scottish Government would make sure that they had spent the money they had, but that does not seem to be their approach. The SNP has failed to spend at least £250 million of European structural funding and may have to hand back up to £373 million of unspent funding. Let us pause for a minute. The UK was a net contributor to EU funds. This is money that Scottish businesses and workers paid into Brussels. We then got some of that back to spend in Scotland, and the SNP is sending it back again. Now, I love Europe and I am pro-European, but even I would venture to say that this is taking love for our fellow Europeans a little too far.

Since the SNP came to power in 2007, it has wasted more than £5 billion of taxpayers' money on pet projects, failed industrial interventions, incompetence, costly agency spend in the NHS, overspend on infrastructure projects and, of course, the two famous ferries that do not sail. Scots also face much higher taxes compared with the rest of the UK. If I have understood it correctly—I must say I find it difficult to follow—the SNP's position seems to be that the oil and gas giants who have made billions of pounds of windfall profits due to elevated oil and gas prices should pay less tax, but someone working in Midlothian on £29,000 a year should pay more tax than their counterpart in Northumberland.

The SNP seeks to blame others, including our very new Government. However, culpability for the state of the public finances sits with the SNP. Hon. Members should not take my word for it. The Scottish Government have been persistently and consistently warned that their approach to public finances is simply not sustainable. The gap in public finances has long been predicted by a wide range of organisations and fiscal experts, including the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Scottish Fiscal Commission—an institute in Scotland similar to the Office for Budget Responsibility, although I am glad to say that Liz Truss did not get anywhere near it. The Scottish Fiscal Commission said of the Scottish budget that

“much of the pressure comes from the Scottish Government's own decisions.”

The Auditor General has warned that the SNP's short-term approach to budgets is not addressing unsustainable public finances in Scotland. We can have no confidence that the Scottish Government are able to address these problems. As Audit Scotland said in 2023:

“Historically there has been an implementation gap between public sector reform ambitions and the ability of the Scottish Government to deliver change”.

Translated into more normal language, that means that the Scottish Government keep saying they will do stuff, but they never get round to doing it.

The terrible state of public finances and higher income taxes in Scotland do not concern only working people: 82% of Scottish business leaders are concerned about Scotland's tax divergence from the rest of the UK. Why? Because it makes it harder to recruit talented

people to come and live in Scotland. I would venture to say that that is what we are desperate to do: have more people living, earning and contributing in Scotland.

There are wider problems.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): The figures on migration show the opposite, and the hon. Member will join me in recognising that we welcome people from all over the world to come to Scotland. Will he also join me in recognising something that is a good for Scotland's economy? Before the Brexit referendum, the Conservatives promised a Scottish visa—something that business and the higher education sector are crying out for. For the recent election, Labour figures promised a Scottish visa. I know that the hon. Member is not in the Government, but is that something he agrees with, along with his Scottish Labour colleagues?

John Grady: Scottish Labour and the Labour party are in favour of bringing talented people into Scotland, and the Scottish Government are welcome to work with us as we seek to ensure that that takes place. As I understand it, the Home Secretary is determined to ensure that it does, and I also understand that the Migration Advisory Committee is looking at the issue carefully. There is no doubt that we want to ensure that talented people can come and work in Scotland; the question is how to do it, and we are seeking to work with the Scottish Government productively on that.

One of the biggest challenges in the Scottish economy is productivity. One key way to get economic growth is to ensure that everyone can make more in the same time. The CBI-Fraser of Allander Scottish productivity index shows that Scotland is lagging behind the rest of the UK on 10 out of 13 productivity indicators, including business investment and business research and development spend. It is worth saying that business investment is simply not enough in the UK as it is, which is why our Government are so focused on increasing business investment and business research and development spend.

I regret to say that the problem comes down in significant part to the Scottish Government. In February 2024, Audit Scotland concluded:

“The Scottish Government's 10-year economic strategy currently lacks collective political leadership and clear targets.”

That mismanagement has a terrible effect on Scotland's public services. If Scotland's economy had grown at the same sclerotic pace as the rest of the UK's economy, it would be £8.5 billion larger. That would mean that there was more to invest in public services. As the Scottish Fiscal Commission's work shows, Scotland would have £624 million more in tax revenues each year if we matched the UK's abysmal performance under the Conservatives. Scotland desperately needs a Government who are pro-worker, pro-growth and pro-business, and that is what we will offer the Scottish people in 2026.

This crisis is due to the mess that the Tories and the SNP have made of our economy. Scotland's independent Auditor General has warned that the SNP's approach to public finances is unsustainable. Our public services face cuts because of the SNP's buy now, pay later policies, and we have lost out on good industrial jobs, as they have gone overseas.

Stephen Gethins: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Grady: I will make some progress, because I have another 26 pages to go.

The Scottish Government absolutely refuse to take responsibility for the catastrophic state of the Scottish economy and public finances. There is always some other factor, person or force majeure event to blame. I venture to say that the Scottish Government have an abundance of two things at the moment: brass necks and Teflon desks. There is no great mystery about who is responsible for the state of the Scottish economy: the SNP has been in power in Scotland for 17 years and, until July, the Conservatives had run this country for 14 years. The First Minister, the right hon. John Swinney, has been one of the central guiding minds and directing intellects behind those 17 years of incompetence; he was Finance Secretary for more than half of the SNP's term in office and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills for five years.

Labour will take the steps needed to fix the Scottish economy. We are determined to bring outside investment into Scotland, which has been the focus of our international investment summit this week. We are developing a strong industrial strategy. Our new Employment Rights Bill will make work pay and protect the majority of Scotland's business against competition from unscrupulous businesses that do not treat their employees fairly. An example of that is exploitative zero-hours contracts, which we will banish from Scotland.

GB Energy, headquartered in Aberdeen, one of Scotland's amazing cities, will spearhead billions of pounds of investment in our energy system, including floating offshore wind, which is a brilliant opportunity for the north-east of Scotland, and hydrogen. We will work tirelessly to help our businesses export and to support our tourism sector. For the last 17 years, the Scottish Government have been selling Scotland to the Scots, but we know that Scotland is brilliant; we have to sell Scotland to the world, and that is what we will do. An early example of that is a deal with Brazil for the recognition of Scotch whisky worth up to £25 million.

I spent more than 27 years working as a lawyer with Scottish businesses before I came to this place, and I have never wavered in my belief that Scotland has the greatest economic potential. I have never wavered in my belief that Scotland's economy can grow and deliver good jobs and the money needed to deliver the public services that Scotland deserves. That is Scottish Labour's belief too. A growing economy gives people well-paid jobs and optimism about the future, and we are determined to deliver that. A growing economy delivers better public services, and Scotland's public services must be improved. We are determined to rebuild our public services after years of neglect and mismanagement.

Next year is Glasgow's 850th birthday. I am ferociously proud of Glasgow and of Scotland—including Aberdeen, where my mother came from and where I have spent so much time both on family matters and working. With investment and stable government, we can deliver the change that Scotland needs. We have got rid of one of the Governments failing Scotland; we need to get rid of the other. It is time for change in Scotland. It is time to deliver economic growth and better public services to Scotland.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. We have an hour and a half in total, and the Government and Opposition spokespeople will have 10 minutes each. Regrettably, given that at least 14 people have indicated that they wish to speak, the time limit on Back-Bench speeches will be two and a half minutes. I am afraid that I will be pretty strict about that in order to give everybody the opportunity to speak. Finally, I ask Members to bear in mind that if there are too many interventions, which should be brief, that limit may be reduced.

9.50 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. People may ask why I have chosen to speak on this matter, but the phrase "a rising tide lifts all ships" applies to the links between the economy of Northern Ireland and that of our Gaelic cousins across the sea in Scotland.

Let me first put on the record my sympathies to the family of Alex Salmond. This is the first Scottish debate we have had since his passing, although we expressed our condolences in the Chamber yesterday. My thoughts and prayers are with his family at this time.

The links between Northern Ireland and Scotland are not simply cultural, although those links are displayed by the numerous Scots bands at the 12 July celebrations and in our shared love of pipe band championships, our shared love of poetry and our shared language, with our Ulster Scots. It is not simply that my Scots brethren and sisters in this House will know what I mean when I call someone sleekit or a gern—by the way, just for the record, there is nobody here who is sleekit or a gern.

We are awaiting an Ofgem decision on whether Northern Ireland electricity can be sourced from Scotland. The scheme would involve building two converter stations—one in Northern Ireland and one in Scotland—and a cable of about 80 miles, depending on the final route, linking the two. That would be a physical manifestation of the trade that takes place between the two nations, Northern Ireland and Scotland, on a daily basis.

One of my staff members is allergic to a number of antibiotics. After the birth of her second child, she needed a particular antibiotic and was told there were none in Northern Ireland. A phone call from the local pharmacy, Andersons in Newtownards, to a small pharmacy in Scotland meant that she had a prescription in the morning, and by the afternoon the antibiotic was with her. The links and the pathways are there, and so too is the friendship.

This can be seen in the fight for our fishing fleet, which Members in this Chamber who long for Scottish independence and I—someone who fought for the Union—came together to win for the Scottish and Northern Ireland fishing fleets. Those are battles that we will continue to fight and win. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Gregory Campbell) recently highlighted during oral questions the need to strengthen the economic trade between Northern Ireland and Scotland, and that is certainly something that would help us all.

In conclusion, I support my Scottish brethren and sisters in their quest to secure more—more fishing rights, more manufacturing rights, and more investment in renewable energy and all the potential that is not fully

[Jim Shannon]

realised in Scotland. I do so not to underline a theory that Scotland can stand alone, but because we are stronger when we stand together, and because the ties that bind are enhanced when we work as one body for the benefit of all in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

9.52 am

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on securing this important debate. After 14 years of economic mismanagement, my constituents deserve to see their wages go further, their public services performing better and their local communities thriving. For those aspirations to be met, we need good-quality, well-paid jobs that provide the security people need to plan for their futures and to have the economic confidence to spend in their local areas—to purchase in their local shops, and to support local cafés, restaurants and pubs, such as the Yard House in Coatbridge, which I had the privilege of visiting recently. So many of those establishments are facing real challenges.

In my community, I want to see the creation of jobs, investment in the skills that people need, and support for people who are seeking to develop those skills or to start their own businesses. I am pleased to see the work of our Labour Government. So much good work has already begun towards building a stronger, fairer economy in Scotland, which will provide the foundations to create those jobs: the Employment Rights Bill, which is set to ban exploitative zero-hours contracts, end fire and rehire and fundamentally tackle the scourge of low pay; the creation of the national wealth fund and GB Energy; and the significant event yesterday, which will deliver £63 billion of investment. I am keen to see what that means in reality for people across Coatbridge and Bellshill.

However, critical to that is improving Scotland's economic circumstances and working to reset the relationship between Scotland's two Governments. We must not underestimate the scale of the challenge we face. Labour market statistics published in July make for sobering reading, with unemployment rates and inactivity rates above those in the rest of the UK. Those figures show that rebuilding our economy and, more importantly, our communities, household finances and public services will not be easy or achieved overnight. That will require a level of analysis, investment and co-operation between the two Governments, which, sadly, we all know has been absent for far too long.

9.55 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on a very thoughtful speech. I want to make three brief points.

When the North sea oil came, the then Labour Government saw to it that oil fabrication yards were established in different parts of Scotland, two of which in the highlands, at Kishorn and Nigg, I worked in. They were important because they helped halt and reverse highland depopulation—the curse of the highlands

and islands for far too long. Welding and fabrication skills were relocated from Glasgow and the Clyde, and other parts of the UK, to those yards, and some of the greatest structures still working in the North sea today were built there, including the Ninian Central and Magnus platforms.

We have the skills there today, but they are ageing skills. The hon. Member rightly talked about the potential of renewables in the North sea, but virtually none of the nacelles and blades are made in this country. We have the fabrication and welding skills, so we should utilise them, as was done in the 1970s. If we do not do that, we are missing a trick.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is rightly an avid exponent of the potential for space launch from Shetland. I, too, am a keen exponent of the potential of Sutherland in that regard. Orbex, which is based in Morayshire, currently employs 150 and hopes to have perhaps 500 by 2030. There is enormous potential, but the UK Government must match the level of funding coming from Germany and France for the space industry. That is a challenge for the Government, and I am sure they will do their best to meet it.

Lastly, so many of our skilled female workforce are unable to deploy their skills to the full to the betterment of Scotland's economy because the care that they need for their children is simply not there. They cannot leave their homes to go out and make money for the family and serve Scotland in the best way they can. If we can get that right, we can realise the potential of our female workers; again, we would be very foolish not to.

Thank you, Mr Dowd—I believe I have kept within the allotted time.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Yes, well done. I call Graeme Downie.

9.57 am

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on securing this important debate.

Back in the mists of time, in 2007, a new economic strategy for Scotland was announced by a new kid on the block, a certain Mr John Swinney, a member of a Government that would rely on Conservative votes for its survival. Let us see how it went.

In 2007 John Swinney promised a “wealthier and fairer” Scotland that would

“enable businesses...to increase their wealth.”

As has already been said, Scotland's economy has performed far behind what we would have expected and hoped. Just this week we saw the latest NatWest regional tracker published, analysing economic activity across the UK, with Scotland languishing in eighth place out of the measured regions—not a good start.

John Swinney said Scotland would be “smarter”, yet in 2017, when he was Education Secretary, the Scottish Government admitted that young adults

“are more likely to experience low paid, precarious work, and cycling between this and unemployment”.

Just this week the Scottish Funding Council said that the

“reform of the post-school...landscape has not yet been implemented”. So much for smarter and better opportunities.

It was said that Scotland would be “healthier”. As a former board member of NHS Fife, I could waste an entire speech explaining exactly how that has not been the case: £1.7 billion of NHS funding on agency staff, £1.3 billion on delayed discharge, and a chaotic, overreaching attempt to design a national care service. That makes it three down so far for the First Minister’s 2007 plan.

It was said that Scotland would be “safer and stronger”, but we have had the shambolic implementation of Police Scotland and lower police numbers since 2008. The First Minister also said that Scotland would be “greener”. Is there any consolation at the end? Well, I guess we could give him partial credit here. The Scottish Government did become greener, albeit for only a short time, when a calamitous coalition with the Green party saw climate change targets abandoned and a disastrous attempt to implement an ill-considered and ultimately abandoned deposit return scheme. Before SNP colleagues begin drafting their press releases about more powers, I point them to the foreword to the 2007 document, which said that the strategy could be achieved

“with the levers that we have”.

Scotland deserves better, and that is what this Labour Government—who have been in power for only a little over 100 days, rather than the 17 years of the SNP—are already attempting to deliver. We have established a national wealth fund, launched the largest increase in workers’ rights, launched GB Energy, announced a record-breaking £1.5 billion of funding for clean energy, and issued an industrial strategy focused on growth sectors where we know Scotland can and should perform better in the future. That is what we should be aiming for.

10 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I appreciate your taking the time to chair this debate so excellently, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on his speech. I am glad and relieved to hear that he is not proposing to marry me. I am married already, but I appreciate that he considered it, however briefly.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Aberdeen as one of Scotland’s great cities; Aberdeen is the greatest city. I am literally here to say that. It is the greatest city not just in Scotland, but in the entire world. If anybody would like to spend time in Scotland, I thoroughly recommend Aberdeen. Thankfully, it is where Labour have chosen to put GB Energy. That makes a huge amount of sense, because we have been at the forefront of energy generation and subsea technology for so many years. The level of skills and expertise in and around Aberdeen is unparalleled.

We are, however, at a tipping point. There is a see-saw, where we need to see growth in jobs in renewable energy. I appreciate the comments and commitments that the Government are making, but if the change is to happen, we cannot lose the skills we have in oil and gas, because those people will go abroad to use their skills. We need to have that see-saw effect. We cannot pull oil and gas down in advance of putting renewables up. I have spoken incredibly passionately and regularly on climate change and the need to meet our targets, but the UK

Government must consider the gap there will be in the middle if they choose to take action too quickly without ramping up jobs in renewables.

I am pleased to hear the commitment to a Scottish visa. I am really excited that we will have our own immigration system that works for the needs of the people of Scotland, rather than the populism of how the UK Government think that things should be for people in the south of England.

Several hon. Members rose—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they need to bob. The people on my list are different from those who are bobbing, so if you do not bob, you will not get called. I appreciate that I am tending to sound like a headteacher today.

10.2 am

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on securing the time for this debate, and thank him for touching on the university sector in his opening remarks. Scotland’s universities, which are among the very best on the planet, are more than just institutions of higher learning; they are vital engines driving our economy. From groundbreaking research fuelling innovation to nurturing the next generation of talent, universities play a pivotal role in shaping Scotland’s future. Anyone who doubts that only has to look at the support that Heriot-Watt University’s National Robotarium, in my constituency, gives businesses. That is just one example of how knowledge and expertise generated within our universities attracts investments, creates jobs and fosters economic growth.

I am proud that people living in Scotland have access to free university education, but I am ashamed that our universities are not fully funded to deliver that. Universities receive direct funding for each student via the Scottish Government, but that is currently around £2,000 less than universities in England get. The gap is only widening. If we are serious about growing Scotland’s economy, underfunding Scotland’s universities must end.

I am proud that our universities attract the best minds from around the world, both staff and students. This year, however, the number of visas issued to students coming from overseas to the UK overall dropped by 16% due to Conservative immigration policy. That is a failure, and is really concerning given the current state of the sector in both Scotland and England. It also only damages the multicultural vibrancy that should be at the heart of any university experience, such as the one that my son Ben gets at the University of Edinburgh.

In conclusion, Scotland’s universities are not just assets but essential catalysts for economic growth. By investing in education and research, we are investing in our nation’s future. That is why our universities must be nurtured and cherished, and their success should never be taken for granted.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about Scotland’s universities and the role that they play, particularly regarding investment in our universities.

[John Lamont]

So does he agree that it was a mistake by the UK Labour Government to reverse investment in the supercomputer in Edinburgh?

Dr Arthur: It was a mistake for the previous Conservative Government to commit to that project without allocating funding to it. My good colleague, the Secretary of State for Scotland, is working day in, day out to secure that funding.

If we are serious about growing Scotland's economy, we must ensure that our universities have the funding they need, and that the voice of the UK's universities is heard when it comes to setting immigration policy.

10.6 am

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate on Scotland's economy. Scotland once led the world in economic and industrial development. Alongside other parts of the UK, Scotland was the home of the global industrial revolution. However, Scotland's economic present is not, I am afraid, as glorious as its past.

The economic legacy of both the SNP and Conservative Governments has been dismal. We now face a stalled economy that no longer works for working people. Wages are flatlining, there are fewer opportunities, businesses have been ignored and our global competitiveness is in decline. Both the SNP and Tory Governments have delivered little but chaos and uncertainty. Scotland's economy has not been well served in recent years.

I am here to say, however, that Scotland's economy can be better and can work for working people. We have incredible strengths: we are home to some of the best businesses in the world, to a talented and skilled workforce, and to leading universities at the forefront of human knowledge. We have huge potential in our natural resources as well, especially in a world where inclement weather can be seen as an economic asset.

In West Lothian, we have a fantastic set of businesses and an incredibly skilled workforce, including multinationals, indigenous scale-ups and early-stage start-ups. The modern West Lothian economy has been built on a diverse range of sectors: life sciences, engineering, construction, food and drink, distribution, aerospace, retail, software development and renewables. In the Livingston constituency, we are the long-term home for many of the world's greatest companies, including Sky, Mitsubishi, Glenmorangie, Valneva and many more.

I thank the Secretary of State for Scotland, the ministerial teams, and the teams at the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Business and Trade for their support around the potential job losses at Mitsubishi Electric. I also thank Tom Arthur, the Scottish Government Minister for Employment and Investment, for his swift action to support the workforce there. They are skilled workers who are facing redundancy as a result of short-term economic pressures.

The decisions that lie ahead of us to grow Scotland's economy will not always be easy, but taking the right choices to grow our economy and drive investment will create good jobs and new opportunities in every part of the country. That is the country we wish to build together.

10.8 am

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for securing this important debate on Scotland's economy at such an important time. Scotland has a rich heritage in industry, commerce and innovation—a legacy on which we must build and be far more ambitious for our future.

Ten days ago I visited the InchDairnie distillery in my constituency, which is an exemplar of that approach to economic growth. The team at the distillery are leading innovation in one of our oldest but still most significant industries, developing new whiskies with grains sourced entirely locally, and they are a living-wage employer. They are investing in the future as well, by installing a new boiler system for the distillation process that is hydrogen-ready.

It is very appropriate that InchDairnie has taken that foresighted approach to its energy use when, in Buckhaven in my constituency, SGN is investing in a pilot programme for domestic hydrogen use in 300 homes in the community. That virtuous cycle continues with the hydrogen boilers used in those homes that were let by Bosch, which is a major employer in Glenrothes. The importance of those and many other renewable businesses in my constituency shows how vital the decision has been by this UK Government to deliver a step change in our ambition for Scotland and the UK to be a green energy powerhouse. That is why this Government's decision to establish GB Energy, headquartered in Scotland in the wonderful city of Aberdeen and backed by £8 billion of investment from the windfall profits of oil and gas giants, is such a vital initiative for Scotland and for my constituency. This morning we have heard no alternative proposal to invest billions of pounds in that vital industry for the future.

To conclude, I very much agree with the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on the importance of our fabrication yards for the future of this industry. The Methil yard in my constituency that is currently going to be sold, with that process taking place under Harland and Wolff, has a fantastic role to play in the future of our renewables sector. The contribution of the 200 steelworker apprentices at that yard will be vital if we are to achieve that crucial ambition for Scotland and the UK to be a leader in green energy for the future.

10.11 am

Joani Reid (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on securing this debate. I take the opportunity to highlight one of Scotland's economic successes, which is now unfortunately a huge economic challenge—the town of East Kilbride. It was Scotland's first new town and I would argue its most successful, but it was a success as a result of an interventionist industrial strategy. It brought together incentives and investment from the local development corporation and central Government, which resulted in inward investment and technological manufacturing that led to the Motorola plan, the Rolls-Royce plan and many more. A strategic approach by Government to locate and disperse several service jobs means that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office remain in the town today.

The town was a product of strategic thinking, planning and active intervention, and it was a place of hope and aspiration where families could find not just homes but communities, jobs and opportunities. However, the contrast between what it was and what it is now is stark. Although it is still one of our most successful new towns, East Kilbride is not what it once was. It used to have almost full employment, but after the manufacturers pulled out of the town, and the industries that replaced them—such as services and retail—faced some huge challenges as a result of the financial crisis, the town has failed to keep up with the pace of change. Also, the previous Westminster Government and the Holyrood Government have utterly failed in supporting the town. The town feels neglected and let down by two Governments, and the lack of any serious investment industrial strategy has left communities like mine in East Kilbride behind.

There is of course now hope with the new Government's focus on growth and investment, as well as the creation of GB Energy. East Kilbride can use its space and its skills that were formerly used to deliver companies such as Rolls-Royce and Motorola. With a Government serious about driving investment, boosting our economy and creating jobs, towns such as mine in East Kilbride can be rebuilt and renewed. That is the focus of what this Government are trying to do. The work of post-war Governments who transformed our public realm can once again take place. It is a testament to the mission-led Government, who have a long-term strategic vision to rebuild Britain with an industrial and economic policy that puts working people, fairness and growth at its core.

10.14 am

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on securing this important debate. Ahead of the general election, Prosper Scotland summed up the hurdles that the Government face, in addition to the challenges of decarbonisation and an ageing population, as well as even greater technological challenges, when it said:

“What is also evident is that our economy has struggled for the decade and a half since the financial crisis in 2007-08, a weakness that ill-prepared our society for when recent crises came.”

It is fair to say that that is a damning indictment of the Tories' and SNP's handling of the economy.

However, I believe that the best days lie ahead for Edinburgh North and Leith and for Scotland. We have the natural assets and the key ingredients to deliver economic growth. On the green economy and the sprint to clean power, Scotland already generates significant amounts of clean power, and if the Scottish Government give consent to Berwick Bank, we could boast the largest offshore wind farm in the world within a few years. We need to secure manufacturing and supply chain jobs to support the energy transition in Scotland, at sites such as the port of Leith in my constituency.

To deliver Brand Scotland, we need to rip through the border and sell Scotland not just to ourselves, but to the rest of the world. We have salmon, shortbread, Tunnock's teacakes, Irn-Bru, Lind & Lime gin and Johnnie Walker—a distillery that not only sells whisky to the world, but welcomes more than 1 million visitors

a year to its whisky experience in my constituency. We need to market those brands to every corner of the globe.

Edinburgh is the largest tech hub but, with the scale of innovation, we are creating more tech jobs than ever that cannot be filled. That leads me nicely to the key ask of this debate: for both of Scotland's Governments to work together. With the devolution settlement, it is not possible for the UK Government alone to deliver economic growth for Scotland. That means celebrating achievements together, but also tackling the blockers—a bureaucratic planning system, a skills shortage and women struggling to enter the workplace, to name but a few.

Finally, for workers across Scotland, a fair day's work must mean a fair day's pay. I am delighted that the Labour Government brought forward the new deal for workers within their first 100 days, and I look forward to the biggest increase in workers' rights for a generation becoming a reality for workers across Edinburgh North and Leith and Scotland in the coming years.

10.16 am

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on securing this important debate.

I welcome the opportunity to speak about Scotland's economy, not least because of the huge breadth of businesses in the towns and villages across my constituency, which is situated in the heart of the central belt with road and rail links to Glasgow, Edinburgh and beyond. From small independent businesses to large multinationals, spanning manufacturing, construction, hospitality, engineering, telecommunications, biosciences and retail, they all play a vital role in contributing to our local economy and supporting local jobs. Film and TV production makes an increasingly important contribution to the economy, with the filming of “Outlander” at Blackness castle and in the Bathgate hills showcasing the beautiful and versatile backdrops that the area has to offer. More recently, Bathgate welcomed Colin Firth for the filming of “Locke & Key”.

However, there are significant challenges that threaten to undermine our economic growth and prosperity, with the Scottish Government underfunding the vital investment needed in infrastructure projects and cutting initiatives to get more people on to public transport, with a £23.7 million in-year cut to the travel budget. Although my constituency is home to many fast-growing towns and villages, investment and infrastructure are not keeping pace with development, and nowhere is that more starkly seen than Winchburgh, which continues to await a new train station that would not only support a shift to sustainable travel and ease motorway congestion into Edinburgh, but unlock further economic growth, supporting local businesses and improving links to employment opportunities.

Another significant challenge facing communities is the swingeing cuts to council budgets. West Lothian council has had to find savings of £10 million per year for the last 16 years, while Falkirk council has the second-largest budget gap in mainland Scotland as a proportion of revenue spend. This is a story of two

[Kirsteen Sullivan]

councils—one Labour-led and one SNP-led—both facing devastating cuts that will impact people and services across my constituency.

10.19 am

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for requesting this debate. He was right to call for this debate because for far too long Governments in the UK and in Scotland have failed to work together, failed to create opportunity and failed to put Scotland's economy and people's wellbeing before party politics.

Regions such as Ayrshire power the country's economy through their vast coalfield site, but former coalfield sites right across the country have been left behind. If they were all to be combined, former coalfield sites in the UK would amount to the most deprived region in the country. Because of its unique history and landscape, Ayrshire has growth potential. We need to support the area by unlocking opportunities through more investment in skills infrastructure.

With Scotland at the heart of the UK Labour Government, our nation will lead the clean energy revolution. Ministers are already resetting relationships with the Scottish Government and working closely to ensure that these benefits are felt by Scots and people right across the UK. Scotland is a powerhouse of the clean energy mission, and GB Energy will drive forward investments in home-grown energy production and provide benefits to bill payers. In Ayrshire, we are keen to capture the spill-over effect from GB Energy's being based in Scotland. GB Energy is about creating opportunity for clean economic growth, and I will work hard to ensure those opportunities also reach my constituency.

With the Government's objective of doubling onshore wind energy by 2030, Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock hosts the largest wind farm currently under construction in the UK. The wind farm has embraced the community benefit model and will pump tens of millions into community projects over its lifetime. Growth in the clean energy economy is one aspect of the change that we need to deliver in our constituencies, but I agree with many of the points made about what this Government have already achieved in their first 100 days in office.

10.21 am

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank you for chairing this debate, Mr Dowd, and I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for bringing this important topic to Westminster Hall. I thank all colleagues for their contributions—we are definitely stronger together. Building on the talent and experience in Aberdeen, by developing new industries with the support of the best universities in the world, can only help us to secure investment for the future, using Scottish talent and supporting areas of our economy such as the hospitality industry.

Scottish Government figures show that 338,000 small and medium-sized enterprises operate in Scotland. Those SMEs have created an estimated 1.2 million jobs, or 56% of private sector employment, and 42% of private sector turnover as of March 2023. Despite their economic contributions, small businesses are in decline in Scotland.

Both the SNP Scottish Government and the previous Conservative UK Government have implemented policies that have resulted in high energy costs and a challenging economic environment, preventing SMEs from thriving.

The previous Conservative Government mishandled the economy and jeopardised public finances, which halted economic growth and increased the cost of our debt. Their bungled Brexit deal has harmed the economy and increased costs for businesses, with 38% of SMEs reporting that the UK's exit from the EU has been a major obstacle to their success. Further compounding these challenges, the SNP cut more than £23 million from net zero and energy spending, breaking its promises and reducing crucial investment in renewable energy infrastructure. That decision directly impacted opportunities to lower energy costs for businesses, despite the fact that 72% of SMEs identify energy expenses as a significant obstacle to their success.

In my Mid Dunbartonshire constituency, some small businesses are facing electricity standing charges of £16 a day. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce quarterly economic indicator for Q3 2024 highlights anxieties about taxation in Labour's autumn Budget. Pressures on cash flow and profit margins are already limiting growth and squeezing profits for businesses. Scotland, which hosts some of the largest wind farms in Europe, not only faces high energy costs for consumers, but fails to produce even a single wind turbine blade domestically. That fact is tied to the mismanagement of public contracts, including handing over £50 million to a firm that immediately collapsed, leaving no solution or recovery plan in place. Such setbacks not only undermine progress on renewable energy in Scotland, but limit the potential benefits for local businesses and communities.

Business and consumer confidence in Scotland is falling, but as a Liberal Democrat I am optimistic for Scotland's future. The Liberal Democrats are committed to investing in innovation and skills to boost economic growth and create good jobs. We want to invest in community health services and fix the crisis in social care to get more people back into work. We want to ensure stability, certainty and confidence in public finance, while reducing the national debt as a share of GDP and maintaining essential investments such as those into our green transition. Finally, we are dedicated to repairing our fractured relationship with the European Union, restoring the benefits it once gave to Scottish businesses as well as to individuals.

10.26 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) for bringing forward this important debate on the state of Scotland's economy. As he highlighted, there can be no doubt that Scotland's economy has suffered from 17 years of SNP rule. It is impossible for me to mention all the many contributors to this morning's debate, but I want to mention a few.

First, the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) rightly highlighted the multiple failures of the SNP over the last 17 years, not just in relation to economic policy, but in other areas too. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) talked about the importance of skills, particularly in

rural areas such as his, and the same applies in my own area in the Scottish borders. Another challenge we face in the borders is access to childcare, which prevents young women from going back to work.

Jamie Stone: Does the hon. Gentleman accept my point that these skills are ageing? We still have them but, if we do not pass them on, they could vanish and it will be much harder to train a new generation of welders and fabricators.

John Lamont: I totally agree. We need to invest in the skills we have; otherwise they will be lost, particularly for more traditional industries. If the skills are lost there, they might never return.

I do not often agree with the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), but she highlighted an important point about the gap that is emerging, with skills in the oil and gas sector potentially being lost if the renewable sector does not accelerate more quickly. Those in the sector up in the north-east, in Aberdeen, highlighted that point repeatedly during my time as a Minister. They were concerned that there was such a stigma attached to the oil and gas sector now that new people were not moving into that area and would not then be able to move over to the renewable sector when that opportunity arose.

Graeme Downie: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the failure of both the SNP and Conservative Governments to plan for the site at Longannet, which closed in 2016 and now lies empty, is a missed opportunity? Does he agree that all Governments in the future should be looking to work together on that, to bring thousands of jobs back to that area of west Fife?

John Lamont: I will push back slightly on the narrative that, up until the election of the new Government, the Scottish Government and the UK Government had not been working together on the project that the hon. Gentleman mentions, or on other areas. The reality is—as, again, I know from my own experience as a UK Government Minister—that there were huge amounts of co-operation between the Scottish Government and the UK Government latterly. Yes, we did not agree on the question of independence, but it is a myth to say that just because there is a new Prime Minister, a new Labour Government, all of a sudden there is a reset. I know the UK officials behind the scenes were working incredibly hard with officials in the Scottish Government to achieve the best for all of our communities; for all of us who represent Scottish constituencies. The project he highlights is an example where both Governments should be, and have been, working together to try to achieve positive outcomes.

The last Member I want to mention is the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur). I have to say I was very disappointed that he refused to oppose the new Labour Government's decision to scrap the supercomputer project for Edinburgh University. I know it was going to be a huge boost to the university. I know that even in my own area, again in the borders, there were a number of people directly employed with that project and they were mightily disappointed when the new Government decided to rip up that deal.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

John Lamont: I will make some progress, if I may, as I have taken a number of interventions.

Our workers and businesses have been poorly served by a nationalist Government who have too often been distracted from the day job and who have too often overlooked and sometimes even ignored what small businesses have said.

Let me outline how stark the situation has become. A recent survey by the Fraser of Allander Institute at the University of Strathclyde highlighted two key points. First, just 9% of Scottish firms agree that the Scottish Government understand the business environment in Scotland. Secondly, just 8% of businesses agree that the Scottish Government engage effectively with their sector. Those statistics should have been a wake-up call for the SNP to reset its relationship with the business community. It has been promising that reset for years, but it simply has not happened and the consequences are now becoming clear.

Compared with 10 years ago, the Scottish economy has also grown more slowly than the United Kingdom's economy overall. GDP in Scotland is 8.4% larger in quarter 2 of 2024 compared with in quarter 2 of 2014, whereas UK GDP is 14.3% higher. Although the nationalists may try to claim an excuse by citing different population-based figures, the Fraser of Allander Institute have already dismantled that, too. Its most recent economic commentary found that,

“even when the differential population growth in the UK and Scotland is accounted for...growth in Scotland per person over the last 10 years has been 6% for the UK, compared to 4.3% for Scotland”.

It is crystal clear that ever since the independence referendum, Scotland has suffered from an SNP slowdown. The SNP's damaging business policies and harmful decision to bring the Greens, who do not even believe in economic growth, into government has cost our country dearly. Scotland's economy is crying out for something different, but it is not happening at the moment. Labour and the SNP offer only more of the same old ideas. John Swinney and Anas Sarwar favour most of the same policies. They both want higher taxes on workers. They both expect businesses to pick up the bill for a bigger state. They have the same socialist ideology that has failed Scotland for decades.

The left-wing parties in the Scottish Parliament have become disconnected from the lives of normal people. They spend too much time on divisive policies and fringe obsessions like gender reform and they do not spend enough time, energy, and resources on driving Scotland's economy forward. Scottish Conservatives are proudly standing up against that left-wing consensus of the political establishment in Scotland. Scotland's workers, businesses and indeed our entire economy need a different approach. They need a new way forward.

Tracy Gilbert: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that the new deal for working people would lift hundreds and thousands of families out of poverty, and that can only be good for Scotland?

John Lamont: I am grateful for that intervention. I did not quite catch the first point, but the previous Government had a proud record of improving the lives

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of people across the length and breadth of Scotland by lifting people and families—and children in particular—out of poverty. That is a record the previous Government are rightly proud of.

I wait to hear what the new Government are going to do, and what the Budget will contain. I know from businesses, many communities and residents that there is a great fear of higher tax and more money going out of people's pockets, which will do nothing to deal with poverty in many communities the length and breadth of Scotland.

The Scottish Conservatives are determined to deliver the stronger economic growth our country desperately needs. Under our new leader, Russell Findlay, the Scottish Conservatives will put forward a positive vision for the future of our country that champions the values of mainstream Scotland—opportunity, aspiration and decency. We will present positive new policies to fire up Scotland's economic growth, create opportunities for workers and businesses, and reward aspiration with lower taxation.

10.34 am

Martin McCluskey (Inverclyde and Renfrewshire West) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Mr Dowd, to serve under your chairmanship and speak on behalf of the Government for the first time. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) on securing this debate on Scotland's economy and congratulating all hon. Members on their contributions.

We have heard a lot about the positives and the potential of Scotland's economy, such as the strength of Brand Scotland and our thriving biosciences sector; we have even heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) about our thriving film and TV sector. I am sure the crowds here today are just as great as that which turned out to welcome Colin Firth to Bathgate. However, we have also heard about the problems in the Scottish economy, and it is no secret that—along with the UK economy as a whole—it is underperforming. This has been identified by many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Gregor Poynton) and the hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray).

Fourteen years of mismanagement by the previous Government has resulted in persistently low levels of investment, poor productivity growth and rising inequality. That has led to this Government facing the worst economic inheritance since the second world war—a £22 billion black hole in the public finances. The Treasury reserves were spent three times over in three months, which is absolutely astonishing, and financial commitments were made by the previous Government that they knew they could not keep. That inheritance means tough decisions for the Government, but it is better to be honest and up front with people about the choices that we face. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will set out in her budget how we will fix the foundations of our economy so that we can tackle poverty, rebuild our public services and begin a decade of national renewal.

The economic inheritance we face is not just fiscal. It is also structural. My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor have made clear that the No. 1 priority of this Government

is growth. To achieve that, the foundations of Scotland's industrial economy need to change significantly. That is why we published our industrial strategy Green Paper yesterday. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid) about the importance of industrial strategy, and how it is not just dry, but something that really makes an impact on people's lives.

Jim Shannon: I wish the hon. Member well, and hope that things go according to his plans and all our plans. In my contribution, I mentioned the interconnector between Scotland and Northern Ireland as a potential way to reduce energy and help us to grow together economically. I know he may not be able to respond to that point now, but perhaps he could come back to me at a later date. If so, I thank him.

Martin McCluskey: I thank the hon Member for his intervention, and for the points he made about the importance of working together—not just between the UK and Scottish Governments, but across these islands. I will ensure that officials write to him on that point.

Our industrial strategy calls time on short-term economic policy making, and establishes a UK industrial council on a statutory footing, to provide expert advice and long-term thinking.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Can my hon. Friend confirm that his industrial strategy—and indeed GB Energy and our clean energy revolution—are not merely theoretical? They are working practically in the United States, the fastest growing economy in the G7, and are creating jobs in those former industrial areas. Indeed, this Labour Government will help to bring that about in Scotland, creating good jobs in those areas that need it most.

Martin McCluskey: I welcome that comment from my hon. Friend, and also congratulate him on his election to the Treasury Committee, where I am sure he will make a great contribution. He has set out exactly what the plans the Government have set out will do for Scotland, and the aspirations and ambition of those plans for our country.

Returning to the UK industrial strategy council, this body will work with specialist sectoral taskforces, and bring together the expertise of businesses, academics, and trade unions to help drive economic growth in all parts of our country. That will allow us to build on Scotland's strengths and huge potential in key sectors, including advanced manufacturing, life sciences, financial services, clean energy, defence, and creative industries—all areas where Scotland is already beginning to thrive. Together with the establishment of GB Energy in Aberdeen, which the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) highlighted in her speech, and the creation of a national wealth fund, we will bring investment, jobs, and growth to Scotland.

Graeme Downie: Does the Minister agree that a key area for investment from the national wealth fund should be Scotland's port infrastructure in order to ensure we are making the best economic use of our coastline, such as at places like Rosyth in my constituency?

Martin McCluskey: Ports are essential to the future of our country, and coming from a constituency with an important and thriving port, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

We are taking tough decisions, but change is under way and investment is now flowing into the country. Just yesterday, as many hon. Members have mentioned, the international investment summit brought the chief executives of hundreds of the world's biggest companies to the United Kingdom. They announced £63 billion of investment and 38,000 jobs for the UK. The companies included Scottish Power and its parent company Iberdrola, which doubled their investment in the UK from £12 billion to £24 billion, and Greenvolt, which announced a £2.5 billion investment in Scotland. That will benefit the whole country.

Jamie Stone: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment; I am sure he will do a very good job indeed. I may be a Liberal Democrat, but I recognise that one of the greatest achievements for the highlands of the 1960s Labour Government was the establishment of the Highlands and Islands development board, which did a great deal to reverse depopulation. Today, under the auspices of the Scottish Government, Highlands and Islands Enterprise—its successor body—is a shadow of its ancestor. I wonder whether the Minister would agree to talk to the Scotland Secretary to see how, working with the Scottish Government, we can revitalise HIE.

Martin McCluskey: I understand the importance of the Highlands and Islands development board. My partner's grandfather arrived in Scotland only because he was the chief engineer in the Cruachan power station. That part of my family is here because of the work of the Highlands and Islands development board, so I make the commitment to the hon. Member to speak to the Secretary of State about those issues.

Delivering significant change to Scotland's economy means working in partnership across areas of policy, not just industrial policy and employment rights but planning, housing, skills and access to health services. Many of these areas are devolved, and we are committed to resetting the relationship between the UK and Scottish Governments. That does not mean that we will never disagree, but where we have shared goals, we should be able to work together. The Secretary of State for Scotland has already begun working with the Energy Secretary, Gillian Martin, and Deputy First Minister Kate Forbes on a range of issues since coming to office.

One of those issues, which was mentioned by both my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow East and for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), was universities. I would agree with them that universities are a jewel in the crown of the Scottish economy. They drive innovation, create jobs and new businesses and deliver world-leading research and education. I know that the universities sector will be crucial to the future of the Scottish economy.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I have learned a lot today about this great new relationship, and I wish the hon. Gentleman all the best with that, but the universities sector is a very difficult area. In Scotland a cap has effectively been placed on the number

of Scottish pupils able to leave school and go to university, while foreign students are incentivised. The universities sector in Scotland has a fine past, but does it have a great future?

Martin McCluskey: I would say that it does have a great future. I am not dismissing the fact that there are issues within the Scottish universities sector, which many of my hon. Friends laid out during the debate, but there is huge potential for the future of the sector and it is for not only the Scottish Government but the UK Government to make sure that it is realised. In terms of our relationship and working together, what we saw from the previous Government was a stand-off, and I do not think that works to the benefit of the people of Scotland. What the majority of Scots want to see are their two Governments working together to deliver better results.

Frank McNally: I welcome the Minister to his place. We have been talking about universities, but there is also a significant challenge in Scotland with the decimation of further education, particularly colleges. This is creating real challenges for people who are looking to upskill and reskill, and we must ensure that the people who are best placed to secure the jobs of the future are able to do so. Does the Minister agree that much more needs to be done by the Scottish Government to ensure that further education in Scotland gets the support that it deserves?

Martin McCluskey: I agree. I know from experience in my own constituency with James Watt college in Greenock—now part of West College Scotland—that there have been issues with investment in colleges. That largely impacts on opportunities for working-class young people, and for people who perhaps did not get the results that they wanted at school and need a second chance. The college sector always provided that for people, but at the moment it is struggling to do so in many places across Scotland.

Gregor Poynton: My hon. Friend talked the importance of the university sector to Scotland, and that is clear. I have two points on that. First, yesterday's industrial strategy is welcome. This is about how we support scale-ups and start-ups coming out of our Scottish universities. There are already great examples in my constituency of Livingston, but also across Scotland. However, more work needs to be done to help them and to ensure that the great thinking that is going on in universities can come to be more commercial.

Secondly, I have been told by many people that there is not the same access to finance, and oftentimes these companies are either bought up or have to look to move to America. The work that the UK Government are doing to create a stable environment and to involve the City of London, as part of the UK, to try to unlock some of the £3 trillion in pension funds to invest in these scale-ups is incredibly important. It is important not just that we start them in Scotland, but that we can grow them to a significant scale.

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming the launch of the industrial strategy yesterday. It is important that we ensure that any opportunities from the university sector are spread right across the country, and that is what my right hon. Friend the

[*Martin McCluskey*]

Chancellor of the Exchequer is trying to do with the national wealth fund. Our university sector in Scotland is also trying to make sure that the opportunities from universities and those start-ups are pushed out beyond universities' borders. My hon. Friend's point about access to finance is important. The Government are trying to provide a stable economic environment, which we did not have under the previous Government. That gives investors confidence, as we saw yesterday when we doubled the amount that was invested in the UK at the global conference last year. That is testament to the confidence that business now has in the UK because of our stable political environment.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the recently released Scottish Government industry statistics reveal worrying trends in Scotland's food and drink sector, with output in the food and drink sector falling, employment falling and businesses failing? Those figures are absolutely scandalous. Both the SNP and the Tory Government failed to support Scotland's world-class food and drink industry adequately. In my constituency of West Dunbartonshire, the whisky industry is a significant employer, so will food and drink be a key growth industry identified in our Government's blueprint for growth, thereby maximising Brand Scotland and job opportunities in West Dunbartonshire?

Martin McCluskey: The food and drink sector will play a crucial role in the future of the Scottish economy. I am referring not just to the whisky sector, which my hon. Friend has mentioned and which I know he plays a key role in championing through the Scotch whisky all-party parliamentary group, but to other sectors, such as our great salmon sector. There are a lot of other opportunities in food, drink and tourism whereby the Scottish economy can thrive in years to come.

One area of Scotland's economy on which the Governments have worked closely together in recent months has been the response to the commercial decision of Petroineos to end oil refining at Grangemouth. The oil refining operation has played an important role in Grangemouth's economy for more than 100 years. However, as a clear sign of how we can work together for the Scottish people, the UK and Scottish Governments have announced a joint £100 million package to help to secure Grangemouth's industrial future and protect its skilled workforce. Scotland has a proud industrial past, as we have heard from many hon. Members this morning, and, as part of the transition to net zero, it will have a bright industrial future, and one that will guarantee jobs and wealth for families for generations to come.

Kirsty Blackman: In relation to that transition, while the hon. Gentleman is in the mood for making commitments, will he commit to speaking to the Chancellor about the Scottish carbon capture cluster and the fact that it is looking for an outward show of confidence from the Government? I am not asking him to push for money today, but positivity about progressing the Scottish cluster for carbon capture would be incredibly helpful for the industry.

Martin McCluskey: We saw last week the Government's commitment to carbon capture and storage. I am happy to take those points away and ensure that they are communicated to the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Chancellor.

The Government's focus on growth is in the service of our mission to tackle poverty, remove barriers to opportunity and put the country back in the service of working people. It is appalling that under the previous Government, child poverty in the UK went up by 700,000 since 2010. Today, more than one in five Scots and one in four children are trapped in poverty, trying to get by on less than they need.

The child poverty taskforce, which this Government have established, is developing a strategy to reduce child poverty that will be published in the spring of next year. The previous UK Labour Government oversaw huge falls in poverty levels across the UK. It is what Labour Governments do—it is in our DNA—and we will do it again.

The vital work of the taskforce comes alongside the Government's commitment to make work pay. Last week, we published the Employment Rights Bill, the biggest upgrade of workers' rights in a generation. I welcome the comments from a number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Coatbridge and Bellshill (Frank McNally) and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert), supporting this agenda and how it will impact on their constituents.

This Government are calling time on unfair employment practices by ending exploitative zero hours contracts, introducing day-one employment rights and establishing a new fair work agency to enforce workers' rights. That is all part of our plan to deliver economic growth for workers, businesses and local communities, right across the UK. As we have heard from others this morning, this Labour Government are pro-worker and pro-business, so these reforms will not just help Scottish workers but boost Scottish businesses of all sizes. We are going to tackle head-on the low pay, poor working conditions and job insecurity that have been holding our country back. Our plan will grow our economy, tackle in-work poverty and raise living standards for all.

We recognise that rebuilding our public services and economy will require investment, and the Chancellor has been clear that there will be no return to austerity. I want to emphasise that point: she has said numerous times that there will be no return to austerity. Although funding decisions and details will be presented at the upcoming Budget, the UK Government are committed to retaining the Barnett formula and funding arrangements agreed with the Scottish Government in the fiscal framework.

The framework provides the Scottish Government with greater certainty and flexibility to manage devolved public services, as well as higher per person spending. That does not remove the need for both Governments to take tough decisions to look after the public finances and stabilise the Scottish economy.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): One of the challenges we have had in the Scottish economy in recent years is a gap between rhetoric and reality. For example, in the creative sector, which is based heavily in my constituency, the Scottish Government

produced 10 strategies in nine months. That means that the creative industries just serve as a backdrop for photo opportunities for Scottish Government Ministers, who do not engage with the deep challenges and opportunities that the sector faces. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are finally making the correct response, which is to be honest with the public about the financial challenges that we face, and then to deal with the foundational difficulties in order to grow from there?

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Since he arrived here in July, he has been a significant champion of the creative industries and the arts. The example he gave of 10 strategies in nine months illustrates the kind of short-term uncertainty that has reduced investment in our economy. People did not get the certainty they required during the previous Conservative and SNP Holyrood Governments.

It is clear that Scotland's economy faces challenges, but it is also brimming with potential. We are up to tackling those challenges and unleashing that potential. In our first 100 days, we have made significant progress in resetting the relationship with the Scottish Government. We have listened to the views of businesses and communities across the country, and we have set out a clear path to create the change that we were elected to deliver.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I call John Grady to wind up.

10.54 am

John Grady: Thank you, Mr Dowd, and I thank every Member for their wonderful contributions to the discussion. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the interconnector between Scotland and Northern Ireland; I worked on the first interconnector between Scotland and Northern Ireland as a baby lawyer. It was a great passion of Mo Mowlam. The Labour party has always backed great infrastructure projects that deliver growth for all in our family of nations. The interconnector delivered a secure supply of energy to Northern Ireland and a great outlet for Northern Irish renewables. This time around, the Labour party is absolutely committed to resolving the blockers on electricity transmission

development, so that we can get energy projects up and running quicker. We need clean energy supplying British people and businesses with lower-cost energy.

Inflation is the enemy of small businesses. The hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) was quite right to focus on small businesses, which are a real motor for growth for a modern economy. We all recall the terrible 40 or 50 days of a Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng Government, which brought immense damage not just to small businesses in Scotland, but to social landlords trying to plan their investments, facing unpredictable interest rates and out-of-control inflation.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride and Strathaven (Joani Reid) focused rightly on the implications of poor economic policy and fiscal management for our wonderful towns and cities in Scotland. The mismanagement of the economy has terrible implications for people trying to educate their children and get treated, with more than 40% of certain operations—such as hip operations—in Scotland carried out privately because the NHS does not have capacity. Economic growth is critical.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Gregor Poynton) mentioned the importance of Governments working together when we face industrial challenges. I applaud the Secretary of State's work in trying to create a productive, closer working relationship with the Scottish Government. We will always put country above party. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert), representing a wonderful part of the world, mentioned employment rights. We are focused on giving people a fair employment.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) mentioned how wonderful Aberdeen is. It is a wonderful city, as my mother used to tell me every day of the week. We take the energy transition very seriously, which is one of the reasons why we are so disappointed that the SNP are spending the one-off ScotWind receipt not on energy transition, but on plugging a black hole created by their economic mismanagement. I close my remarks by thanking you, Mr Dowd, for your wonderful chairing of the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Scotland's economy.

Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner

11 am

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I will call Robin Swann to move the motion and I will then call 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.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, in this Westminster Hall debate—the first that I am sponsoring. I want to take this time to cover a number of points, the first being how these things came about and the need for them, the second being the current situation and why I have secured this debate, and the third being recommendations to the Minister as to how the office should be delivered to benefit our veteran community in Northern Ireland.

The New Decade, New Approach document, co-authored by the British and Irish Governments in January 2020, saw the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly after a three-year period in which it had failed to meet or establish an Executive. Under annexe A, which covered the UK Government's commitments to Northern Ireland, there was a section entitled "Our commitments to veterans", which contained four points. The first was:

"Introduce UK-wide legislation to further incorporate the Armed Forces Covenant into law and support full implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant."

The second was:

"Appoint a Northern Ireland Veterans' Commissioner to act as an independent point of contact to support and enhance outcomes for veterans in Northern Ireland."

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman on his first Westminster Hall debate. It is clear that we have much to thank Danny Kinahan for; he is a man of integrity and a veteran himself, and his footsteps will be difficult to follow. One of the overarching themes from discussions with veterans as individuals and in groups has been the vital need for a replacement and that the replacement is themselves a victim. We do not desire a civil servant with experience of holding a pen, when only those who have experienced holding a weapon and wearing a uniform can know how we feel and what we need. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that must be the case?

Robin Swann: To clarify, the hon. Gentleman means a veteran—that is the point that has been made very vocally by the veterans community.

The third point in the annexe was:

"Initiate a review of the Aftercare Service in Northern Ireland (ACS) which will consider whether the remit of the ACS should be widened to cover all HM Forces veterans living in Northern Ireland with service-related injuries and conditions."

The fourth was:

"Ensure that the work of the War Memorials Trust who protect and conserve war memorials across the UK is better promoted and understood in Northern Ireland."

In August 2020, the then Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis, announced that the former Ulster Unionist MP Danny Kinahan had been appointed as Northern Ireland's

first Veterans Commissioner. In the spirit of transparency, it should be noted that Mr Kinahan was my party's previous MP in the seat that I now represent. His appointment was welcomed across the board. The then leader of the DUP, now Baroness Foster, said his appointment was a

"positive and long overdue step toward ensuring the needs of Northern Ireland's large and vibrant demographic of armed forces veterans are practically understood and addressed".

She added that

"he brings a wealth of experience to the role and I know he will be keen to embrace the huge in-tray that awaits".

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. Does he agree that the pressing need for a commissioner was exemplified just this weekend in the national press, where the issue of the late Captain Robert Nairac was highlighted? It is also exemplified in the ongoing problems veterans face, with many of them having witnessed horrific and terrible incidents and still living with their thoughts about them.

Robin Swann: The hon. Member makes a valid point. I asked a question of the Northern Ireland Office on 12 December about the appointment, and the answer I got was:

"We will set out steps for the appointment of a new Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner in due course."

We are now almost a month on from that.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Surely the greatest deficiency is the fact that there is no statutory basis for the Veterans Commissioner? If we are going to secure the long-term future of the essential provision that a Veterans Commissioner can offer, surely we need to have it on a statutory basis, as elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Is that not the most important step that the Government could take moving forward?

Robin Swann: I thank the hon. Member for his point, and I will come to it later when I quote him in regards to the concerns that were raised when Mr Kinahan resigned.

On Mr Kinahan's appointment, the leader of the Ulster Unionist party at that stage, Dr Steve Aiken, said that it

"will be warmly welcomed by all veterans and the wider armed forces community across all of Northern Ireland",

that Mr Kinahan would

"be a first-rate advocate for the many thousands here who have served"

and that

"by his appointment we have at long last joined the rest of the United Kingdom in providing that very necessary representation."

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. Having heard the comments of the former leaders of the DUP and the Ulster Unionists, it is important to place on record our appreciation for the work that Danny engaged in. He did not work in a party political way, but rose to the occasion as a veterans-first commissioner and a champion for veterans. Having worked with him throughout his time in the role, I think the hon. Member will come on to some important deficits and deficiencies, in terms of not only how the role was hampered and constrained

by the Northern Ireland Office and the appointing Department, but how it lacked the resource that would have allowed the commissioner to engage properly with anything more than about a 10th of veterans in Northern Ireland.

Robin Swann: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention—believe it or not, I was going to quote him later as well, but he has pre-empted that. Trust me, we are making cross-community representations to the Minister and the Northern Ireland Office.

Moving on from the warm words of congratulation on Mr Kinahan's appointment, we are here today because, unfortunately, on 5 September—four years after the role was created, and having been reappointed for a second term—Mr Kinahan issued a statement announcing his resignation, which came as a surprise to some. It said:

"I can confirm that I have today resigned from my position as Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner.

Following an open and frank conversation with the Secretary of State, I have sadly concluded that I cannot provide the independent voice that veterans require.

There is a feeling among some veterans in Northern Ireland that they have been forgotten and that they do not enjoy the same protections as their counterparts in Great Britain.

Veterans in Northern Ireland have particular needs and concerns which need to be addressed by the UK Government, which I have made very clear in our discussions."

In closing, Danny said:

"Finally, I would like to place on record my gratitude to all those who have placed their trust in me and assisted me with my work over the last four years. I will continue to work in their interests where I can."

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. Does he agree that it is essential to empower the Veterans Commissioner and strengthen their authority, and that any enhancement is crucial to effectively protect and promote the interests of our veterans?

Robin Swann: I do agree with the hon. Member, and I will expand on that in my later comments.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly, Lord Elliott, then Ulster Unionist Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, said that Mr Kinahan's resignation impacted directly on the veterans community and on the support available to veterans in Northern Ireland. He went on to say that Mr Kinahan

"cited an inability to: 'provide the independent voice that veterans require', which underscores a critical development in how veterans' affairs are managed in Northern Ireland."

Speaking of Mr Kinahan's resignation, he said:

"That recent event has sparked widespread concern across the veterans community and beyond, making it a matter of immediate relevance...the recent loss of the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office...underscores an alarming development that could lead to a gap in support. Given the sacrifices made by veterans, any perceived failure in providing adequate support is of exceptional public interest and requires immediate attention by the Assembly and the Northern Ireland Office."

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), the leader of Traditional Unionist Voice, said that Danny Kinahan

"performed the role in very challenging circumstances and now is an opportunity for the Government to address fundamental issues before appointing a successor."

As he said in his intervention:

"The role of Veterans' Commissioner must be put into a statutory basis and Government must provide proper resources and a structure."

He also pointed out something crucial:

"Something not widely known is that the post of Veterans' Commissioner is currently only a part time role with just two staff. By way of contrast, the Victims' Commissioner role is full time with a staff of seven.

Many veteran issues in Northern Ireland still need to be resolved. The previous government had a draft bill to align all the veterans' commissioners across the UK and put the posts on a statutory basis...The new Labour Government needs to take this forward".

The right hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), the leader of the DUP, said:

"Veterans throughout Northern Ireland and our party's Veterans champions in local councils recognise the commitment"

displayed by Danny Kinahan.

So why the debate today? Why did the Veterans Commissioner for Northern Ireland come to the decision that he did? To sum up some of Mr Kinahan's points from a meeting with him, the most significant issue facing the Veterans Commissioner is the lack of operational independence. The commissioner is restricted to part-time status, limiting their ability to fulfil the broad responsibilities of the role. The two staff members are assigned by the Northern Ireland Office and selected without input from the commissioner, reporting directly to the NIO, not the commissioner, which he felt undermined the commissioner's authority to lead and manage the office.

The commissioner also faced considerable limitations in staffing decisions—for example, office staff were even empowered to propose bonus awards for themselves, rather than the commissioner initiating them. He requested a formal appraisal process to assess staff performance to address areas of improvement. That was not implemented, leaving him powerless to manage the office effectively.

The structural limitations imposed have transformed the role of commissioner into that of a figurehead: while the commissioner is the public face of veteran advocacy in Northern Ireland, Mr Kinahan felt that decision making was dominated by the Northern Ireland Office, rendering the commissioner's role largely symbolic. He said that he also struggled to ensure that the Secretary of State received full, unedited reports, which he felt undermined the commissioner's ability to influence policy effectively.

How do those concerns impact the role of the commissioner? The identification of support for veterans is inadequate. One of the commissioner's primary responsibilities is to identify veterans and ensure that they receive appropriate public services. Northern Ireland does not have a comprehensive database of veterans, and no questions were included in the recent census to identify our veterans. The commissioner repeatedly raised the need for door-to-door leafleting to inform veterans of available support. As a result, he estimated that only between 5,000 and 10,000 of the 120,000 veterans in Northern Ireland are in contact with support services. That failure to engage veterans is a direct consequence of NIO involvement in the operations of the commissioner's office and a refusal to allocate resources to key initiatives.

[Robin Swann]

It should also be acknowledged that the 40,000 veterans who served in the Ulster Defence Regiment under constant threat, which continued after their service ended, face different challenges and are now mostly at an age where a local focus is required.

On health services for veterans, the commissioner identified significant challenges in veterans accessing healthcare, particularly those in long-term pain awaiting surgery. He put forward a proposal for partnership with NHS England and King Edward VII's hospital to provide veterans with faster access to surgery to achieve the commitments of the armed forces covenant and the Government. But he felt that that initiative was hampered, maybe by the over-application of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The commissioner also expressed concern about the closure of our Veterans Support Office. That closure is a stark example of how veterans' support in Northern Ireland has been undermined. The VSO was a trusted and, again, independent organisation that provided centralised support for veterans, and its closure has left a significant gap in services. The commissioner's views were neither considered nor consulted in the making of the decision, which seems to have been driven by the NIO and by the Office for Veterans' Affairs.

The concerns raised were also brought forward in the independent review of UK Government welfare services for veterans, published in July 2023. There were several key Northern Ireland recommendations. Recommendation 8 stated:

"A formal welfare services governance board should be created," which should include Ministry of Defence officials "and the Veterans' Commissioners for Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland."

Recommendation 27 stated:

"Consideration to retaining the NIVSO brand, alongside that of the OVA, should be given."

In conclusion, I will move to four recommendations for the future. These changes are essential to restoring the effectiveness of the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner and ensuring the office can fulfil its intended role. The first is to establish the full independence of the office. Commissioners' offices must be fully independent from the NIO, with direct control over staffing, budgeting and decision making. The second is to increase the time allocation from the commissioner, from a part-time role to a full-time role, or at least to a more significant time allocation. The third is to reinstate the VSO as an independent and trusted body, with the commissioner playing a key role in shaping its service. The fourth and final recommendation is to improve reporting and communication. The commissioner should have the authority to submit reports directly to the Secretary of State and the ability to engage directly with relevant Ministers and Departments. That is why I have brought this debate and make these recommendations.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. This is my first time responding to a Westminster Hall debate for the Government and I am delighted that it is on this issue;

my grandfather was from Northern Ireland and served in the British Army, so this debate is very close to my heart. I am so grateful for his service and the service of all veterans.

I congratulate the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) on securing this important debate—his first Westminster Hall debate as well—and on his work to improve support for veterans in Northern Ireland over many years, including reconvening the Armed Forces Liaison Forum when he was Minister of Health for Northern Ireland. I know he is deeply committed to ensuring that veterans in his constituency, and indeed right across the UK, receive all the recognition they deserve and the support to which they are entitled. It is a commitment shared by this Government and, I am sure, by all in this Chamber—

Gavin Robinson: I appreciate that the Minister is here today and speaks with a personal connection to this story. She will know that the commitments in NDNA were important and represented work done in the Defence Select Committee and through private Members' Bills to make sure veterans in Northern Ireland had a strong voice, as their counterparts across the United Kingdom do. She should also know that the last number of years have proven very difficult for veterans, with the closure of the VSO and with the feeling that they are not treated the same as their counterparts across the UK. Does she understand that the most important initial step she could take would be to confirm that the NIO will advertise the position of Veterans Commissioner? Doing that now would indicate a commitment to that support.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. This is a half-hour debate. I accept that people are intervening on a very important matter, but I ask Members to be careful and considerate with their interventions in such debates.

Fleur Anderson: Thank you, Mr Dowd. I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. In fact, my next sentence was going to be one that will please him greatly, I think. I was about to say: which is why we have moved very quickly to advertise the position of the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner. In fact it will be advertised this week, with all the details available. This debate is therefore extremely timely and can serve as a very long job advertisement for the position. I hope that many people who listen to this debate, or read it in *Hansard*, will consider applying for this position. It is such an important position and one on which we have moved extremely quickly as a Government, demonstrating our commitment to supporting veterans.

Jim Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Fleur Anderson: If I keep giving way, I will not have enough time to speak, so I think I will continue.

Mr Kinahan was appointed by the previous Government, which established the role of the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner. I join the Secretary of State in expressing my gratitude for Mr Kinahan's dedicated work over the last four years on behalf of veterans and their families living in Northern Ireland. As has been said, it was one of the commitments made as part of the

New Decade, New Approach political agreement in January 2020, which helped to restore devolved Government in Northern Ireland.

As set out in New Decade, New Approach, the commissioner's role was

“to act as an independent point of contact to support and enhance outcomes for veterans in Northern Ireland.”

Danny Kinahan, himself a veteran and subsequently an elected representative in Northern Ireland, took up the role on 1 September 2020. Over the last four years the commissioner and his team have worked to deliver that important support for veterans in Northern Ireland. Their work conducting direct veteran engagements and veteran information roadshows across Northern Ireland has been particularly valuable, as has their establishment of a veterans mental health committee, involving a number of key mental health service providers for veterans.

The commissioner was also involved in encouraging collaborative working with the veterans sector, working closely with veterans commissioners in Scotland and Wales, with regimental associations and with the voluntary sector. He also sought to ensure that Northern Ireland veterans' views were heard in my Department and across Whitehall with regard to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and the development of the Independent Commission on Information Recovery and Reconciliation.

In delivering its role, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office works closely with a range of local statutory and non-statutory stakeholders. Previously that included the Veterans Support Office, which was formed in 2018 to develop capacity to deliver the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland and played a role in co-ordinating and signposting to charity provision. It closed in June this year, as the way that support for veterans is provided in Northern Ireland continues to evolve.

Many of the functions of the Veterans Support Office had over time been replicated by other organisations or superseded by other initiatives. That includes the establishment of the Veterans Commissioner's Office, which now plays a leading role in communicating with and championing the needs of veterans resident in Northern Ireland, as well as building connections with partners delivering support to veterans across Northern Ireland.

The Office for Veterans' Affairs has additionally created a new role, based in Belfast, to provide dedicated strategic co-ordination of organisations, programmes and initiatives that support veterans' wellbeing in Northern Ireland. That post will become operational imminently and is a post that is evolving to continue to support veterans.

This is a Government of service that will always stand up for those who have served our country. My hon. Friend and colleague the Minister for Veterans and People is leading work across Government and with civil society to ensure that our veterans and their families get access to the health, housing, employment and other support that they need, wherever they reside in the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland specifically, the specialist statutory welfare body for veterans, the Veterans Welfare Service, provides information and practical support to veterans and their families, including timely physiotherapy and psychological therapies to eligible veterans.

The £500,000 Defence Medical Welfare Service pilot additionally supports veterans' health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland and provides insight that will improve our understanding of veterans' health needs. Veterans in need of housing advice, meanwhile, can contact the Government's single housing support pathway, Operation FORTITUDE, where a dedicated team of advisers works to assist veterans across the UK.

The armed forces covenant continues to be a key Government priority, with a commitment to fully implement the covenant in law. It ensures that the armed forces community is treated fairly across the UK, including in Northern Ireland, although its delivery is approached differently there due to Northern Ireland's unique historical and political circumstances.

As the hon. Member for South Antrim mentioned, at the beginning of September the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner met the Secretary of State, who accepted his resignation. Mr Kinahan explained his reasoning, and it has been reiterated publicly. I join the Secretary of State in expressing my gratitude for Mr Kinahan's dedicated work. I am delighted that we started work immediately on the appointment of the new Veterans Commissioner—I hope that will begin tomorrow, but maybe later this week.

The appointment of the new Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner will be made on merit by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, following open and transparent process, which includes public advertising and independent assessment. Again, I encourage all suitably experienced people to apply for this important role. In the meantime, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner's Office has engaged and will continue to engage with veterans, signposting them to support, including while the new Veterans Commissioner is appointed. Indeed, I believe the office was involved in a successful event last month at Parliament Buildings in Belfast, which recognised and celebrated Northern Ireland veterans' service in Iraq and Afghanistan, and which was sponsored by the hon. Gentleman's party colleague, Lord Elliott.

In addition, the Government are committed to continuing to support veterans in Northern Ireland through the Veterans Welfare Service, which has field teams across Northern Ireland linked in with various partner organisations and statutory bodies, and with the different initiatives funded via the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. That includes the Veterans' Places, Pathways and People programme, known as the Veterans' Pathway in Northern Ireland, which is led by the charity Brooke House and does excellent work on improving the co-ordination of mental health support to veterans among partner organisations locally. The charity Beyond the Battlefield was also awarded £100,000 in March 2024 to provide wraparound services for veterans in Northern Ireland who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

I have listened carefully to the points the hon. Gentleman made about the basis for the role, including the ability to communicate, with veterans, health support and the other issues. I am pleased that he has raised those, and I am sure they will be read by any applicants for the role and by the future Veterans Commissioner once they are appointed.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. The role of the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner is an important element of the

[Fleur Anderson]

support provided to veterans across a wide range of areas that I have already detailed, in recognition of their service to our country. Let me once again encourage everyone who is suitably experienced to apply for the post, and reiterate that this Government recognise the dedicated service of all our veterans and are committed to supporting the veteran community across the whole of the United Kingdom. This is a Government of service that will always stand up for those who have served our country, and we will continue to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

Renewable Energy Projects: Community Benefits

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered community benefits from renewable energy projects.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. In all our careers, we have seen extraordinary changes, such as the advent of the internet, artificial intelligence and mobile phones. Going back 50 years, in the early stages of many of our lives, we had the North sea oil boom. The oil boom was extraordinary for many countries, not least Norway, which has saved US \$1.7 trillion from it. Great Britain saved none of that money, however, and I am worried that we will save none of the money from the extraordinary renewables boom that is coming our way.

One of the biggest systemic changes in our life is happening right now: the move from fossil fuels to renewables. Many billions of pounds are being made, a huge number of jobs are being created and cheap electricity is being generated, but it is overseas companies, with overseas ownership of renewables projects, that we are seeing all over the UK. Precious little of the money ends up in the hands of the people who are being impacted by those projects.

The issue I have with these renewables projects, whether solar, wind, pumped storage or whatever, is that they are in rural areas. The locals suffer the visual impact, and we have all seen miles and miles of 200-metre-high wind turbines and field after field, sometimes of prime land, covered in solar panels. Villagers—people—have to face those industrial projects, and we really need to take them with us on this net zero journey.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I represent roughly 1,500 farmers in Westmorland. All of them, pretty much, have water flowing through their fields and their land—often very quickly—but few of them take advantage of hydroelectricity, which could be a source of cross-subsidisation for farming, while also creating important renewable energy for our communities as a whole. Does my hon. Friend think that hydro-technology, in particular on farmland, is a great way forward? We can farm and produce renewable energy at the same time.

Mr MacDonald: Micro-renewables are the way ahead, and the more micro the better. Whether that is a solar thing on a roof or hydro for a farm, I could not support it more.

In 2023, as part of research in a written submission to Parliament, Octopus Energy showed that 87% of people would support a turbine in their community if it decreased their bills.

Now, I do not blame the landowner; these projects can allow farmers to retain the land in their family for generations to come. In some way, it is like discovering oil or gold on their land, and it is great that our bountiful wind and rain can be such an asset for us, especially in an era when coal is inaccessible and unacceptable, nuclear

is being phased out, and gas is often imported from countries with an unacceptable moral standing, while also badly hitting our balance of payments and being environmentally unfriendly to transport to Britain. Renewables are absolutely the future.

The 68 million people in the UK are enormous beneficiaries of our renewables sectors, but the cost is borne by a fraction of that number—by those living in the remotest areas. Those of us in the Chamber represent populations who pay a 50% premium on electricity connection fees compared with those living in cities. The same people are not connected to mains gas, and therefore pay a great deal to have tankers deliver heating oil to their houses.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. As he will know, we are talking about fairness to communities. One of the unfair issues in terms of communities and the cost of electricity is standing charges, whereby households in north Wales and Merseyside pay £100 more a year than those in London. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the present arrangement is fundamentally unfair and that things should be shared more fairly across the nations of the United Kingdom?

Mr MacDonald: I absolutely love that—I am going to make the right hon. Lady a dame in my first honours list. It is an absolute disgrace that people in rural Britain pay a premium to get renewables, even though it is us generating the electricity. The standing charge should be the subject of our next discussion.

Those of us in the highlands, and indeed in many other parts of Britain, have long, dark, windy and cold winters. When many people open the curtains in the morning, they look out on to a wind farm selling cheap, green energy to the big cities. The remote highlands and islands, the Scottish Borders, Wales, Cumbria and the west country are among our poorest areas.

Mr Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that community benefit and compensation for communities is important for not only the communities that experience these projects but the planning system? Take it from a former planning inspector: if we had a sensible and predictable level of community benefit, it would make granting planning permission smoother, with fewer objections.

Mr MacDonald: There is a recent change to planning in Scotland—I am unsure whether it extends to England—called national planning framework 4, which makes the economic benefit to the community part of the criteria for getting a plan in, so we are moving towards what my hon. Friend describes.

The areas I mentioned are among our poorest. They suffer from the highest level of fuel poverty, an older population, lack of affordable housing, poor transport infrastructure, struggling market towns, lower wages, and often worse education and health services than cities. Rural people have higher costs and lower incomes.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): In Caerfyrddin, we have the possibility of four lines of new electricity cables and pylons coming through. Does the hon. Member agree that the best community benefit for Caerfyrddin

and our rural communities would be to underground the cables rather than have these pylon lines coming through?

Mr MacDonald: Somebody whose opinion I respect greatly told me that undergrounding cables was no more expensive. I was very surprised at that, because I had understood from the transmission line companies in Scotland that it was a great deal more expensive to underground them. I will definitely look into that, because I know that it is a requirement to underground them in Norway. We should explore that issue further.

So we have boom time in renewables, generating trillions of pounds over many decades, and we have a rural population that really needs financial help and investment.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): In the last decade, my constituency has seen a wide range of solar schemes with different community benefits, ranging from £20,000 a year for the 25 years of the project's expected life, which is handed over automatically to parish councils, to just a £30,000 pot, which people have to bid into. Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be equity of treatment, and that there are benefits to having an ongoing relationship, beyond the monetary value it brings?

Mr MacDonald: I think my hon. Friend will be thrilled with the next part of my speech, which will answer that question. We have a huge financial need, and we have the renewables revenue, which we will talk about in a second. Money and need—bingo, we have a match. Is that not exactly what we are here in Parliament to facilitate?

I am pleased to hear that the Great British Energy Bill is largely here, as it holds the prosperity of much of rural Britain in its hands. It can insist that communities have a stake in local renewables projects and that we legislate to require all renewables projects to pay a significant sum to impacted areas. Amazingly, it made no mention of community ownership of renewables projects or of community benefits.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): I have been fortunate enough to visit your beautiful constituency, but in my beautiful constituency of Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, we have Rampion 2, a renewable wind farm that is due to go on to the sea closer to land than Rampion 1, with huge environmental and visible impacts. On your point about where the benefits sit, there is currently no requirement for any visitor centre to sit within the constituency impacted by the wind farm. Do you agree that any commercial benefits, such as a visitor centre, which will bring tourism and jobs, should reside in the most impacted constituency?

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. For the benefit of everyone in the room, we avoid the word “you” because it refers to me. I remind all hon. Members that we speak in the third person.

Mr MacDonald: It is fair to say that building a visitor centre was not one of my list of key things to do with the money, but I shall add it to my list at around No. 97—there is a space there. We will talk about this more

[Mr MacDonald]

in a minute, but fuel poverty, affordable housing and so on are probably the key uses for that money at the beginning.

The Lib Dem energy spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings), has submitted an amendment to the Great British Energy Bill that would allow it to consider community benefits, and I very much hope that her amendment is taken forward.

I had a motion on community benefits passed in the Highland council. I have consulted the electricity generators and Ofgem. I have met Government Ministers here and in Scotland, discussed the issue with most knowledgeable people in all political parties and generally bored everyone I can find with it. There is consensus that it would be fair to require that the impacted rural people of the highlands and islands, of Scotland and of the UK as a whole benefit from bearing the costs of hosting our energy infrastructure.

The Highland council has done the work. It has a social value charter, which it would be pleased to share. The council and I agree on almost all aspects, except that the amount paid to communities should be a percentage of gross income from the projects, rather than £12,500 per megawatt. A percentage would allow communities to benefit from a soaring electricity price, as happened after Russia invaded Ukraine, and protect the project owners and utilities if the electricity price slumped.

Here is my financial proposal: 5% of revenue from all newly consented renewable energy, generated both onshore and offshore, should be paid to community energy funds. For onshore projects, two thirds of that should be paid to the affected council board, with one third paid to a council strategic fund. For offshore projects, all of that 5% of gross revenue should go to a council strategic fund. An existing renewables project should also pay money; I will explain that in a second.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that the ownership of energy production is really important. The inaction of the last Government left the country reliant on energy produced and owned abroad, so I am proud of the work that this Government have done to found the publicly owned GB Energy, which will give us long-term energy security. I welcome this debate on the community benefits of renewable energy projects. I was reassured in the House just last week about communities such as Cullingworth in my constituency, where we are looking at proposals to host associated infrastructure—basically battery storage. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those sorts of benefits should be for not just energy generation, but the associated infrastructure, such as battery storage? Community benefits should also come locally from those projects.

Mr MacDonald: I wholeheartedly agree. It should be the same for the transmission lines and the interceptors, for pumped storage and battery—really, the whole infrastructure of producing renewables.

So where is the 5% going to come from? It is really important that investors do not suffer from swings in British policy, and that they continue to invest in UK

energy infrastructure. It is key that this increase is passed on to all consumers in the UK as part of a green tariff. My informed opinion is that paying that 5% to impacted communities would translate to about a 1.25% increase in electricity prices in Britain.

What should a council that receives that substantial amount of money use it for? Here are three examples of what has been happening already. One community fund near me gives £1,000 to each of the properties in the community. If 1,000 properties were given £1,000 each, that would be £1 million. Perhaps the locals managing the fund would allocate it to households that earn less than the UK median household income of £34,500. In any case, at a time of winter fuel allowance cuts, that would be most welcome. A second option is for the community to use the money to build affordable housing, and I know of a third community that injects money into its local care sector, for care homes.

Let me plagiarise the Highland council report in order to provide some context. In 2023, in the highlands, local communities received approximately £9 million. That is below the expected commitment based on Crown Estate Scotland's guidelines, which suggest that developers should contribute £5,000 per megawatt, equating to £13.9 million. The total income from wind generation in the highlands for 2023 was estimated to be around £590 million. That calculation is based on a potential production of 11.8 GW. If all renewables—including hydro, offshore wind and pumped storage—were included, the benefit increased to 5%, and the amount of renewable energy doubled by 2030 to 22 GW, which is likely, then the community benefit would rise well above £50 million per year. That is a heck of a lot of money to highland rural communities. What would that be across the UK? £500 million a year? £1 billion? £5 billion over 10 years? This is a proper levelling-up fund for rural communities.

It was recently announced that two cancer wards on the island of Lewis in the Hebrides will share £4.5 million from a single offshore wind farm. That shows what can be achieved.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Member agree that when we are looking at scaling up wind—floating offshore wind, for example, which will benefit Scotland and Cornwall, where I am from—we could look more closely at contracts for difference, and the licences and leases with the Crown Estate, in order to embed social value in them on a large scale and generate benefits such as apprenticeships or the building up of local supply chains? There are exemptions to the World Trade Organisation rules and so on, and we could manage to do that in quite a substantial way.

Mr MacDonald: I was a Highland councillor for quite a few years and sat on the planning committee. We heard application after application promising a large number of jobs and a large amount of local buying, yet we did not see that, but I do think we need to tighten up a great deal what is being offered in all the different aspects of renewables.

I have been looking at the situation overseas. In Denmark, new renewables projects must offer at least 20% ownership of their overall venture to local residents. In Germany, there is a local tax on renewables. In Heligoland, an archipelago in the North sea, three offshore wind farms were built in the mid-2010s, and the tax revenue taken in

by the municipality was €22 million in 2016 alone. In Ireland, the contribution to community benefit fund is to be set at €2 per megawatt-hour of generation.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this terribly important debate on the fact that rural communities are not being paid sufficiently to host the infrastructure that we need to get to net zero. Earlier this month I visited Awel Aman Tawe, a community energy charity based in my constituency that uses the revenue that it gets from a turbine that it erected itself to pay for regeneration in that deprived area of Wales. Does he think that is a preferable or more desirable outcome in comparison with other projects, such as Bute Energy's project in Powys, where the developer is hiding the community energy funds behind layers of bureaucracy that might make them inaccessible to local residents?

Mr MacDonald: The absolute sweet spot of this entire discussion would be communities' ownership of their own renewables, which they could control and distribute as they wanted. Indeed, that is happening in some places. Of course access to funding is the big issue, but that is the perfect solution.

Surely, one of our great injustices is that our poorer people, who provide half the energy to the UK, have the highest level of fuel poverty and the highest electricity bills, and suffer the industrialisation of their nearby countryside. Now is the time to resolve that injustice.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Members who wish to make a speech should stand, and then we will be able to calculate the time limit. I will begin calling the Front Benchers at 3.28 pm, so there is not a lot of time left, because we have had a lot of long interventions.

2.51 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I commend the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for raising this important matter. Attendance in the Chamber shows just how important this element of GB Energy and the transformation we are going through will be to many constituencies.

I rushed here—via lunch, of course—from the Committee considering the Bill that will establish GB Energy. The Great British Energy Act will be the first Act to pass into law in this Parliament—Labour delivering change within weeks of coming into office. That Act and this transformation will change not only the way we produce power and the impact we have on a burning planet, but the way we live our lives. It could have a transformative effect for communities such as mine.

I commend the Minister for the way he has seized the agenda on GB Energy and seen the potential that the transition could have for places such as Na h-Eileanan an Iar, and the Isle of Eigg in the constituency of the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire, which the Minister visited recently. As we move to renewables, we should not forget that we are transitioning away from carbon, and we have to balance the transition with maintaining jobs in the North sea, which are a vital to many economies, communities and families in Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

The focus of the debate, community benefit, is one element of that transition. I prefer to describe and define it as “community share”. When people hear “benefit”, they think they are getting crumbs; when they have a share, they own it and control it. As it happens, my community has become the epicentre for community-owned wind farms in the UK. Community-owned turbines stretch from Barra in the south, to Galson in the north of Lewis. Those community-owned assets bring in millions of pounds each year to the communities that own them. Something like 23.5 MW is produced each year, which is a modest amount, but one that brings £3 million a year to small rural communities. Scotland's community-owned wind farms provide on average 34 times more benefit payments to local communities than the equivalent privately-owned wind farms. If we do the maths, we can see the potential that community-owned energy schemes have to transform the whole of the UK. What is not to like about them?

Community-owned schemes, which in my community support everything from warm home grants to native tree planting, are a template for what could happen in constituencies across the whole of the UK. For renewal and expansion, these schemes need funding, yes, but primarily access to the grid. For us in the Western Isles, that means getting reserved space, by regulation or legislation, on a planned interconnector—a 1.8 GW subsea cable that will connect us to the mainland and enable turbines swinging in the Atlantic to turn on lightbulbs in Birmingham, the City and many other places.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. The time limit for speeches will be two and a half minutes, but since the hon. Member did not know that when he began his speech, I cannot hold him to it. However, if he concludes soon, that will be ideal, because there are 15 people yet to speak.

Torcuil Crichton: Yes, I will wind up quickly.

There has been an apparent breakthrough, in that three community-owned estates have come together with a plan for a 43 MW wind farm and have been given a connection on the grid. That grid connection is crucial, but so is the massive funding gap that these communities face between getting from concept, through environmental regulation and planning, to connection. That is where GB Energy has a role. I have advocated for a community energy unit within GB Energy to help communities tackle the minefield of financial and regulatory complexities. The Minister cannot snap his fingers and bring GB Energy or a community energy unit into being, but if officials from GB Energy were to shadow and assist those three estates in their efforts over the next two years, we would learn an enormous amount about community energy and create a template that other communities across the UK could follow.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members to bob, because we are still working out who wants to make a speech and who wants to intervene. There will be a two and a half-minute limit from now on. I call Sarah Dyke.

2.56 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness,

[Sarah Dyke]

Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) on securing this important debate.

I commend the new Government's aspiration to increase our renewable energy infrastructure. The previous Conservative Government's failure to invest in renewable energy and insulate our homes led directly to the energy crisis, pushing up energy bills for everyone and squeezing personal finances. In Somerset we are investing in and expanding our renewable energy infrastructure. Under the net zero pathway, the equivalent of 45% of Somerset's future expected electricity demand will be met by local renewable energy generation by 2050.

However, I believe that when communities host renewable energy infrastructure such as solar farms, they should benefit from it. When I asked the Secretary of State about this recently, he agreed—he was clear that when communities take on the responsibility of hosting clean energy infrastructure, they should benefit from it—yet when I wrote to the Minister for Energy, the response stated blankly that the Government have no formal role in ensuring community benefits in solar. That is not the case with onshore wind power, which the Government are taking action to ensure is covered. That leaves communities in Somerset that host solar infrastructure totally reliant on developers to offer tangible benefits. Developments are also ineligible for community infrastructure levy obligations in the way that new housing is. The lack of obligations on developers means that communities are unlikely to benefit from hosting installations, leading to ongoing tensions within communities.

That begs further questions about the Government's development of Great British Energy, to which I hope the Minister might respond today. If GB Energy is going to invest in new ground-mounted solar farms, will it ensure that local communities benefit from hosting the infrastructure, as the Government have claimed is their aim? I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments. I hope that we can continue to move forward and increase clean, green energy production.

2.59 pm

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I have quite a bit of energy infrastructure going on in my constituency, be it the proposed Norwich to Tilbury line, the East Pye solar farm that has just been announced or the Ørsted battery energy storage site to the north of my constituency. To say that this debate is not hypothetical for my residents—it is very much a reality—would be underselling the matter. We have talked about community benefit and community wealth-building, but that is not something my constituents are happy to hear. They want to hear the word “compensation”. They do not want to hear the word “hosting”, because, at the end of the day, a pylon is not being hosted; it is being placed in their back garden.

It is important to remember in this debate that we live in a wasteland of regulatory framework for compensation. Individual businesses that take on such projects to grow their own enterprises—don't get me wrong; they are private enterprises and there to make a profit—must work within a regulatory framework to make sure they are held to account and made to pay for the local people who have to face those developments in their area.

We have seen locally that the National Grid, for example, provides its own funding and grant-based system, but funding is not granted to individuals; it is only general. It takes into account such things as social, economic and environmental benefit, but those are judged by the National Grid's own criteria. That is not something for which the National Grid is held to account, and it does not ensure that local people have a say over what is coming back to them.

The situation becomes even direr when we talk about solar farms. The industry body is responsible for setting out guidance on what should happen to all member bodies within it. Again, that creates an issue where those residents in areas considering having infrastructure in their back garden do not feel heard. They do not feel that they are being listened to in terms of what they want and where they need it. We want to drive towards net zero and we need to drive forward with the industrial upgrade to our national grid, but we end up in a situation where we are throwing the baby out with the bathwater, putting people off our future development towards being a green superpower for the rest of the world to follow.

3.1 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) on securing this a vital debate.

“Wha but lo'e the bonnie hills”,

the very first line of the song “Bonnie Galloway”—I will spare you by not singing it, Dr Huq—extols the virtues of the rolling uplands of the south-west of Scotland. Yet the tranquillity of the moors, farms and forests has been disturbed these last few years by the relentless march of wind turbines. Now Dumfries and Galloway is festooned with them and we have many more on the way. We are in the foothills of a renewables revolution.

Arguments for or against wind farms are not for today. I feel that battle has been lost, but we must fight a rearguard action against ever-bigger turbines. Giants of over 650 feet from base to rotor tip are the fashion, and they are moving ever closer to our towns and villages. I feel that we will see Governments happily trample local opposition to wind farms and turn a deaf ear to forcing power cables underground.

Whether we welcome wind farms or have them foisted upon us, we must wrest from them what community benefit we can. Communities already see little enough of the supply chain benefits. It is to be hoped that the previous UK Government's efforts to create freeports in Scotland might see more of the manufacturing based here in Britain. I have hopes, too, that Labour will make good on a Northern Ireland enhanced investment zone, as mapped out by the previous Conservative Government, that included the western end of my constituency. That would be a game changer: imagine the jobs created if we could build those giant turbines in Stranraer and ship them out via the deep-water port of Cairnryan.

On renewables, we in rural Scotland have had much of the pain and little of the gain.

Torcuil Crichton: Will the hon. Gentleman agree that the difference between Dumfries and Galloway and many parts of the highlands and islands that have benefited from community or commercially-owned wind

farms is community ownership of land and that, were that pattern to be repeated in his part of the world, communities would benefit not only from community land ownership, but from owning the turbines that spin?

John Cooper: I resist the invitation to back a land grab, but the hon. Gentleman makes a valid point.

We have a chance now to bake in greater benefits for our communities, and they should be seen, not as bribery to buy off opposition, but as the power giants entering partnership with communities. I still say that our communities need a far greater say over wind farm consents, but the urban-obsessed SNP in Edinburgh and Labour here in this place will not shift.

There is an undeniable whirlwind of change on wind power. We have the chance to reap a positive harvest from that whirlwind for the people living in the shadow of giant turbines and pylons. Let us seize that chance.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I am going to keep the time limit at two and a half minutes. If everyone is kind to each other, everyone will get in. A brilliant example will be Polly Billington.

3.4 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I was not planning on speaking in this debate, but I am moved to by comments that have been made. I think it is worth while, even in the short amount of time that I have, to remind people that our economy and Britain's success over decades and centuries has been because of our securing an industrial revolution based on fossil fuels. I welcome the opportunity that we have here to establish a political consensus not to repeat the mistakes of the past, where the poorest end up bearing the brunt of any transformation and the wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few.

I share the sentiments of the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald), who secured the debate, that we need to see an increase in community ownership of our renewables—for very good reasons. He says the major problem is access to funding, but I would say it is only a problem unless we change the rules. I would like us to establish a political consensus on the transformation of the energy market reform so that we can harness what is an endless amount of renewable energy in our communities across the country. His suggestion of a green tariff would need to be in the context of energy market reform because, as has been pointed out by others, there are significant standing charges on people's energy bills that militate against the kind of transformation we need in our energy sector.

When we have that community benefit, we also need to think very carefully about what powers we give and the governance structures around it, so that communities can choose how they spend the money. There is a clear argument for ensuring that energy revenue is spent on energy challenges in communities—which are often, as has been said, off grid and often some of the most fuel poor in our country. As a representative of three small towns on a very windy coast, I make the observation that there are poor people living in towns and cities, too, and we would not want to establish an energy market that did not recognise that. We should tackle those challenges as well.

I want to make a point about the ways of dealing with or mitigating the impact on our communities. Inevitably—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. We are finishing at 3.28 pm and there are still loads of people wishing to speak. I call Alistair Carmichael.

3.7 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for securing this debate. Once the Backbench Business Committee is up and running, this is a subject that deserves longer and more careful scrutiny.

Speaking from the perspective of Orkney and Shetland, I will keep things simple. Time is short and simple is what I do best. There are two things that I want people to understand about Orkney and Shetland. First, we have the highest level of fuel poverty of any community in the country. I hear what the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) says about poor people in all communities, and she is correct, but the truth is that the further north we go, the more we are likely to find people enduring poor housing standards with long, dark, cold winters. That has an impact and it is felt most acutely in Orkney and Shetland.

The second thing I want people to understand is that when we talk about needing to find a template for making these things work, in Orkney and Shetland we have already done that. We have done it since the mid-1970s on our relationship to our oil and gas industry, which we have hosted. We have the two largest onshore terminals for oil and gas in western Europe—now coming perhaps into the autumn, if not quite to the end, of their existence. The reason there is such support for the oil and gas industry in Orkney and Shetland is that for the last few decades it has been a tremendous source of community benefit for us.

If there is an energy generation source, or whatever it is, in a community and the community sees the benefit of it—in a direct financial sense of money going into a trust or just in the availability and reliability of good-quality, high-skilled, well-paid jobs—people will be much more accepting. When, as is the case at the moment, we see Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks turning on the Viking wind farm in Shetland and being paid £2 million in August alone not to generate any electricity, that is where we see a disconnect. Dr Huq, there is a great deal more I could say about this subject—and I hope we will return to it—but just remember this: whatever the question is, the answer is to get yourself to Orkney and Shetland.

3.9 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for bringing forward this important debate.

Communities have suffered the impact of more than a decade of botched energy policies and soaring bills, while our reliance on imported energy has put our energy security at risk. Many of our constituents will pay their monthly energy bills to a company based

[Kirsteen Sullivan]

600 miles and an ocean away. We know that our energy system is broken, but for too long it has felt far too distant to fix.

This Labour Government are already doing things differently with GB Energy, owned by the British people, which will invest in clean energy and ensure that our communities reap the benefits. At its heart is a commitment to support and expand community-owned energy projects, which are owned by the local people that use the energy.

That is not new, however. Local people already benefit from community-owned projects that exist and thrive across the country. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) spoke earlier about wind turbines. I know of many initiatives in my constituency that contribute to projects in local communities to deliver benefits for them. With community ownership we can deliver even more.

Let us be clear about this. Community ownership is a Labour party value, and it is not just a concept; it is about delivering benefits and value to our cities, towns and villages. The local power plan is a product of years of campaigning by the Co-operative party, and as a Labour and Co-operative MP I am proud that the Labour Government are going to deliver on this. At a fundamental level, community power is about giving people a say and a stake in the things that impact their daily life, such as those mentioned by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael): local jobs, lower prices and supporting local projects to deliver according to local priorities.

3.12 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald), on securing this debate—the first of what I am sure will be many debates in years to come. He has talked about what Norway has done, and he is correct to say that my constituents look out of the window when it is cold and see the turbines going round and round, but the money heading south. That is not a good thing at all. The coldest community in the whole of the British Isles is a village called Altnaharra in central Sutherland, where on 30 December 1995 temperatures hit an astonishing -27.2° . If that is not cold, I do not know what is.

My hon. Friend has talked about taking people along with us, and that is incredibly sensible advice, because they are paying a 50% premium above other buyers of electricity. If we can take people along with us on the Orkney and Shetland model, it will work—but the key is how we go about it. He also rightly mentioned affordable housing and how such a fund could be used to address this issue. I was recently in the village of Achiltibuie in Wester Ross, speaking to young people who had summer jobs there. I asked what they did in winter when the hotel closes. The answer was, “We have to head south.” Why? Because there is no housing in a place like Achiltibuie. There is absolutely no affordable housing. That is a dagger at the heart of the viability of communities in the highlands, because it leads to school rolls falling and so on.

My hon. Friend is quite correct to place this issue before us, and I hope he will be encouraged—though I am sure he will need no encouragement—to bring it

forward again. It could have been tackled some years ago, but a perceived inertia at all levels of Government to actually do something about this issue meant it never was. There is a great opportunity here. Knowing the Minister, whom I congratulate on his appointment, and knowing my next-door neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire, I have every confidence that this will be the start of a discussion that, if we are positive about it, can achieve a fruitful outcome.

3.15 pm

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for securing this debate.

My constituency of Bicester and Woodstock has had multiple applications for solar farms, but they are dwarfed by the enormous proposal by the Blenheim estate and its development partners for an 840 MW solar plant, the so-called Botley West proposal. We need to make the transition to more renewables in our energy mix. The Liberal Democrats support that transition—we want to see 90% of our energy coming from renewables by 2030—but that high ambition makes steps to increase community benefit from any new scheme essential.

We must bring people with us on this journey by sharing the benefits. As with other aspects of renewable energy policy, the current framework is incomplete and hands too much control to the landowners and developers, often at the cost of local communities. We urgently need an approach to renewables that has a strong presumption in favour of meaningful community engagement and sustained community benefit.

Botley West has not met that standard. That is one of the many reasons why I and many of my constituents object to the current proposal. Originally, the developers offered the community a benefit fund of £50,000, amounting to £59.50 per megawatt of annual capacity. It is derisory. The £5,000 per megawatt of capacity recommended by the community benefits protocol would instead deliver £4.2 million each year to the local community if the scheme goes ahead as currently proposed.

I urge the Government to put in place a framework for new renewables that will place renewables schemes at the heart of community discussions and place our communities at the heart of debates on renewables schemes.

3.16 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for calling this important debate.

Aberdeenshire North and Moray East, which I represent, and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) are the two constituencies most affected by these developments; I do not think anyone would contradict me on that point, which the Minister well understands. How are they affected? Well, the fisher folk are having to move among the pylons, the farmers are having to deal with the pylons and the underground cabling, and these are areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Those are important points to take on board, but I want to speak primarily about community benefit. The principles that guide us are early engagement,

flexibility of approach, transparency and the recognition of community needs, but they are not statutory, which is part of the problem. They need to be put on a statutory footing.

In his maiden speech, the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire proposed

“that 5% of revenue from all newly consented renewable energy generated both onshore and offshore should be paid to community benefit funds.”—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 510.]

I find it very difficult to disagree with him on that point.

I also want to give a little bit of perspective. On 2022 figures, UK investment in new wind farms was €500 million; in Scotland it was €2.6 billion. That gives a sense of proportion. In the Highland area at the moment, 301 turbines have been approved under planning rules but not yet built, which far outstrips any other area of Scotland, including the constituency that I represent. In the midst of all this fuel poverty, Scotland’s people—particularly in my area, which is one of the coldest parts of the UK—are paying the highest standing charges in the UK. That has to change.

There are great benefits associated with community benefits given by these companies. I have an excellent example in Fraserburgh in my constituency, where the Moray East project made a substantial donation. I look forward to similar developments in the near future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. The time limit will now be reduced to two minutes.

3.19 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for securing this important debate.

It is important that we remember the context and seriousness of the climate change challenge, but as hon. Members have said, we need to bring people and communities with us, particularly where there are changes to their local landscape and area and where land is given over to solar generation before opportunities to use building roofs have been fully explored and exploited.

Renewable energy is essential to the decarbonisation of our electricity grid. My hon. Friend’s proposal of a 5% levy on gross revenue for community benefit would go a long way towards ensuring that communities, as well as businesses and investors, enjoy the advantages of investment in renewables. Revenue from such schemes could benefit my constituents in so many ways, not least by helping to plug the gap that our planning system has caused between the housing that has gone into the area and the supporting infrastructure. Such benefits would include more youth service provision—in some cases that means any youth service provision—in the largest communities of Grove, Wantage, Didcot and Wallingford; local road, walking and cycling improvements; a contribution to the proposed new railway station serving Grove and Wantage; the realisation of more opportunities for local healthcare improvements; and home insulation projects.

When we consider how best to combat climate change, the policies that most resonate with people are those that benefit planet, people and economy. Local electricity

generation is one of the best examples. The proposed levy would ensure that people, as well as planet and economy, will benefit.

3.21 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I commend the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for securing this debate. As the Minister will be well aware, my constituency of Witham is at the forefront of National Grid’s proposal for the Norwich-to-Tilbury upgrade of the national grid. I would like to put a number of concerns to him that my constituents and people across that part of mid-Essex have raised.

This debate is about community benefit, but with the pylon development scheme there is very little dialogue about community benefit. Guidance on the community benefits of the scheme is still under development; there are therefore no cost estimates or any details of what it will actually mean for my constituents or even for those affected by the proposal. I would welcome the Minister saying more about that when he winds up.

Alongside that, reports now indicate that there may be a cheaper option than pylons: tunnelling. Countries such as Germany have been at the forefront of that, along with innovation and technology. I would welcome more information from the Minister and the Department about whether that will be factored into the community discussion about wider benefits from the upgrade to the grid, and into the work that he will be undertaking. I do not think that it is deliverable by 2030, but clearly we need to make some progress.

The community benefit discussion is clearly live within the Government. May I ask when the Minister will meet Members who represent Essex and the east of England for dialogue and discussion, so we can go back to our constituents and give them some assurance about what this will mean for them?

3.23 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) on setting the scene so well. He highlighted the importance of a good relationship in respect of renewable energy and the benefits for constituents. In two minutes, it is impossible to say all I need to, so I will not hang about. As we approach the conference of the parties, it is important to remember the benefits that these projects have for the local communities that we represent.

I always give a Northern Ireland perspective in these debates. Community Energy NI has revealed that community benefit is often associated with large-scale energy, and there are numerous wind farms across Northern Ireland. Many developments now offer community funding to a level of £5,000 per megawatt per annum over their lifetime. The energy strategy for Northern Ireland was published by the Department for the Economy in December 2021. For this action plan, the Government focused on potential energy schemes with regard to the consideration of onshore wind, solar and hydrogen.

There is fantastic potential across the United Kingdom for shared ownership options whereby a developer enters into a financial partnership with a community group or local residents. We are doing these things in Northern Ireland and we wish to do more. At present, community

[Jim Shannon]

benefit packages are provided on a voluntary basis and there is no legal requirement in the UK for developers of energy infrastructure to provide community benefits.

I want to highlight one issue to the Minister. Legislation on energy is a reserved matter, but if we in Northern Ireland want to go ahead with a scheme, we need the planning Department; planning is a devolved matter. It is a case of marrying the two. How can we and how can the Minister work better with the planning Department in Northern Ireland to ensure that when we have projects that we want to expedite, we are not held up? I look forward to seeing how we can expand the possibility of better community renewables projects across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, especially to allow the devolved nations to play a part in that success.

3.25 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Ynys Môn, my constituency, is known as “energy island” and has a community-owned project in marine energy at Morlais, which is an example to all. Now there is a proposed large development for solar, covering 3,700 acres, around 2% of the island. The bigger of the two proposals, Maen Hir Energy, is five times the size of the UK’s largest active solar farm. The local corner shop would offer more jobs than this development on the island, which will have a detrimental effect on the economy by affecting agriculture and tourism. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on our food security of the loss of good quality agricultural land?

The debate motion includes the phrase “community benefits”, but far too often it is a case of large developers offering tokenistic gestures and small sums of money. The community benefits should be renamed “community compensation”, because large developers often give a small amount of money to communities, which are then burdened by the economic and social cost of the project. With the other development on Ynys Môn, Alaw Môn, I have seen at first hand the developer changing the offer to the local community within a matter of days, offering one amount on a Thursday night and a reduced amount on a Tuesday night. That behaviour is totally unacceptable in our communities. It is shocking that developers are required only to make voluntary commitments to compensation, which can seemingly be changed at a whim.

To address the issue, we must move beyond compensation and look at meaningful ownership. Community-owned and led renewable projects could provide lots of local benefits such as cheaper energy bills, could increase resource efficiency and could help to meet our carbon reduction targets without compromising Ynys Môn’s landscape and economy. We need a step change in our energy system to ensure that real community benefit is felt by those who host clean technologies. I hope that the Government listen to the calls for change and take forward proposals that will bring meaningful benefits to local communities.

3.27 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for securing the debate.

The greatest community benefit for people across the north of Scotland, in my constituency and neighbouring constituencies, would be paying less for their energy, along with the investment in jobs that comes with renewable energy. People are reliant on cars, are off grid, are on lower wages and have inefficient housing—that is a fact across the highlands and islands of Scotland. The impact on them of high energy prices is significant: for many, it is a choice whether to heat and eat. We hear that frequently, but it is a fact.

This winter, many communities in my constituency will experience temperatures in negative double figures for many days, which is quite normal. Communities such as Aviemore and Newtonmore are right up in the Cairngorms, where thousands of people live with those temperatures every single year. They understand what it is like to live in a cold, harsh winter climate.

I agree with many points that have been made today. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) mentioned community ownership; we have examples of that being progressed in my constituency, which provides huge benefit.

I have a question for the Minister about transmission charges, which have a huge impact on the investment pipeline of these projects. If we do not get investment in these projects, we will miss out on significant community investment and significant community benefit. It cannot be right that people pay more for their energy when it is being bought hundreds of miles away at a cheaper price than they can buy it. That is unacceptable and discriminatory. The rug has also been pulled out from under those communities with the removal of the winter fuel payment for so many people.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call the first of our three Front Benchers: Roz Savage, for the Liberal Democrats.

3.29 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall, and hon. Members for their fascinating contributions. I rise to speak on an issue that is very dear to my heart, as an environmental campaigner rowing alone across three oceans to raise awareness of the ecological crisis and now as the Member for South Cotswolds about to present the climate and nature Bill—my private Member’s Bill—in the House tomorrow.

There is both promise and peril in renewable energy. The Liberal Democrats wholeheartedly welcome the steps being taken to revitalise British investment in renewables, which will start to rectify the missed opportunities of the previous Conservative Government, who never seemed to grasp the scale, scope and speed required to avoid environmental disaster. These new initiatives hold the promise of lower energy bills, high-quality jobs, greater energy security and the chance of actually meeting our net zero targets, but we must proceed with caution and wisdom.

The proposal for an excessively large solar farm in my constituency serves as a stark reminder of how renewable energy projects can backfire when poorly conceived. The solar development has provoked a visceral negative response from local communities, because it is the wrong

size, in the wrong place and has the wrong ownership—foreign ownership. By allowing unsympathetic developments to mar our beautiful countryside, we risk alienating the very public whose support we need.

We need only look to the cautionary tale of our water companies to understand the perils of allowing foreign profit-driven entities to monopolise our essential utilities. The owners of companies such as Thames Water have prioritised profits over the needs of customers and the health of our natural environment, resulting in higher bills for customers, a lack of investment in infrastructure, and toxic pollution that is killing our precious waterways. We cannot afford to repeat those mistakes in our renewable energy sector; the transition to clean energy must prioritise the needs of our communities and the protection of our environments over the profits of distant shareholders.

Communities have to be involved, and it is clear that there is a significant gap in the GB Energy Bill around community energy. The Liberal Democrats firmly believe that communities living near large-scale energy infrastructure should receive tangible benefits. We are ready and willing to work collaboratively with the Minister and his Government to ensure that those benefits are guaranteed in the Bill. Our vision includes large energy suppliers working with community schemes to sell locally generated power to local customers at discounted rates; guaranteeing that community benefit funds receive a fair share of the wealth generated by local renewables infrastructure; empowering local authorities to develop renewable electricity generation and storage strategies; and giving small, low-carbon generators the right to export their electricity to existing suppliers on fair terms.

The success of our clean-energy economy, our ability to tackle the cost of living crisis, and the realisation of our climate targets all hinge on community buy-in. We need to win hearts and minds and persuade people that net zero projects are good for their communities, their pockets and our future national economy and security. To that end, we urge the Government to enact the necessary regulatory changes to truly support community energy. Community benefits for energy schemes should be guaranteed and community energy schemes should receive discounted rates for the clean electricity they contribute.

I will end on a personal note. As someone who has witnessed at first hand the beauty and fragility of our natural world during my ocean rowing expeditions, I am deeply committed to ensuring that our transition to renewable energy does not, in the process, destroy the beauty of the natural countryside we are working so hard to preserve for future generations. We need to get the balance right, and people have to be part of that equation.

3.34 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) on bringing forward this important debate. He raised this subject in his maiden speech, so he is clearly passionate about it. As someone who has been here for 14 years, it is a great pleasure to hear so many newly elected MPs bringing fresh perspectives to the House. Parliament is a better place for new MPs coming in and sharing their experiences; two minutes is not enough for some of these speeches.

In his maiden speech, the hon. Member raised valid concerns about the industrialisation of the countryside, which is an issue that all of us, certainly on the Conservative Benches, have consistently guarded against. Our belief is that the need for renewable energy must be balanced with the preservation of rural landscapes, ensuring that development is sustainable and respectful of local communities. Aside from his desire to see money flow back into communities, that is the only way we will get the public to support any plans for net zero and a decarbonised energy grid, as we heard from the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage).

Unfortunately, the new Government immediately began to torment rural communities in their crusade for carbon neutrality by 2030 by removing key protections from the national planning policy framework just days after the election. Those provisions required developers to demonstrate that onshore wind projects had community support and that local planning impacts were properly addressed. In the new Secretary of State's first week, he disregarded the previous Secretary of State's legal planning guidance, which stated that the best and most versatile agricultural land must be avoided for new solar farm applications and that the cumulative impact of many solar farm applications must be considered together. Those decisions by the new Labour Government undermine the very communities that bear the burden of hosting new energy infrastructure while ensuring minimal benefit.

Even more concerning, we understand that the Government intend to consult on bringing large onshore wind proposals into the nationally significant infrastructure project regime, which would further centralise decision making and diminish local input. It is vital that the Government listen to the views and concerns of local communities about onshore wind. Residents should have a say in projects that directly affect their environment and not be sidelined by top-down diktats from Westminster. We must ensure that local voices are heard and that community consent remains central to the planning process for renewable energy projects.

I also note the previous Government's approach to community benefits and our commitment to ensuring that communities hosting vital energy projects were directly rewarded. We announced plans that people living near transmission infrastructure could receive up to £1,000 per year in electricity bill discounts—I am not sure it was per year, actually—providing meaningful financial relief to local households. In addition to those savings, we announced that funds would be available for local projects, empowering communities to invest in the initiatives that matter most to them, whether that is improving local parks, enhancing energy efficiency or supporting education programmes for young people. We had intended to publish guidance this year on making that a reality, so this debate is timely in allowing the Minister to give an update on all those plans.

When it comes to the impact of new grid infrastructure, pylons across much of our countryside will concern our residents most, and Labour's accelerated push for pylons across rural landscapes threatens to blight our countryside. The rush to meet unrealistic targets will impose unnecessary visual and environmental costs on rural Britain, with little regard for the long-term impact on our natural beauty. The National Energy System Operator, formerly known as the National Grid, recently published a report

[Mark Garnier]

that says that while grid enlargement by 2030 means pylons, grid enlargement by 2034 allows enough time to underground those connections and, at the same time, provide £600 million of savings in grid delivery.

The shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), highlighted during the election campaign that our party remains committed to protecting our landscapes. We propose learning from Germany where underground power lines have become the default presumption in designated areas such as national parks. That approach not only preserves the character of those unique places, but respects the wishes of local communities. Crucially, it could save bill payers money in the long term.

Over the last decade, technological advances have made it increasingly feasible to bury power lines, especially in sensitive areas. Unlike the new Government, we would have undertaken a rapid review to assess the advantages of alternative network technologies compared with overhead pylons. By exploring options such as underground cables and other innovative technologies, we can achieve energy grid decarbonisation without the impact on our countryside that Labour is apparently prepared to accept.

It is vital that we approach the energy transition with a clear vision that balances that transition with the need to protect our countryside and safeguard community interests. Labour's plans seem short-sighted and fail to strike that balance.

Although we have real concerns regarding the Government's plans for the countryside, I am extremely supportive of technologies that could have real community benefits—those that are innovative and easy to deliver, and that produce cheaper clean energy. I recently met experts from the University of Oxford and Oxford Photovoltaics, or Oxford PV, to discuss breakthroughs in solar power generation. They are working incredibly hard to produce lightweight solar panels so that the roofs of factories and warehouses can be used for solar panels without having to reinforce the building underneath.

Seamus Logan: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the National Farmers Union of Scotland accepts the arguments and the case for pylons as opposed to underground cabling?

Mark Garnier: That is great. If people accept pylons, that is absolutely fine, but there are an awful lot of people who do not and we can look at where the alternatives could be cheaper.

Jamie Stone: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mark Garnier: I am mindful of time, but I will take one more intervention.

Jamie Stone: Does it not strike the hon. Member as strange that SSE proposed to underground the cable in the highlands from Dundonald to Beaulieu, yet says that it is impossible to do so in other parts? That is a very mountainous part of the highlands, so I think there is something in what my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald), my constituency neighbour, said about it being possible.

Mark Garnier: I see; I might have misunderstood what the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire said. It is an engineering challenge, but we need to listen to the experts who know what they are talking about. I am not entirely certain that I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to make, but if we can underground cables it would be better for communities, certainly if it is cheaper and better for the environment. If that means taking a bit of extra time, we need to get together to think carefully about that.

I will get back to my point about the University of Oxford and Oxford PV. Using that kind of technology, together with community-based power generation, has the potential to reduce strain on the national grid and limit the need for large-scale projects that can disrupt our landscape and our communities.

Through the Energy Act 2023, the previous Government committed to removing barriers to community energy projects by launching a call for evidence. I am interested to hear from the Minister whether the new Labour Government will honour that commitment—perhaps he will share that information with us in his remarks later.

The challenges that we face in transmitting renewable energy, particularly wind power, from areas of generation to areas of demand underscore the urgent need for grid upgrades. The current limitations in grid capacity, most notably the B6 boundary between Scotland and England, have become a major constraint on our energy system. The B6 boundary is the largest single network bottleneck, preventing vast amounts of wind power generated in Scotland from reaching higher-demand areas in England. As a result, we are facing enormous constraint payments, whereby wind turbines are shut down despite being able to generate clean and affordable energy.

That must be the greatest source of frustration for people living in areas of natural beauty such as the highlands and the Shetland Islands. Not only have those people had their landscape blighted but, if the equipment is not working at full capacity, bill payers will be paying for constraint payments in order for the equipment not to generate electricity. For instance, Orkney has some of the most powerful wind turbines in the UK, yet they often have to be turned off simply because the grid cannot handle the energy they produce. That is a glaring example of how our infrastructure is failing to keep up with the energy transition. The highlands and islands are energy-rich regions, but their potential is being stifled by inadequate transmission networks.

I turn to the biggest concern for many residents, which is how the Government will deliver the infrastructure required for a decarbonised energy grid by 2030. I must say to new Labour MPs that at the next general election in just four or five years' time, all constituents—Labour MPs' constituents in particular—will ask, "Did you meet your 2030 target?", "What did you do to my energy bills?", and "What did you do to the countryside?" Labour Members claim that their plans will save households £300 a year on energy bills, but it seems incredible that that saving will ever be achieved.

I asked in the House when we might receive a full systems cost analysis of Labour's net zero plans by 2030, but we still have not had a proper answer—the answer given was, "In due course." We need an answer to the question of how much this will all cost.

Although the Government's pledge to cut everyone's energy bills by £300 remains on their website, curiously no Ministers can bring themselves to repeat it. I have no doubt that the Minister would be delighted to do so if he gets the chance—he will have many chances, because I will wind up in a minute. Despite that promise, the actual price of the proposal will put a huge strain on taxpayers.

I have a number of questions for the Government, which I will put to the Minister. What are the full system costs associated with a net zero power grid by 2030? Will the Government confirm that they still plan to save households £300 a year on their energy bills? What baseline are they using—is it from the election? How do they plan to balance the urgent need for rapid decarbonisation with the development of emerging energy technologies? Will they support some of the innovative technologies that I mentioned or ones with longer lead times, such as nuclear? Will they explore alternatives to large-scale pylon construction, such as undergrounding and undersea cables, to protect communities and landscapes? Will they commit at the very least to match the community benefit regime set out by the previous Conservative Government of up to £10,000 off energy bills over 10 years for families in areas that have new energy infrastructure?

How we achieve this transition matters to all our constituents as it affects our natural world, our energy security and everybody's energy bills. It is essential that it delivers real benefits to the communities most affected by renewable energy projects. We need to ensure that those communities are not just sites for energy generation but true beneficiaries, most importantly through lower energy bills. The Government's rushed approach risks sacrificing long-term gains for short-term targets, leaving rural communities to bear the brunt of the costs without the promised savings.

The Opposition believe in a balanced approach in which the latest technologies are harnessed, communities are listened to and grid capacity is strengthened without degrading our natural landscape. We should support innovative solutions and new technology while focusing on lower energy bills and decarbonising the energy grid. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, who campaigned like a stalwart in opposition but now finds himself on the Front Bench in government—I congratulate him on his post, by the way.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): For the second time in the same day, I call the Minister.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again today, Dr Huq. It is good to look out and see so many of my colleagues from the Great British Energy Bill Committee here to discuss energy again. I am glad we got the Bill through Committee quickly enough for us to be here—we did not need our afternoon session.

I do not have a huge amount of time, and I want to get to as many hon. Members' contributions as possible. Of course, I want to leave the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) time to conclude this important debate—I congratulate him on securing it. Hopefully he will see from the enthusiasm

and the level of participation how important others find this subject. I know from his maiden speech and other contributions how important it is for him and his constituents.

Just a few weeks ago, I had the real pleasure of visiting the hon. Gentleman's constituency; I went to the Isle of Eigg to spend a day learning about the community energy project there. Although in some ways that project is unique, it is a very good example of how a whole community can benefit from such projects. The community genuinely has the power in its own hands—it has its own micro-generation grid—and it has received other benefits as people have upskilled themselves so that they can understand how the grid works and manage it.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I will try to respond to as many as I can, but I will briefly start with the context. This Government have come to power facing three interlinked challenges—ensuring energy security, displaying climate leadership and bringing down bills for people across the country—to which our response is our clean power by 2030 mission. Clean power is the only way to protect our constituents from the rollercoaster of price spikes that we have faced over the past few years, and to deliver the climate leadership that we need. That is why we introduced the Great British Energy Bill within our first 100 days, and why it is progressing through Parliament as quickly as possible. Great British Energy, which will have its headquarters in Aberdeen, is an important part of our plan to increase the delivery speed of renewables projects and, crucially—I will come back to this point—to ensure that the British people have a stake in that energy future. The Conservative party has for many years accepted the premise of publicly owned energy companies, but it does not support the premise of the British people being part of a publicly owned energy company—just ownership by companies from beyond our shores. Of course, we welcome their investment in this country, but with Great British Energy, we are saying that we would also like the British public to have a part to play.

A number of hon. Members made points about community ownership. Although this debate is about community benefits, I think, as some hon. Members have said, there are links between them. The Great British Energy Bill is about setting up the company, but there is a wider context in the Government's local power plan, which commits to much more community ownership of energy, and ensuring that communities large and small have the funding and, crucially, the capacity to take forward some of those projects themselves.

Delivering on our clean energy mission, which is undoubtedly ambitious, will require action on a number of fronts. I want to touch on infrastructure, which many hon. Members have mentioned. There is at the heart of the current Conservative party's rhetoric on that subject a fundamental contradiction. We heard it from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), but I also heard almost exactly the same words from the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) on the shadow Front Bench in the Committee earlier today, where on the one hand, there is a recognition that we need significant upgrades to the grid, and yet on the other hand, there is no desire to make a commitment to building any new infrastructure to deliver it. Both those things cannot be true at the same time.

[Michael Shanks]

I gently point out to Opposition Members that after 14 years of government, that is not a new problem. The grid did not suddenly fall apart in July 2024, with the Labour Government. That challenge has been facing the country for a long time. Indeed, I would meet Conservative Members halfway and say that even beyond the 14 years they were in government, there has been a challenge on the grid. However, they had 14 years to take action and did not. This Government are now moving forward.

If we want to see the connections issue resolved, and community projects able to connect into the grid, as hon. Members have mentioned, we do need to build some of that infrastructure. That requires communities to host the infrastructure, so I turn to a number of points that were raised about how we work in partnership with communities—using collaboration, not coercion. It is important that the entire mission is a national one—for Government, but also to ensure that every member of the public is part of our achieving clean power by 2030. Key to that will be reforms to planning regulations. To deliver the critical infrastructure that this country needs, nationally significant infrastructure must be built; our planning system is holding that back.

The planning and infrastructure Bill, which we will introduce shortly, will speed up and streamline the planning process. We will also be updating relevant national policy statements within the next year, in order to provide certainty to industry. In Scotland, the current electricity infrastructure consenting regime is from the Electricity Act 1989 and has not been updated in line with other legislation across the UK. The regime is too slow and is holding back investment. I am working closely with my Scottish Government counterparts on how we develop a set of proposals to reform that and speed up the new infrastructure development that we need.

I come back to the point that hon. Members have rightly made—that as much as we need to streamline the planning process because we need to build the infrastructure, communities must be at the heart of it. Public engagement and consultation will continue to be incredibly important, but so also will be a more holistic approach to planning energy infrastructure in the first place. That has been the root cause of many of the challenges that hon. Members have raised today. The lack of strategic planning for some of our energy infrastructure in the past has led to bottlenecks, which we want to avoid in future.

Finally, I turn to the point about communities living near clean energy infrastructure, including the transmission infrastructure that we need to build. Let us be clear: communities, by hosting that infrastructure, are providing a service to the country. It is essential that we build that infrastructure; it must be built somewhere. The challenge I have with some of the discussion on that subject is that we fall into the trap sometimes of saying, “Yes, we agree we need to upgrade the grid, but not anywhere near my constituency, please.” That will not work, unfortunately. We want to ensure that those communities that do host this infrastructure, on behalf of us all as a country, directly benefit from it. Communities are important, not just in terms of hosting infrastructure but in terms of the wider acceptance of the direction of travel that we are taking. We need communities to be

with us if we are to achieve the necessary pace. At the moment, as has been raised, such community benefits are voluntary arrangements. They could be monetary or non-monetary schemes; there are a variety of different options across the country, some that work extremely well and others that, as many here know, do not work so well. The voluntary nature of arrangements for delivery of community benefits does lead to these significant variations.

Jim Shannon: As I outlined in my submission to this debate, infrastructure is a reserved matter, but back home in Northern Ireland it is a planning matter, which is devolved. The question is how the two combine. It is a very simple question. It might require a much more difficult answer, but I would really appreciate it if the Minister could answer, please.

Michael Shanks: That is a very important question and I was going to come to the hon. Gentleman’s specific point in a moment. He is absolutely right. Since I came into post, I have been working with my counterpart Ministers in the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments on how we can work together. Clearly, in Northern Ireland that is slightly different because energy is transferred, so the policy levers are slightly different. However, we do have the same outcomes in mind throughout the UK, which is really important. I will continue to work with Conor Murphy and the wider Executive to bring us together as much as possible, because the hon. Member makes a very important point.

On community benefits in particular, we are continuing—at pace—the work started by the previous Government to review how we can effectively deliver benefits for communities living near this infrastructure. We are looking at examples across Europe—we are not on this journey on our own; there are other countries that have been doing this for a very long time, and we are learning from that—and developing clear guidance on community benefits for both the infrastructure and the transmission networks. We will publish that in due course. Great British Energy’s role will be to build upon existing community energy schemes under way across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It will build on that experience to contribute more where it can.

I shall now respond to a few of the specific points raised by hon. Members. The point on solar projects, raised by the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke)—who is not in her place, but I will write to her on this—is an incredibly important one. Part of the aim of the solar taskforce set up by the previous Government and reconvened by this Government is to set out a very clear pathway for these projects.

Several hon. Members mentioned standing charges. The Government are looking at that issue right now. We accept that far too much of a burden and too much of bills comes from standing charges and we are working with the regulator to do much more about that.

Although I listed 12 other points from hon. Members, I am conscious that I have eight minutes in which to cover them. To allow the hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire time to wind up the debate, I will close by saying that as a Government we take this issue very seriously. Our ambition is to bring communities with us on this journey. We want to do that through a

collaborative approach, with all hon. Members, but also with communities at the heart of this. We will have much more to say on that in the weeks and months ahead.

3.58 pm

Mr Angus MacDonald: I did forget to disclose that I may have a potential conflict of interest, the details of which are on the parliamentary website. I apologise for not saying so before, but I do not think anyone would find it a major such conflict. You did mention—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. The Minister did; not me.

Mr MacDonald: Sorry. The Minister mentioned community benefits, but in rather a weak way. The Members in this room—I think there have been 60-plus of us here—represent the majority of the land mass of Britain. I think the message we are sending loud and clear to the Minister is that we all feel very strongly about the community benefits, and we very much hope they will be significant. Thank you very much for allowing me to host this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered community benefits from renewable energy projects.

3.59 pm

Sitting suspended.

Estate Adoption: North-east England

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered estate adoption in the North East.

Thank you for the honour of serving under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I am grateful to have this opportunity to move the motion, which is of considerable importance to my constituency of Cramlington and Killingworth. It is a newly formed constituency, made up of new towns as well as a number of villages, covering the north of Newcastle, south-east Northumberland, and north and north-west North Tyneside. As it is on the edge of different local authorities, over the past 10 to 15 years, our villages and towns have grown with significant levels of development. These developments provide important and needed homes for our communities, but there have also been significant challenges for those communities, and adoption and delivery of infrastructure are key among those challenges.

With the commitment of the new Labour Government to deliver the homes that our country needs, we need to ensure that we are not only building homes, but sustainable communities, with buy-in from residents. Delivering timely and appropriate infrastructure is a key part of that, because a home is not just the property that we live in, but the street that we live on, and the community we are a part of. For too many of my constituents, there are unacceptable delays in the delivery of even the most basic infrastructure. Residents who have worked hard, saved, and bought their first home, their family home, or their dream home, are left without adequate road surfaces, pavements, street lighting, pedestrian crossings, and road markings. Too often, people are left in limbo—passed from one organisation to the next, with each one trying to pass the buck—paying management fees and council tax, yet not having the basics, such as completed pavements, roads or communal facilities. Residents are left frustrated and angry, with a lack of communication from those responsible, a lack of accountability, and no certainty on when their estates will be finished.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): The situation which my hon. Friend describes in her constituency is mirrored in mine; it is an issue that affects properties around the country. Locals in my constituency will know the old Birds Eye site. It was a brilliant idea to bring new housing into the town centre, on a brownfield site, but latterly it has been discovered that the estate is half-finished, the roads are unpassable, and the paths unusable. Does she agree that local authorities should be given additional powers and that there should be caps on the costs that local authorities are required to pay, to force developers to complete these estates so that people can live in their dream home?

Emma Foody: This is an experience that is shared around the country, and we need to look at all available options to we resolve this matter. We are not talking about months that residents are left in this situation, but years—five, 10, 15 years, in which families see their children grow up and leave home before a road is completed.

[Emma Foody]

Before the debate, I asked my constituents for their testimonies and experiences of the range of issues that they face. David, who lives on the Fairways estate in the west of Cramlington speaks of roads and pavements on the estate that are largely without tarmac, which has made using bikes, wheelchairs, and pushchairs dangerous outside the home. He talks of how residents are cut off from other facilities such as shops, schools, and parks, because the necessary footpaths were not built for years. He says that only after constant pressure from residents did the developer build a footpath, which is unlit and poorly laid—it would be difficult to use a pushchair or a wheelchair on it—and it links one housing estate to another through a field. If people have a car, the roads are not much better. They are often unfinished, with a higher risk of damaging vehicles. When the roads are icy, there is more risk of traffic accidents.

Another constituent, Iain, has been contacting the developer of Five Mile Park in Wideopen for three years regarding the road surface. The estate was constructed almost 10 years ago, and he has been given excuse after excuse about why work has been delayed on the roads, pavements and footpaths. The developer informed Iain that the road had been completed more than a year ago. However, poor-quality work by contractors means that it has not been brought up to adoptable standards. That is just one case of many in which a developer will claim to have completed roads, pavements or other infrastructure, but not up to a standard for the local authority to adopt them.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): This is such an important debate. Likewise, in Amble in my constituency of North Northumberland, constituents have contacted me about a private developer that has left their estate in a scruffy and untidy manner and which is using a contractual error to try to escape blame. That is in the context of a 65% decrease in planning spending in the north of England, so there is also a key issue about the resources that local authorities need. Does my hon. Friend agree that private developers should be willing to bring estates up to an acceptable standard so that local authorities are not forced to adopt unkempt and unfinished estates?

Emma Foody: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those issues. I know it is something that is raised with all Northumberland MPs, and I agree that we need to look at all mechanisms to ensure that estates are at an adoptable standard.

In my constituency, Dan from West Meadows, another estate, shared his worries that local football pitches would never be brought up to the standard that has been promised. Mark, who lives in Backworth View, told me how the street lighting on his road has never been switched on in the five years he has lived there, yet he is paying full council tax and management fees. Many residents express frustration that they are paying both estate management fees and council tax, yet, because the estate is unadopted, they have poorer quality infrastructure, despite paying more.

Local authorities often feel the brunt of complaints from residents, but they hold little power to compel developers to bring private unadopted estates to the standards required for them to be adopted. Local authorities

should not be footing the bill for delays and lack of delivery from private house builders. Too often, local authorities are hamstrung. The developers have long since left the site, so local authorities are left fielding complaints from residents, despite having little power to compel action. A chief planning officer at a local authority told me that the current system is skewed towards developers. They pick their own contractors, timeframes and materials, which are often not up to the standard for a council to be able to adopt their work, yet it is the local authority that is left with understandably frustrated residents long after the developer has gone.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I have also seen problems holding developers to account in my constituency of Stockton North, where we have estates such as Willow Sage Court, Wynyard and Queensgate, which have unfinished roads, a lack of facilities and high maintenance charges. The Competition and Markets Authority said in a report earlier this year that there was an increasing trend for this type of estate, and it recommended a set of national standards. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should have a national framework of standards for private developers, as well as sanctions for developers that do not deliver?

Emma Foody: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution; it is as if he has seen the next part of my speech as I am going to reference the CMA, so I will progress and touch on the issues he raised.

I have mentioned the homeowners, the local authorities and the developers, but there is another third party that has an important role: the utilities and the broadband companies that have to deliver the infrastructure as well. In Earsdon View, residents remain on an unadopted estate, as the developer and the water company have been unable to resolve adoption. A resident on the estate, Jim, feels that the water company and the developer have passed the buck, and nothing has been done on the issue. As he put it, residents are left with “stalemate”.

Often, it is the relationships between developers and utilities companies that hold back the full adoption of water mains and other utilities. The knock-on consequence is that roads are left open and untarmacked while the disputes are ongoing. While such issues between developers, third parties and local authorities are haggled over, residents are left to pick up the cost through estate management fees. That fee is meant to support a contractor while they carry out work on the estate, but residents have shared their experiences of being left unsatisfied by the system of estate management fees, which are often unpredictable, opaque and confusing. Many argue that they are being ripped off, with fees that can increase by unlimited and unspecified amounts each year. Residents such as Oliver fear that if fees continue to go up and they were unable to meet them they would be unable to sell their property.

The CMA report earlier this year says that one of the things that creates the most distress for homeowners on such estates is the disproportionate response time taken by management companies, as well as their response when homeowners are unable to pay. Homeowners have had their property seized because they cannot meet the costs levied by estate management companies, yet residents are left powerless to challenge the unfinished state and poor quality of their estate. People echo earlier remarks

that the existing system is skewed towards developers, with little access to justice for residents. I am glad that the Labour Government have already pledged to end the leasehold system. A developer that has not met its promises to homeowners should not be able to profiteer in relation to those same homeowners.

I am proud that this Government are taking the necessary steps to solve our housing crisis. We have a complete shortage of housing of all types. This Labour Government are being bold, with a target of 1.5 million homes during the Parliament; reform of leaseholds to end exorbitant ongoing costs for residents to live in their own homes and of the existing leasehold system; the end of section 21; and reform of the rental market. The Government have said they intend to introduce legislation to deal with the commonhold and leasehold issues that are still prevalent in today's housing market, fixing the system—adoption should be part of that.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): To pick up some of the points made by my hon. Friend about estate adoption, in particular in areas such as Medburn, Corbridge and Hexham in my constituency, residents contact me regularly, concerned about the state of their roads and the fact that we have unsafe compounds, often outside communal areas. In the rural communities that I represent, that can be particularly toxic, and it damages ongoing faith in the community and the community spirit itself. I hope the Minister can, in his response, elucidate a little the importance of adopting such estates, in particular the smaller settlements.

Emma Foody: I absolutely share the sentiments of my hon. Friend. I refer him to my earlier comments about how this is not just about building homes, but about building communities. To do that properly—the Labour Government have set out that they intend to do that—we need to be able to address the issue of unadopted estates.

The CMA report talked about common adoptable standards as one solution that would set out clearly the minimum standard that has to be met for a road to be adoptable. Where the standard is met, there should be mandatory adoption of amenities, with only a few limited exceptions. I would be grateful if the Minister responded to those suggestions in his reply.

Certainty could be provided to residents about the timescales within which the adoptable standards would be met. The Minister has talked about that previously. Such measures would give residents clarity and would enable developers to be held to account on timescales and delivery against them. The measures would strengthen the hand of residents and local authorities to hold developers accountable for putting in place the most basic infrastructure that residents ought to be able to expect. The measures would address the imbalance between developers and the rights of homeowners when it comes to adoption and delivery of infrastructure.

As my colleagues in the north-east and I have set out, residents should not be left for years on estates paying fees on top of council tax while there is unfinished infrastructure and a lack of any certainty of delivery long after the developer has left the site. People who have worked hard, saved and bought their own home deserve better than that. If we are to deliver the housing that this country needs and bring communities with us, addressing this issue and the timely delivery of appropriate

infrastructure on estates is crucial to getting that buy-in. I know that this is something that the Minister will be working on, and I look forward to his response.

4.14 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

It is a real pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) on securing this important debate. She has only been in the House for a short time, but she has already earned a well-deserved reputation as a hard-working and conscientious Member, and a doughty champion of her constituents' interests. I commend her for the impassioned case she just made in support of action to ensure that residential freeholders living on private or mixed-tenure estates in her constituency and across the country are better protected from unfair costs, and that the infrastructure and amenities they rely on are brought up to an appropriate standard.

The distinct set of problems faced by residential freeholders on private or mixed-tenure estates is well known and well understood. The problems include, as my hon. Friend has just set out in some detail, excessive or inappropriate charges levied for minimal or even non-existent services, charges that include costly and arbitrary administration fees, charges hiked without adequate justification, and charges levied when residential freeholders are in the process of selling their property.

The general lack of transparency and clarity experienced by residential freeholders in respect of how their estate management charges and fees are arrived at, and how they break down, is compounded by the distinct lack of control experienced by homeowners on estates that have what is known as an embedded management company. Under this arrangement, which encompasses around 20% of freehold estates, the company running the estate is set in the title deeds for the properties, and residents have no ability to change it. They therefore lack the ability of homeowners on estates run by resident-led companies, often with the support of managing agents, to exert at least some influence over the level of estate management charges and how funds are spent. During proceedings on the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 in the last Parliament, I pressed the previous Government, in my capacity as shadow Minister, to introduce a right for residents to take over the management of their estates. We are now giving careful consideration to the merits of doing so.

Residential freeholders on privately owned and managed estates clearly suffer from inadequate transparency in other unique respects. For example, it would appear to be fairly common for residential freeholders not to be notified of their future liability for charges early in the conveyancing process. Many learn of their exposure only at the point of completion. Even in instances in which residential freeholders are notified of their future liability in good time, many have to confront the fact that their contracts do not specify limits or caps on charges and fees. There is also a distinct problem with management fragmentation on many privately owned estates that have been constructed throughout the country over recent years, with residential freeholders, even on relatively new estates, frequently having to navigate scores of management companies, each levying fees for services in a way that further exacerbates the general lack of transparency and potential for abuse they face in respect of charges and fees.

[Matthew Pennycook]

A related problem experienced by residential freeholders in many of these estates, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth and others have mentioned, is the quality and timely delivery of infrastructure and amenities. Historically, when a local authority was to adopt an estate, it would set clear standards and provide oversight to ensure that amenities were delivered to those standards, but the delivery of such amenities is now often left to the developer, with limited engagement from local authorities. I have heard countless stories—we have heard some more today—of how this development is leaving people living in homes on unfinished estates or with facilities that at best are substandard, and at worst can be dangerous.

At the root of many of these problems are the falling levels of adoption of amenities on housing estates by local authorities. If hon. Members have not seen it, I urge them to read the CMA's house building market study, published in February, which is the most detailed study of the problem we have come across. It detailed how the problem appears to be driven by the discretionary nature of adoption, by house builders' incentives not to pursue adoption in the first place and by local authority concerns. That must be acknowledged, because I have often heard calls—we did so in the last Parliament, from the then Government—that the costs should simply be put on to local authorities to force adoption. However, there are concerns among local authorities about the future ongoing costs of maintaining amenities that are often delivered to a poor standard, in the context of pressures on their resources and finances.

The situation is leading to poor outcomes for homeowners and, in some cases, potentially serious detriment from exposure to costs—too often opaque and difficult to control, and levied, as my hon. Friend said, in addition to council tax—for amenities that are open to use by the general public. The Government are clear that the current situation is unfair and unreasonable, and it must be brought to an end. There is a pressing need to better protect residential freeholders who are experiencing such problems on existing freehold estates, but also an urgent need to reduce the prevalence of these arrangements, which the CMA estimates represent a significant proportion of new housing supply across the country.

Underpinning many of the issues of concern raised today is the fundamental absence of regulation or oversight of the practices of estate management companies, and the fact that residential freeholders do not enjoy statutory rights equivalent to those held by leaseholders. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 took steps to give existing homeowners on such estates additional protections and enable them to hold their estate manager to account for the money that is spent.

The Act created a new statutory regime for homeowners based on leaseholders' rights. It includes improved transparency over such charges to ensure that they are reasonably set, and a new right to challenge them if they are not. Bringing those measures into effect will require detailed secondary legislation. Given the considerable amount of detail and thought that we need to put into them, we

are working at pace, but I hope my hon. Friends will appreciate that it is important that we take time to get the detail right. If we introduce that secondary legislation and it contains flaws, it is their constituents and mine who will suffer, so it is important that we take time to get it right and to engage with stakeholders. Work is ongoing in that area. .

We are clear that the measures in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act are not enough, which is why, in the Government's manifesto, we committed to ending the injustice of fleecing and better protecting residential freeholders against unfair costs. That is why we reiterated that commitment in the King's Speech. This is a complex area of policy, which is why the Government intend to consult with homeowners, developers, local authorities, management companies and others so that we can develop meaningful and effective solutions to these problems. The consultation that we intend to publish in due course will need to consider a wide range of trade-offs, including costs to homeowners and local authorities, potential impacts on housing supply and the links to the planning system. In direct response to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald) asked, we will absolutely consider the recommendations made by the CMA and respond to its report directly in the interim, but it is one of a number of potential solutions to this problem. We want to consider everything in the round to ensure that we have the right answer when we bring it forward.

The reforms we intend to make in this area, in whatever form they ultimately take, sit alongside our wider plans to bring the feudal system of leasehold to an end, and they need to be seen in that context. This is a distinct subset of problems on private and mixed tenure estates, but it sits alongside a range of problems experienced by residential leaseholders and freeholders. That is why the Government will take steps to enact the remaining Law Commission recommendations around enfranchisement and the right to manage; it is why we will take steps to reinvigorate commonhold and ensure that it is the default tenure; and it is why we intend to take steps to tackle specific problems, such as the injustice of forfeiture and unaffordable, unreasonable ground rents. I hope to be able to say more on that topic soon.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth and other hon. Members for raising their concerns about this issue. We acknowledge that it is a problem, and I hope that they will take my assurances at face value when I say that we are working on solutions to it and will bring them forward in due course. We want to listen to the experiences of hon. Members across the country—although this is a north-east debate, the problem very much affects constituencies in all parts of England. As I say, we are committed to taking firm action to end the injustice of fleecing and better protect residential freeholders from those costs, and I look forward to bringing further information to the House to that end.

Question put and agreed to.

4.24 pm

Sitting suspended.

Business Confidence

4.30 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered business confidence.

It is a pleasure Mrs Harris, to serve under your chairmanship today.

“Sustained economic growth is the only route to improving the prosperity of our country, and the living standards of working people”—

so intoned the Labour manifesto published over 114 days ago, ahead of the general election. I am sure that most, if not all, of us across the House accept the basic and fundamental premise that such growth is what ultimately funds our vital public services, which are crucial to all our communities.

Reducing inflation, giving business confidence to invest and delivering growth was a hallmark of the outgoing Conservative Government. After a difficult few years affected by the pandemic, it remains important for all Members of Parliament to be business champions for our communities. I thank every business, in all our communities, for what they do every day—every business on our high streets, in industrial estates and in the rural economy. I am thinking of the self-employed: those taking a chance so that others can be employed, sectors can grow and families are supported.

Many businesses in the Mid Sussex, Wealden and Lewes districts are hidden—family businesses, start-ups in back bedrooms, future dreams and more opportunities. They are, above all, a way to connect our communities to a thriving local economy and an investment in our future. They are giving, truly, an opportunity to all. Very shortly, I will be hosting my “Taste of East Grinstead and Uckfield constituency” event in the House of Commons, a follow-up to my most recent business breakfast at the Highlands Inn in Uckfield. I am sure that many other MPs will be showcasing businesses in their constituencies and working with them in this way.

Despite lingering covid shocks and the devastating war in Ukraine, inflation reached 2% by May and economic growth rebounded strongly, reaching 0.5% in quarter 2. Our dominant services sector grew by 1.5% in the same quarter. Key to delivering economic growth is, of course, inspiring confidence—the so-called “animal spirits” in the oft remembered words of John Maynard Keynes. They are a vital pre-requisite. Indicators suggest that confidence was growing in the first half of this year.

Like many things, the new Labour Government have failed to live up to their own hype, let alone the aspirations of millions of working people or businesses who create those jobs and opportunities all across our land. I welcome the international investment summit and the £63 billion it raised, but I remind the House that almost half that investment had already been previously announced by the Conservative Government; I warn the Minister of the danger of double counting.

In a little over 100 days, the Institute of Directors economic confidence index has fallen to minus 38—the lowest since December 2022. The same index points out business investment intentions, showing the sharpest drop since the onset of the pandemic: it was plus 24 in

July and minus six come September—the lowest since September 2020. CBI survey trends have shown that manufacturers thought that output would fall over the next year: minus seven compared with plus nine in August 2024. The latest purchasing managers index for the services sector is also, I am afraid, heading in the wrong direction, showing that our economic recovery is somewhat running out of steam under the new Government.

What is the cause of this reversal? Institute of Directors members cite ongoing concerns over tax changes and the cost of new Labour reforms. The British Chambers of Commerce stated:

“On the domestic front, many businesses are increasingly anxious about the direction of economic

policy, and taxation has now become their primary concern”.

Now, the biggest single concern for business leaders is tax. A survey undertaken by the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales cites tax as the chief concern—the highest ranking on the survey ever. Given the mood music emanating from the top of Government, how can that be a surprise? Both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have repeatedly warned that further taxes are coming, but have repeatedly refused to tell us where—a hard winter, not just for pensioners but for business. We heard that clearly at the Dispatch Box, just last week. This is the result of a single structural decision to delay the Budget until October, which has simply allowed rumours in.

Already, the situation is changing the behaviour of businesses. A survey by Evelyn Partners shows that 29% of business owners are looking to sell, while hard data shows the Treasury pocketing the highest level of capital gains tax in 15 years as investors head to the exit door. That is hardly a recipe for the growth—let alone stability, which the Labour Party promised our constituents. Just last week in Prime Minister’s questions, and recently in the media, the Prime Minister refused to rule out a rise in employer national insurance. I remind hon. Members that the Labour manifesto was clear, stating that:

“Labour will not increase taxes on working people, which is why we will not increase National Insurance”.

The situation has created a falling away of job vacancies. I remind the Minister and his Government that local small business owners are clearly working people. This is a pure jobs tax. Labour’s position now seems to be that taxing working people is bad but taxing their jobs is good. It is no wonder that businesses are confused and concerned.

One agricultural business in my constituency recently wrote to me:

“I hear dark stories about the forthcoming budget and the possibility that the financial support for the agricultural sector of the economy is likely to be reduced or even slashed. If this were to happen the viability of my family’s enterprise would be at risk and the livelihoods of between 20 and 30 families would be threatened. Our business is focussed on producing milk, grain and timber for the nation and on caring for the environment in which we live and operate.”

I am sure that other hon. Members here will be bringing similar concerns from their own constituencies and reporting similar things.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on bringing this important and timely debate. Many farmers

[Helen Grant]

in my constituency of Maidstone and Malling are having a very tough, wet time, like the farmers in her own constituency. I believe that, for many, business confidence is pretty much at an all-time low. Does she agree that reducing red tape, regulation, bureaucracy and endless reporting, and having a slightly more light-touch approach in terms of planning and the re-diversification of farms, could boost business confidence and inspire and motivate farmers?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right: I have had conversations in my own district of Mid Sussex about supporting diversification in the rural economy. If things were changing on the high street, they would be supported; if they are in a rural business, they are blocked. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that the Minister is listening, although it seems that his party is not here to listen. I thank hon. Members here from the other parties, who are keenly supporting their own constituents too.

As I said, this is hardly a recipe for growth, let alone stability. A farming conference is coming up shortly at the South of England showground in Ardingly in my constituency, and that will be vital to business. Sponsorship in support of that has been absolutely key. I take this opportunity to wish good luck to Fallow Meadow, a new event space in West Hoathly in my constituency—another rural business taking a chance to diversify in order to support the family farm.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for setting the scene so well. Does she agree that small businesses are the backbone of our communities—they certainly are in my constituency—yet were hardest hit post covid? Recovery has not been easy. Given the increase in the cost of living, small businesses are finding it increasingly difficult to stay competitive with the online monster. Does she agree that confidence can come only when the Government are working hard to regulate and tax online businesses effectively and support all businesses in this new tech age, so that the ones that have been there forever can still be there for the future?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, about his community and the local economy in Northern Ireland. This matters so much. These people are stridently working to earn wages every week—not only for themselves, but for their sectors, families and communities.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about the online challenge, which is gargantuan. It is absolutely right for us to seek to future-proof many of these businesses, which have been going for decades. It is difficult to start a business, let alone maintain one. If we let businesses fail because we do not support them for the future, we will look back in real horror.

Senior businesses, let alone small businesses, are already warning that the employment package announced last week will limit investment and reduce growth and jobs in years to come. Of particular concern is the cost imposed on small businesses. The Federation of Small Businesses is leading the charge on that, warning that small businesses will be looking at the changes with trepidation. The Government have only just managed

to meet their self-imposed target of 100 days. They have left 70 measures to come in for 2026, meaning that uncertainty for businesses involved will carry on. That is a real concern.

Comments from Ministers over the past few weeks have caused chaos. First, the Leader of the House stated that there would have been a real risk of a run on the pound if the Government had not withdrawn winter fuel support from our pensioners; in the meantime, the Prime Minister had to disavow the Transport Secretary's comments, stating that she did not speak for the Government. I say to Ministers that they speak not only for their Departments but for industry and sectors. They would do well to stop walking around with placards and remember that they are, allegedly, running the country.

I appreciate that the Prime Minister is new, and collective responsibility among Ministers is a cornerstone of Cabinet government. I am sure that this Minister will be working diligently to do what he can to support that. I was a Minister for a number of years—I was Employment Minister during the covid years—and I know how difficult it is. I genuinely wish Ministers well. Holding this debate today and being really honest about businesses' and our constituents' concerns has meant that the issues have been aired and heard. The national interest demands that the Government get a grip so that they can unleash the investment through the summit, spur economic growth, deliver those local jobs and live up to the promises that they have made to the British people. Otherwise, we are in for a long and costly five years.

In closing, I ask the Minister to reassure my businesses and our communities that the Government truly understand the impact of instability. What action will the Government take about Crawley college, for example? Unfortunately, it is shutting down engineering places as we strive for the new future. That concerns me because many businesses in East Grinstead and beyond need such engineering and apprenticeship places to support their future. Ministers should be truly working across Government to make sure that the next five years are a success for all our communities and constituencies, so that we have the public services and local economies that we are all striving for and aspire to.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the Front-Bench speakers at 5.8 pm. All Members should take that into consideration and keep their remarks under five minutes.

4.45 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Thank you for that direction, Mrs Harris; I will follow it directly. I want to focus solely on a small part of business confidence: the confidence of businesses across the United Kingdom in the UK's internal market. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the mover of the motion, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), said, small and medium businesses are the backbone of our communities, and nowhere more so in Northern Ireland than in my constituency of South Antrim. We have a real challenge at the minute with the outworkings of the Windsor framework and how our small businesses can sell to, and purchase parts and other things they want to sell on from, the rest of the UK. They are having difficulty getting parts to sell and selling across the Irish sea.

Prior to this debate being called a small business wrote to me, which is why I thought it would be useful to come here. To survive, that small business went to online selling through Amazon. It was looking for some advice on what will happen after 13 December, when the EU's general product safety regulation, which will apply to those selling online from Northern Ireland, will kick off. It said:

"As an online business this is starting to do us a lot of harm already. Places like Amazon where we do most of our business are making us do compliance reports for every item and we probably have over 60k items that have to be done one at a time."

The GPSR is adding additional bureaucracy and cost to those small businesses to such an extent that suppliers are saying that they will no longer post to Northern Ireland, completely destroying business confidence across what should be our United Kingdom. I am meeting an English company later this week that tells me it wants to supply Northern Ireland, but, because of the introduction of the EU's GPSR, it will look to cease trading into Northern Ireland. The GPSR comes into effect on 13 December: that is three weeks prior to the Christmas and new year sales, a crucial time for small businesses that rely on online sales.

Two bodies were recently created and announced by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland: Intertrade UK and the Windsor framework independent monitoring panel. We thought that they could answer our questions and queries, but I have asked the Northern Ireland Office and we are still waiting for them to be appointed or established. All the while, the clock is ticking down on what our consumers, suppliers and sellers in Northern Ireland want to achieve. I hope the Minister can provide reassurance or guidance on that today, because I have asked the Department for Business and Trade and the Northern Ireland Office and still I can give no reassurance or guidance to the small and medium-sized companies in Northern Ireland who want it.

The hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield referred to the international investment summit and the announcement of £63 billion of investment. I appreciate that she talked about double funding and the double announcement. I would have been happy if it had been indicated that any of that was coming to Northern Ireland. From what I see in the announcement that was made, England gets a fair share, Wales gets some and Scotland gets some, but nothing is coming to Northern Ireland. We would welcome any of the £63 billion or 38,000 jobs that were announced.

4.48 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a real privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) on securing this important debate in a very timely manner. It is so timely because the more I speak to businesses or business organisations, the more the phrase "holding pattern" comes up. That is down to of the uncertainty that has been created in the first 100 days of this Labour Government. Frankly, a lot of business organisations and businesses thought that the promise of change meant change for the better. Clearly, that was not the case, because, as we have just heard, the business confidence monitor of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales—I am a chartered accountant by profession—has dipped. That is consistent with what we are seeing across the patch.

Politicians often refer to businesses and small businesses, which I used to cater for—when I was president of the Greater Birmingham chambers of commerce, the majority of our members were small businesses—as the lifeblood of our communities. That is a very easy phrase to put out there, but it has to be more than a slogan. They are the businesses that define what our communities stand for. They are the ones that create jobs, take risks and create the real wealth.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield, I welcome the investment, but I think the figures of the new and old money will be disputed—I am sure we will do that in the main Chamber and in here. As I have said before, the Government's successes will be the country's successes, so we welcome that level of investment, but investment only comes when businesses have confidence to invest.

It is about not just domestic investment but international investors. The Labour Government often talk about what they have inherited. As I was the Minister responsible for tech and the digital economy up until the election, I know that we had the third most valuable tech economy in the world. We had some of the highest levels of investment and were the fastest-growing in the G7. That was all defined by the fact that people felt confident enough to invest. Weeks before the general election was called, we had about £2.5 billion come in in one week.

I want to stress the importance of business confidence and economic confidence. Damage is done when the Prime Minister talks about there being worse to come. On the back of the political choices the Government are making, there may well be worse to come, but they will not be able to deliver on the economic growth and public sector investment they want if the private sector does not believe that they can do it.

There has been a lot of chatter about moving the goalposts on fiscal rules. There is no magic money tree, as has been said. There is no definite way of putting money out there without the chickens coming home to roost. There is always a price to be paid, and the burden will be borne by the businesses of the United Kingdom. They will be the ones that will be taxed. It is incredibly worrying that we have not had clarity on the capital gains issue. I think there was a report yesterday, but I will wait for the Chancellor to come to the Dispatch Box to confirm that capital gains will not rise, because that will affect investor sentiment.

National insurance is very much in the media today, and that question is really hampering because if employers have to pay more national insurance, the cost will be borne by consumers. That will affect demand and recruitment and labour decisions—I say labour with a small l, but there might possibly be a big L involved at the next election if there is such an impact.

My community is very entrepreneurial and there are businesses there, as well as businesses in my business forum, which all hon. Members are welcome to join. Britain is a great place to do business, and it is a great place to invest and grow, but that is despite this Labour Government.

4.53 pm

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris, particularly on this topic of business confidence. My constituency of South Basildon and East Thurrock

[James McMurdock]

is rich with potential. Basildon is the industrial powerhouse of Essex, and Thurrock commands a prime location on the Thames. That is not to say that both spots are without their challenges. Basildon faces a significant housing crisis, and the high street is suffering, as many high streets are. But with that comes a desire to improve things, and to improve things we need businesses to invest. It goes without saying that those businesses must have the confidence to do so.

Thurrock was unfortunately embroiled in an investment scandal to the tune of £1.5 billion and is in a very difficult situation. The interest servicing that debt alone is approximately 40% of its operating budget, so one can imagine the challenges it faces. That is exactly why we need investment and growth and business confidence. Some specific figures have been given on the dip in confidence, which I would say is—to put it lightly—unfortunate.

It would also be putting it lightly to say that I was somewhat dismayed to hear of decisions made in the past few weeks that will directly impact my constituency, such as the delaying—again—of the lower Thames crossing. I have spoken against the lower Thames crossing because I do not feel it is ambitious enough. Given the 15 years and £800 million spent on its planning, to be in approximately the same state of overextension in our road capacity in just a decade's time—just five years after its completion—does not seem to be a good use of £9 billion of taxpayers' money. That said, the decision taken was not to scrap the plan or not go ahead with it; the decision was to delay it, which I might consider to be uncertainty.

Furthermore, as we have seen in the papers, I was somewhat taken by surprise—that is also putting it gently—by the language used to respond to a business that does something legal, but which some people may not like, which was akin to language used in my university days. I am referring to the £1 billion project, relating to DP World, that was jeopardised. DP World is an extremely important business for not just my constituency but our country. It is the only operator with two deep-sea access area ports, and has direct freight to distribute goods across our country that come in from all over the world. It is essential. Whether people have workers' rights in mind or not, for it to be treated with a slight lack of the professionalism that we might expect from those in high office was a shock to me, and to local businesses as well.

I conclude by saying that my constituency wants to enrich this country. My constituents want to work hard and to invest and they want their businesses to flourish, and they are willing to put in the time and effort to achieve that. We have all the ingredients to do those things. However, just this month alone, we have seen two projects totalling £10 billion very literally jeopardised. Does the Minister agree that that is not good enough, and that, going forward, more considered and professional language must be used when communicating with or about our major industries and businesses? Will the Minister also consider the approach to major infrastructure projects and how delaying them impacts not just residents but local businesses? There are knock-on effects of such delays—we have building projects right now that are literally dependent on the lower Thames crossing, which has been delayed.

4.58 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) on securing the debate. I am proud of my constituency of Wokingham, of Berkshire and of the Thames valley for being one of the UK's centres for growth. The area is home to international investment that brings well-paying jobs and prosperity into our area, building an economy fit for the future.

In our small and medium-sized companies, we find innovation and sustainable local growth. The hope is that one day, those businesses will go on to rival the giants that dominate the scene today. The past has been prosperous, but the present is beginning to show some concerning cracks.

In Wokingham, between 2014 and 2022, the number of new business births per 10,000 people fell by 31%. The number of people of working age in Wokingham has decreased. In December 2022, the figure was 83%, but by December 2023 it had fallen to 78.6%. The regulatory burden on businesses to export is growing, with Santander UK's trade barometer showing that only 22% of businesses say that it is easier to trade internationally than it was five years ago. Covid-19 will have had an effect on these figures, but businesses in my constituency tell me that the chaos and instability of the Conservative Government impacted their business just as much.

I will ask the Minister a few questions, to try to ensure that Wokingham, Berkshire and the Thames valley continue to have a prosperous future. First, will he back small businesses and empower them to create new local jobs, including by abolishing business rates and replacing them with a commercial landowner levy to help our high streets? Secondly, will he bring down trade barriers and enhance our relationship with our closest trading partners, including fixing our broken relationship with Europe? Thirdly, will he speak to Network Rail and the Secretary of State for Transport and convince them of the need for a western railway link to Heathrow airport? Finally, will the Minister for Investment meet me and the Thames valley chamber of commerce to understand what businesses need to attract further inward investment?

5.1 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) on securing this important debate. She quite rightly pointed out that a strong private sector that is incentivised to invest is the foundation and cornerstone of the living standards and prosperity that we want all of our constituents to be able to enjoy.

Over the last four years, the UK has dealt with a financial crisis, a pandemic, and an energy shock caused by the war in Ukraine. Despite those changes, since 2010 growth has been higher in the UK than in every other large European economy, with unemployment halved and absolute poverty down. When the Conservatives left government, the UK's was one of the fastest-growing economies in the G7. However, it is clear that the new Government's policies and politics have hurt the confidence of businesses across the board; I hear that regularly across my Bromsgrove constituency.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I am amazed to hear the hon. Gentleman's tone the day after the business investment summit. Anyone would think that this debate is happening in a different world or galaxy. What about the billions of pounds that were pledged yesterday? That is action and commitment from businesses that have confidence in this Labour Government, with their mandate and their deep commitment to a new partnership with business. Did he not read the newspaper this morning? Those record-breaking figures spell the truth about Labour's record-breaking commitment to business investment.

Bradley Thomas: In response, did the hon. Member not recognise the conditions that the Government inherited on their election in July? It has already been pointed out in this Chamber this afternoon that the Government have been rehashing billions of pounds' worth of investment that the previous Government secured and are now passing it off as their own.

Returning to the points that I wish to make, the new Government have claimed that their election has positively impacted business confidence, but the Institute of Directors' economic confidence index, which measures business leader optimism about the prospects for the UK economy, continued to fall in September to minus 38, having been minus 12 in August. According to the Office for National Statistics, 55% of respondents to a voluntary business survey about challenges facing the economy felt that their businesses' performance would stay the same or decrease over the next year. The CBI's industrial trends survey for September shows that more manufacturers think that output will fall over the next three months than think it will rise. Potentially most critically of all, GfK's consumer confidence index fell to minus 20 in September, suggesting that consumers lack confidence in the vitality of our economy. In large part, that is due to concerns about tax rises—concerns shared by many businesses.

Instead of making the UK a hostile destination for investment, the Government should work to ensure that it is the most attractive destination possible for investment. To become an attractive destination for inward investment, we need to look urgently at the factors that will determine investment decisions. The tax burden, which rose following the global pandemic and the unprecedented level of support provided by the previous Government, is damaging business confidence through fear that there will be higher taxes after the Budget at the end of this month. We need to focus on incentives for businesses investing in large-scale capital projects, access to skills, a long-term industrial plan for the UK economy that will once again reward investment, and a concerted effort on skills development that will lead to a long-term uplift in industrial resilience. That is critical in a world in which our adversaries seek to gain advantage over us and blunt our economic edge.

We have a great opportunity to reduce our dependence on foreign imports and focus on the long term. That is particularly crucial to my constituency. I would like the Government to focus on small businesses and foster a greater sense of individual entrepreneurship at a grassroots level, which would be a massive benefit to constituencies across the country, town centres such as Bromsgrove's, and rural businesses.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bradley Thomas: I will not, as I am about to wrap up.

My key asks are for the Government to be less ideological in their pursuit of investment in the UK, and to focus on the long term and on conditions that will ultimately drive businesses' inward investment decisions. They should focus not just on the large corporates, although they are fundamental, but on promoting grassroots entrepreneurship and cracking down on regulatory bureaucracy, which gets in the way of business investment decisions.

5.6 pm

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris, and to speak on behalf of the Liberal Democrats as their business spokesperson for the first time—I hope hon. Members will be nice to me.

I congratulate the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) on securing the debate. I share her concerns about the high street, retailers and microbusinesses—like her, I have many in my constituency. I welcome the international investment summit and the Government's industrial strategy, which will give businesses certainty and incentivise them to invest in new technologies, grow the economy, create jobs and tackle the climate crisis. However, page 5 of the strategy makes it clear that the Government will focus on urban areas; there seems to be no strategy for growing the rural economy. The Government say that they will devolve significant powers to the mayoral combined authorities, but I must ask the Minister what their plans are for areas of rural England that are outside metro mayoral authorities, such as my constituency of Chippenham.

A recent report by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs stated that about 14% of manufacturing happens in rural locations, and a considerable amount of that is significant to those regional economies. Many of those small and medium-sized enterprises specialise in areas such as food processing and equipment manufacturing, a lot of which comes from the diversification of farming families. Rural areas are at the forefront of the UK's renewable energy production: 70% of wind energy, and a lot of solar energy, is produced in rural areas. Chippenham has a large number of rural solar farms, which are important, up-and-coming local businesses.

Planning takes twice as long in the UK as it takes most of our EU friends and neighbours, which is a barrier to investment. I share hon. Members' concerns about planning delays for farming families trying to diversify; our complicated planning structure creates unnecessary cost for lots of small businesses in rural areas. Dave Ricks of drug manufacturer Eli Lilly stated that planning processes are an "impediment" to opening businesses in the UK, unlike in the US, Ireland and Norway. Johnson Matthey, which manufactures hydrogen fuel cells in my constituency and is the UK's biggest investor in research and development in that area, said that it is really concerned that we will lose out to China, just as we did with battery technology, if we do not support infrastructure for hydrogen networks—it too faces planning delays. A recent DEFRA report highlights that 18% of rural businesses cite poor infrastructure, particularly digital and transport networks, as a significant barrier to growth. Again, the rural infrastructure simply is not there.

[Sarah Gibson]

I am sure that many Members agree that, although the Conservative Government failed business and workers on stability over the last few years, the need for stability could never be stronger. If we expect businesses to commit to promoting skills, equality and good governance, and to supporting their local communities, we need to create a stable business environment, with smart regulation and investment in infrastructure, research and innovation.

Like the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), I ask the Minister to take SMEs seriously given their importance to our rural economy. A serious issue that has come up time and again in my constituency is unfair tax hikes, especially hikes to business rates. I share the hon. Member's concern about national insurance rises for small businesses, and especially for employers. I share the pain expressed by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) about the red tape suffered by businesses in Northern Ireland; businesses in my constituency that export to the EU are suffering from similar red tape, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) expressed his concern on behalf of small businesses doing the same in his constituency.

5.11 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Harris, for chairing the debate, and well done to my hon. Friend the Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) for securing it. What a good debate it has been. It has been a debate of two halves. From this half of the room—the Opposition half—we have heard lots of interventions and lots of thoughts about business confidence, while the other half of the Chamber was entirely empty for the majority of the debate.

There have been some very interesting contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield rightly thanked businesses in all of our constituencies. She focused in particular on the role of family businesses as the thriving local hubs of our communities, as well on as the economic growth that they provide. She correctly identified the importance of animal spirits, which are vital for growing an economy. In the first half of this year, confidence was growing in our business community, but what a disastrous change we have had, with business confidence now falling as a result of tax fears.

David Pinto-Duschinsky: Will the hon. Member give way?

Jerome Mayhew: No, I am not going to take an intervention. I feel quite strongly that if an hon. Gentleman cannot make it to the start of a debate, wanders in halfway through and then seeks to make an intervention to ask a question—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. Can we keep it to the debate, please?

Jerome Mayhew: I will, but I would just like to refute this. Perhaps if the hon. Gentleman takes out *Hansard*, he will find the answer to his question in the first half of the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) is right that business is in an uncertain holding pattern and that SMEs are the lifeblood of our

community. The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock) is quite right to say that his community is rich with potential. He expressed concerns, however, over the delay of the decision on the lower Thames crossing, and said that he thought the Government should have taken a more professional approach towards DP World. I agree with him. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) rightly pointed out that between 2010 and 2024, growth was higher in the UK economy than in all the main EU economies, and that there is opportunity if we focus on entrepreneurship and on rural businesses.

Throughout this debate we have highlighted the slump in confidence since Labour came to power—and not just in business confidence, but in consumer confidence. Why is that? Well, do not take my word for it. The ex-chief economist of the Bank of England, Andy Haldane, said that the Government's approach has generated “fear and foreboding and uncertainty among consumers, among businesses, among investors”.

Labour's plan appears to have been, “We'll come into power, we'll say it's all terrible and so much worse than we thought it was, we'll say that there's this black hole”—a black hole, by the way, that Treasury officials were unable to find when the *Financial Times* asked to see the data behind it—“and this will give us political cover for long-planned tax increases.”

The problem is that political games in this case have been paid for in lost jobs and futures. After nearly four months of inaction, this inept political vacuum has been filled by speculation, rumour, kite flying and denial. The “So what?” is that Government incompetence has cost jobs. The CBI has just said that it is clear that firms are holding back from employment because of Budget fears. The consultancy AJ Bell has said that directors of listed companies have doubled sales of shares since the general election—that is businesses voting with their feet. Evelyn Partners has said that a third of private business owners with turnovers in excess of £5 million have accelerated their exit strategies. Why? Because of fears about capital gains tax and inheritance tax relief. This is our entrepreneurial future being destroyed by the inaction of the Government.

It does not matter whether the rumours are true or false; the fact that they are rumours is having devastating impacts in its own right. Now the direction is clear, and it appears that the Government will increase employer national insurance contributions. As Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said, that is a clear breach of the manifesto promise. When considering the issue previously, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that an increase was an anti-business measure—I agree. The Office for Budget Responsibility has told us that an increase in employer national insurance contributions will lower wages.

Labour is pulling off the triple: misleading the public, harming business and lowering wages—all with the same policy. The more business sees of this Government, the less it likes them. When will this party of opposition that finds itself in government get a grip?

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): I too take the opportunity in the usual way to thank the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) for securing this

important debate. At the outset, let me echo her thanks to businesses across the country for the wealth they create, the better communities they help promote and, crucially, the good jobs they offer. I do not know where her “Taste of East Grinstead” event is taking place, but if it is in the House, I will happily come along if I can. If not, I would be happy to hear from her separately about the particular businesses that turn up to that event.

As a number of interventions from hon. Members have made clear, small businesses, in particular, are the backbone of our economy. I feel particularly privileged to be the Minister for Small Businesses and to hear some of the remarkable stories about how those small businesses came into being and the successes they have had in each of our communities. That is why I am pleased that we have been making progress in government on following through on the commitments we made in opposition in our nine-point plan to back small businesses. If time allows, I hope to touch on some of those points.

I welcome the support of all hon. Members who have spoken for their business communities, even if I did not quite agree with the tone of all their remarks. All of us need the businesses in our communities to succeed, and it is great to hear so many Opposition and Government Members wanting to back them to succeed.

The Prime Minister could not have been any clearer about this Government’s guiding mission: we will go for growth at every opportunity. Growth and backing business is the surest path to prosperity and to improving the living standards of working people. We have made it clear that our goal is to deliver the highest sustained growth in the G7, more secure jobs, better wages and, as a result, much greater funding for our public services, including our brilliant NHS. It surely goes without saying that investment is key to driving that growth.

I gently say to Conservative Members that the problem is that the Administrations of the past 14 years sadly starved our economy of the investment it needed. Whether it is the fall-out from the poor-quality deal the Conservatives negotiated with the European Union after the Brexit referendum, the revolving door of Prime Ministers—I think every Conservative Member here backed Liz Truss’s disastrous mini-Budget—the seven separate growth strategies since 2010 or the 11 different Business Secretaries in as many years, I say to Opposition Members that all of that might help to explain why they lost the confidence of business at the last general election.

If Opposition Members are not convinced by that, I would underline that there was also no plan to help small businesses grow, export or get into new markets. Support in that area was cut back and, in some cases, axed completely. There was no delivery on repeated promises to comprehensively reform business rates and no serious plan to tackle the scourge of late payments, which many small businesses face at the moment. Vital infrastructure projects that were fundamental to growth in many communities were cancelled, sensible measures to open up opportunities for investment in green energy projects were blocked, there was no obvious plan to back the high street—a point made by the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock)—and, in particular, there was no serious plan to tackle retail crime going forward.

The result is that British firms have not felt that investing domestically was an attractive enough proposition. There has been much reluctance to adopt new technology,

to upskill employees or to plough money into research and development. Sadly, that is why the UK has sat right at the bottom of global rankings for business investment for quite some time—27th out of 30 in the OECD last year, behind Mexico, Slovenia and the Slovak Republic.

Robin Swann: I thank the Minister for that point, which goes back to my contribution. This is about seeing what the Government can do in the next few weeks to give small businesses in my community in South Antrim the assurance they need to continue their online presence and sell into the UK.

Gareth Thomas: I thank the hon. Member for his earlier remarks and his intervention. Let me be clear that my Department will continue to work with local partners in Northern Ireland, including InterTradeIreland, to develop and deliver our trade and industrial strategies. If the hon. Member wants to speak to me, I would be happy to help the small businesses that have written to him to join up with the support available in Northern Ireland.

Members across the House will be pleased that there is good news on growth. I welcome the generous support of the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield for the work done yesterday at the international investment summit and in the run-up to it. A raft of measures were announced to help boost business confidence going forward and to spur growth, and I will recap on some of them. We are determined to make it simpler for companies to relocate to the UK through a new corporate re-domiciliation regime, which I am sure will strengthen our position as a global business hub. We have announced a business-boosting lift to the thresholds on company sizes, which means we will have new legislation by the end of the year reducing the burdens on start-ups and SMEs, saving them nearly a quarter of a billion pounds. We will be consulting next year on our ambitious modernisation programme for the UK’s entire non-financial reporting regime. We are seeking to make shareholder communication easier, and we are clarifying the law on virtual annual general meetings.

Those improvements, helping to reduce red tape, could be worth up to £16 billion a year to investment going forward. As a result of the pro-innovation, pro-business, pro-wealth creation policies we are pursuing, big-hitting global businesses are confidently investing in the UK. The total investment pledged by international and British firms, both in the run-up to and during the summit yesterday, now stands at an estimated £63 billion, which will help ensure that 38,000 jobs are created. I would gently suggest that that is a resounding vote of confidence in both the UK’s economy and the Government’s growth mission.

Mr Frith: The Minister is making a powerful and clear argument for this Government’s commitment to a new partnership with business. Does he agree that although the sum of investment yesterday is important, grabs the headlines and gets people confident about the future, part of the brief he is responsible for is small businesses, and seeing that they get part of the large investment that was committed to? Will he explore in his final remarks how important that is to small business?

Gareth Thomas: If I may, I will come to that in one second.

[Gareth Thomas]

One of the measures announced yesterday that will strengthen business confidence further, and which many businesses have been crying out for, as they told us when we were in opposition and as they have been telling us since we came into government, is an industrial strategy. All Governments have an industrial strategy, consciously or not, through act or omission. This Government are choosing actively to have and implement an industrial strategy to help businesses plan, not just for the next year but for the next 10 years and beyond. That strategy will not just help large businesses or ones in urban areas, which is something the hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) asked about—I congratulate her on making her first speech as an Opposition spokesperson—but benefit all parts of the country and businesses large and small.

Our industrial strategy will inject capital into eight high-productivity, high-export, high-investment sectors in which the UK has a significant competitive advantage: financial services, professional and business services, clean energy industries, digital and technologies, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, creative industries and defence. Above all, our industrial strategy will show that we are listening and responding to the needs of businesses.

To that end, we will engage on those more complex issues that we know are barriers to investment: skills, data, finance, regulation, energy prices, grid connections, infrastructure and planning, which a couple of hon. Members rightly referenced. We want to view every single one of those measures through the lens of investment promotion. That is how we will continue to build long-term confidence, ensuring that our policies are made with business, for business.

Hon. Members raised questions about our Make Work Pay plan, and the number of businesses backing that plan is striking. On flexibility for employees, over 60% of UK managers surveyed by the University of Birmingham a couple of years ago said that home working improved their teams' motivation, and a staggering 75% said flexible working boosted their teams' productivity—something Opposition Members have complained about in the past. It is a similar story on pay. Research by the Institute for Public Policy Research shows that

70% of managers believe that raising the national minimum wage to reflect living costs would help, not hinder, their businesses. The hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield referenced the fact that many of the measures announced as part of our package will come in in 2026. That will enable us to continue to talk to businesses and employee representatives to ensure that we get the details right.

I have no doubt that the Budget on the 30th of this month will be a Budget for growth. We face a very difficult inheritance as a Government, and we have to fix the fundamentals of our economy. I gently say to the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) that he may not be comfortable with the mess his party left us, but figures released last month show that there was another month of record Government borrowing, with debt at 100% of GDP. That is the inheritance that the previous Government left us. We have to fix those fundamentals, and we will do. It will be a Budget for growth, and I have no doubt that our economy and British business will continue to grow from strength to strength.

5.29 pm

Mims Davies: I thank the Minister for his response and will welcome him with gusto to the “Taste of East Grinstead and Uckfield” event. I will forgive his amnesia about the national insurance contribution cuts, the changes that the Conservative Government made to VAT registration, the support that we gave SMEs, and the Help to Grow portal.

I thank all hon. Members for their support in this debate about business confidence, and I implore this Government, in their Budget, to give the country the stability that we need, because if there is a further jobs tax, it will have to be matched by people paying it in the public sector.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered business confidence.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 15 October 2024

DEFENCE

Army Structural Change: Royal Army Medical Service

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): The Government are committed to ensuring a combat credible Army that is structured to meet its purpose—protecting the nation and helping it prosper by fighting and winning battles from land. I am today announcing the Government's decision to amalgamate the Army's current three healthcare corps into a new modern corps called the Royal Army Medical Service.

In 2021, Future Soldier set in motion changes to the Army. The Army has continued to adapt Future Soldier to account for changes in the strategic environment by refining its structures as an evolution of the plan, in response to the changing threat picture and global context.

As part of this Future Soldier modernisation programme, the Army has created a new corps, the Royal Army Medical Service, which is an amalgamation of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), the Royal Army Dental Corps (RADC) and the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC). This amalgamation has no impact on workforce numbers.

The amalgamation will ensure that the next generation of the Army will continue to be supported by a modern corps capable of delivering expeditionary healthcare. The underlying ethos of its founding corps will remain.

The Royal Army Medical Service will deliver modernised, multidisciplinary healthcare offering significant scope for institutional optimisation and improved organisational culture with a shift to a unified, inclusive and representative corps. There will no longer be corps-specific limitations, allowing personnel to work across all areas of the Royal Army Medical Service. It seeks to maximise the talents of its people to enhance the Army's fighting power and build on the successes of its forebears.

The Royal Army Veterinary Corps (RAVC) will remain an independent corps outside of the Royal Army Medical Service due to its legal and operational combatant status which differs from the special protected status of the RAMC, RADC and QARANC.

The amalgamation will deliver improvements for those serving, reduce administrative inefficiencies and promote the world-class work of those who serve in the Royal Army Medical Service. On behalf of the Government, can I thank all those who serve in the new Royal Army Medical Service for their professionalism and dedication and the care they offer?

[HCWS131]

Service Complaints Ombudsman Annual Report 2023: Formal Response

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I am pleased to place in the Library of the House today the Ministry of Defence's formal response to the Service

Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces' annual report for 2023 on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system.

The ombudsman's report assessed the service complaints system and the work of her office in 2023. The response sets out the MOD's comments to the report and includes a summary of our position on recommendations that remain open from previous annual reports.

The MOD values the strong independent oversight that the ombudsman brings to the service complaints system and remains committed to having a system in which our personnel can have confidence.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2024-10-15/HCWS136>

[HCWS136]

Service Police Complaints Commissioner Annual Report 2023

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I am pleased to lay before Parliament today the Service Police Complaints Commissioner's annual report for 2023 on the service police complaints system.

This report is published by Margaret Obi and covers the operation of the service complaints system and the delivery of her functions in her first year as the commissioner.

The findings of the report will now be considered fully by the Ministry of Defence, and a formal response to the commissioner will follow once that work is complete.

[HCWS138]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Strengthening Electricity Security and Supporting Decarbonisation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I am tabling this statement to inform Members of the publication of a policy update, a consultation response, a consultation and a call for evidence on 15 October 2024. This is in support of making Britain a clean energy superpower by 2030 and accelerating progress to net zero.

The Government are committed to delivering clean power by 2030 and accelerating progress towards net zero, while ensuring the security of supply. Making Britain a clean energy superpower by 2030 is one of the Prime Minister's five missions. To deliver this mission, we will rely even more on renewable power. The Government have set a target to double onshore wind, treble solar and quadruple offshore wind by 2030.

This will result in a wholesale shift in our long-term power system. The variable nature of renewables makes it critical that we have sufficient flexible capacity that can be ramped up quickly when generation from renewable sources is low, such as on dark, still days. The National Energy System Operator (NESO) estimates that Great Britain's electricity system could require 40 GW to

50 GW of long duration flex capacity in 2030. This will require the accelerated deployment of low-carbon flexible technologies. The Government are already investing in low-carbon technologies to support the transition away from unabated gas.

Since its introduction in 2014, the capacity market has acted to secure sufficient capacity to ensure consistent and reliable electricity generation. The policy update that I am publishing today sets out the remaining proposals to reform the capacity market from the 2023 phase 2 consultation, aimed at aligning with the Government's 2030 clean power and net zero goals, and improving security of supply. This document sets out policies to remove barriers for low-carbon technology to participate in the capacity market, which should accelerate investment in these technologies. This includes supporting low-carbon projects with longer build times to access support from the capacity market, enabling low-carbon technology with lower capital investment requirements to access longer-term capacity market contracts and reducing admin barriers for low-carbon technologies.

While low-carbon technologies are scaling up, we will continue to need existing flexible capacity, including unabated gas. The running hours of gas generators have already significantly reduced, and we expect that the amount of unabated gas we need will continue to decline as we deploy more low-carbon technologies. Our aim is to move unabated gas into a back-up role, primarily to ensure security of supply.

We intend to ensure that gas plants can decarbonise once low-carbon flexible technologies are available. To support the decarbonisation of unabated gas, I am today publishing a Government response to the decarbonisation readiness consultation, which will soon be followed by an accompanying statutory instrument. This will require that new build and substantially refurbishing unabated gas and other combustion power plants in England be built in such a way that they can readily decarbonise through either conversion to hydrogen-firing or by retrofitting carbon capture technology within the plant's lifetime.

Finally, I am also publishing a capacity market consultation and a call for evidence on proposals to maintain security of supply and enable flexible capacity to decarbonise. We are seeking views on changes to the capacity market to:

Support the economic case for works to extend the life of ageing plants by lowering the scale of planned works needed to access three-year capacity market agreements;

Provide assurance that all substantially refurbishing or new combustion power plants participating in the 2026 capacity market auction have a credible plan to decarbonise before they become operational, whether through converting to hydrogen firing or carbon capture; and

Introduce exit pathways for unabated gas generators with multi-year capacity market agreements to transfer from the capacity market to bespoke support, enabling the plants to decarbonise.

These reforms will give owners and investors in gas power stations the certainty they need about future operations and their pathway to decarbonise. They come after the Government recently reached commercial agreement on the UK's first carbon capture and industrial-scale hydrogen plants—technologies that will be critical in helping gas developers decarbonise their assets in future.

The NESO's modelling was commenced prior to the general election and does not assume the delivery of clean power by 2030. However, these results are still likely to be informative of the level of flexible capacity that the GB system could need at this time.

DESNZ, "Capacity Market 2023: Phase 2 proposals and 10 year review—consultation", October 2023.

[HCWS134]

TREASURY

Financial Services: Bank of England MREL

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Tulip Siddiq):

The Government's response to their consultation concerning enhancements to the special resolution regime noted that the Bank of England would consider whether any changes to its indicative minimum requirements for own funds and eligible liabilities (MREL) thresholds would be appropriate ^[1]. The Bank of England has today published a consultation, "Amendments to the Bank of England's approach to setting a minimum requirement for own funds and eligible liabilities (MREL)". The consultation sets out the Bank's intention to ensure that the MREL regime remains proportionate and evolves over time, reflecting the enhancements delivered in the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill as well as other wider developments, and taking into account feedback from industry.

The Government welcome the publication of these proposals for consultation and recognise the importance of ensuring that the MREL regime maintains financial stability while being calibrated in a way that supports competition and competitiveness within the UK's financial services sector. In this context, the Government note the interaction between some of the proposals set out by the Bank on its approach to setting MREL and the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill, and welcome the Bank's proposal to take the new mechanism for recapitalisation into account when setting MREL for firms with a preferred transfer resolution strategy. This will contribute towards ensuring that the MREL regime is proportionate, while remaining consistent with the Government's intention that the mechanism is primarily focused on the resolution of smaller banks.

The Government are clear that the primary intent of the Bill remains to provide a new mechanism to help address the failure of smaller banks when resolution by means of a transfer to a private sector purchaser or a Bank of England-owned bridge bank is in the public interest. The Government and the Bank are also in agreement that the Bank should not assume use of the new mechanism when setting a preferred resolution strategy of bail-in and corresponding MREL requirements for larger banks, or to rely on the mechanism when resolving such larger banks unless in exceptional circumstances. The Bank's consultation also confirms this position.

The Government intend to update the special resolution regime code of practice to make this point clear and have published draft updates on gov.uk.^[2] These and any subsequent updates will be subject to consultation with the banking liaison panel, to ensure appropriate engagement with industry.

The Government note that one of the Bank of England's MREL proposals will require changes to secondary legislation. The Government will therefore engage with industry on the necessary changes. Subject to feedback on the Bank's consultation and the Government's engagement with industry, the Government will look to make the changes necessary to facilitate these proposals.

^[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66992907ce1fd0da7b59285b/Bank_Resolution__Recapitalisation__Bill_-_Consultation_Response.pdf

^[2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/banking-act-2009-special-resolution-regime-code-of-practice-revised-march-2017>

[HCWS135]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Innovative Finance Facility for Climate in Asia and the Pacific

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances, and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the statement, except in cases of special urgency.

I have today laid a departmental minute describing a new liability, the innovative finance facility for climate in Asia and the Pacific (IFCAP), which the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is undertaking to unlock additional climate finance in Asia and the Pacific. The liability is a guarantee of \$280 million (£210 million) to the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) IFCAP guarantee facility. The guarantee will have no up-front cost to the UK. The length of this liability is 25 years. A copy of the departmental minute to Parliament has been placed in the Library of the House.

I have separately notified the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Development Committee of the UK's intention to undertake this liability.

There is huge demand for finance, especially for climate transitions, in Asia. The ADB has pledged to become the "climate bank of Asia" and, in line with UK asks, has announced an ambition to commit \$100 billion at COP26 to climate finance projects between 2019 and 2030. This will require a doubling of its climate finance commitments in the second half of this decade compared to 2019 to 2023.

IFCAP is a mechanism developed by the ADB that will support this ambition. Through IFCAP, the UK and other development partners will provide guarantees to the ADB. Together, this will unlock up to \$11 billion of new affordable climate finance from the ADB to middle-income countries in Asia and the Pacific—of which \$1.2 billion is directly as a result of the proposed UK guarantee. The additional climate finance unlocked

by IFCAP will help to mitigate carbon emissions in some of the highest polluting countries globally, and to support resilience to natural disasters in the most climate-vulnerable populations.

The UK guarantee would pay out through the ODA budget, up to a limit, the value of any missed repayment within six months if there were to be a default to the ADB by a country in the portfolio of loans guaranteed under IFCAP. The maximum total payout would be \$280 million (£210 million), and the annual estimated payout for IFCAP is £6 million per year over the 25-year lifetime of the guarantee. The guarantee provides powerful credit relief to the ADB, allowing them to increase climate finance by up to \$4.50 for every \$1 guaranteed through IFCAP.

The impact of the guarantee on FCDO's risk exposure has been scrutinized and approved by the FCDO accounting officer. FCDO officials have worked with the Government Actuary's Department to model the risk of the guarantee. In the event that the guarantee is called, FCDO will have sufficient time to make the necessary budgetary arrangement to fulfil the requirements of the guarantee. Authority for any expenditure required will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

If any Member has questions, they should please not hesitate to get in touch.

[HCWS137]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Care Quality Commission: Report on Operational Effectiveness

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): The full findings of the review into the operational effectiveness of the Care Quality Commission (CQC), conducted by Dr Penny Dash, have today been published on www.gov.uk. I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to Dr Dash for the swift and thorough job she has done on the review.

An interim report of Dr Dash's work, published in July 2024, summarised her emerging findings to allow for early conversations on the necessary changes to improve the CQC. Those findings were shocking, and led to my conclusion that the organisation was not fit for purpose. This full report expands on that work and incorporates feedback from recent discussions with user groups and a larger number of staff.

The findings of the review highlight 10 key conclusions and provide specific recommendations for improvement, which I fully support. Notably, the review recommends that the CQC should:

Rapidly improve its operational performance.

Rebuild expertise within the organisation and relationships with providers in order to resurrect credibility.

Review the single assessment framework to make it fit for purpose.

Clarify how ratings of providers are calculated and make the results more transparent.

Continue to evolve and improve its assessments of local authorities.

Formally pause its assessments of integrated care systems (ICSs).

The review also recommends that the Department of Health and Social Care should strengthen its arrangements for sponsorship of the CQC, a recommendation upon which my Department has already acted.

Significant work is already under way to act on these findings. Last week, the CQC announced that Sir Julian Hartley will be appointed as the new chief executive of the CQC. This is a significant step forward as Sir Julian's experience of turning around large, complex health organisations will be vital as the CQC embarks on its improvement plan. He will be supported by sector expertise through the appointment of a number of chief inspectors.

Following the publication of the interim report, the CQC commissioned Professor Sir Mike Richards to undertake a review of the single assessment framework. Findings from the first part of Sir Mike's report will also be published by the CQC today so that both reports can be read together.

In response to the recommendations that are additional to the interim report, we are working with the CQC and the adult social care sector to ensure that local authority assessments evolve in a way that maximises their value in driving outcomes for people who draw on care and support, and their carers. I agree with Dr Dash's recommendation to pause ICS assessments, which have not yet launched, to allow the CQC to focus on getting the basics right before introducing new functions. I am working on next steps.

By implementing Dr Dash's recommendations, the CQC will be better positioned to fulfil its mandate of ensuring that everyone receives safe, high-quality care. A strong regulator is critical to the safety and effectiveness of our health and care system, and I am personally determined that its performance improves so that it can regain the confidence of both the public, and the health and care system.

Following the conclusion of this review, I have asked Dr Dash to lead a review of patient safety in the wider health and care landscape in England, for which I am also publishing the terms of reference today on www.gov.uk. The primary task of this review is to assess whether the current range and combination of patient safety organisations delivers effective leadership, listening, learning, and regulation to the health and care system in relation to patient and user safety.

Subject to the outcome of this second review, I will also ask Dr Dash to conduct a third review on quality and its governance. Further detail on this third review will be forthcoming in due course.

[HCWS133]

Fuller Inquiry: Response to Phase 1 Report

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): On 28 November 2023, the report of phase 1 of the Fuller Independent Inquiry was published. Phase 1 of the inquiry looked into how David Fuller's appalling crimes in the mortuaries at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS trust remained undetected for so long.

I wish to express my deepest sympathies to the victims' families and reassure them that lessons will be learnt.

The inquiry found highly concerning failings in the trust's running, management, and oversight of the mortuaries, and that it was due to this uncontrolled environment that David Fuller was able to offend undetected. Management, governance and regulation failures, alongside poor compliance with standard policies and procedures, and a persistent lack of curiosity, all contributed to the creation of the environment in which David Fuller was able to offend for 15 years without ever being suspected or caught.

The 17 recommendations—16 for the trust and the remaining one for Kent county council and East Sussex county council—made by the inquiry in phase 1 aim to prevent anything similar happening again at the trust.

Today I am updating the House on the response to those recommendations. The trust published an assurance statement in February 2024 on the implementation of the recommendations from the phase 1 report. This sets out the progress made to implement the inquiry's recommendations.

The range of actions taken by the trust include requiring that non-mortuary staff and contractors are always accompanied by another staff member when visiting the mortuaries; controlling access to mortuaries using swipe cards; mandating contractors to renew security clearances every three years; and installing CCTV coverage monitoring access to and from mortuary areas. The trust board is also providing greater oversight and assurance of legally regulated activity in the mortuary.

I am also reassured that NHS England's south-east regional team held monthly oversight meetings with the trust between November 2023 and April 2024—in partnership with Kent and Medway integrated care board—to ensure progress against the inquiry's recommendations and to review evidence of the trust's progress in delivering its action plan. Ongoing compliance with the inquiry's recommendations will be monitored by NHS England through regular regional oversight meetings with the trust, and through other channels as appropriate.

Kent county council and East Sussex county council have reviewed contractual arrangements with the trust and confirmed that the contracts include terms requiring that licensing and regulatory requirements are met to ensure the deceased are at all times treated with dignity and respect.

Phase 2 of the independent inquiry will consider whether procedures and practices in hospital and non-hospital settings, where deceased people are kept, are sufficient to safeguard the security and dignity of the deceased.

In light of the disturbing events in Hull earlier this year, which brought into sharp focus the lack of regulation and oversight in the funeral sector, we have agreed that the inquiry will today publish an interim report on the findings from its funeral sector module. This will provide recommendations on safeguarding the security and dignity of the deceased in that sector.

The Government are committed to preventing any similar atrocities happening again and ensuring that the deceased are safeguarded and treated with dignity.

[HCWS132]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Voter Identification: HM Armed Forces Veteran Card

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): To encourage participation in our democracy, this Government are committed to ensuring all legitimate voters have the ability to vote in our elections.

Working alongside the Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), we are pleased to today, 15 October, lay the statutory instrument—the Voter Identification (Amendment of List of Specified Documents) Regulations 2024—required to add the HM armed forces veteran card (“veteran card”) to the list of photographic identifications accepted in polling stations as voter ID, thereby fulfilling a key manifesto commitment.

Voter identification

The Government are committed to carefully and thoroughly reviewing the voter identification rules and evaluating how they impacted citizens during the general election. Work is already under way on this evaluation, using data gathered at polling stations along with public opinion survey results and qualitative research with electors and the electoral sector. We will be taking into account the findings and recommendations of the Electoral Commission, due this autumn, as part of this review and publishing our full report next year. Any reforms to voter ID in the future will always respect and promote the rights of veterans.

Reviews and major changes to electoral law, if done right, take time, research and careful consideration, and we will be bringing forward firm proposals on the wider voter ID policy in due course. However, there are some clear gaps in the existing provisions—such as the current absence of the veteran card from the accepted voter ID list—on which we can make quick progress while the evaluation is ongoing to improve consistency and widen participation.

At the heart of our security are the men and women who serve and risk their lives for this country. It was unacceptable that the previous Government failed to add the veteran card to the list of accepted voter identifications. Including the card, alongside the already accepted Ministry of Defence identification card (the MOD90 card), will bring parity between veterans and serving armed services personnel with regard to the ID they can use in polling stations. We recognise that the veteran card is a powerful symbol of veterans’ service and its addition to the list is one of the things this Government are doing to honour their contribution. The addition of the veteran card supports them engaging in the elections process and in exercising their democratic rights. We would like to thank those who have campaigned to make this change a reality.

Progress on wider electoral reform

The Government have set out their commitment to strengthen the integrity of elections and encourage wide participation in the democratic process. Fulfilling

our commitment on the veteran card is only the first step in that journey. We are also making progress in several other areas to deliver on these promises. Work has begun on what is required to extend the franchise for all UK elections to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to vote, and legislation for this will be introduced in due course, strengthening our democracy and empowering young people to participate in it.

It is not only young people who should be encouraged to participate. While Electoral Commission reports show consistency in the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers over recent years, we know there remains a significant number of people missing from our registers and we will tackle this unacceptable participation gap by taking action to improve rates of electoral registration. We are exploring a wide range of options to deliver on this commitment, including through the use of data and online services to support electoral registration officers increase registration levels.

We are clear that electoral reform will require careful consideration and engagement with both the electoral sector and with citizens themselves.

Alongside widening participation, the Government are committed to protecting the integrity of and public trust in our electoral processes. Effective regulation and enforcement of how our politics are financed plays a key role in maintaining this trust. Foreign money has no place in the UK’s political system, which is why the law is clear that foreign donations to political parties are not permitted in the UK. However, as threats and challenges evolve, we must continue to do likewise: more can and should be done to ensure our political finance framework remains robust. We therefore committed in our manifesto to strengthening the rules around donations to political parties, and, working closely with the Electoral Commission, are considering a range of measures to achieve this. Firm proposals will be brought forward in due course.

Fixing the foundations of elections delivery

The Government are committed to supporting returning officers, electoral registration officers and their teams in their delivery of our democracy. We have heard and understood the consistent message from the electoral sector that electoral law is outdated and difficult to work with and that while elections continue at present to be delivered effectively, that is not without risk and comes at a personal and professional cost to elections teams.

The Government therefore will, alongside the work to deliver manifesto commitments, look to identify and address the biggest challenges and pain-points in the current system for electoral registration and conduct. We will do this in partnership with the elections sector, using the large body of evidence that already exists and the reflections of the sector on the reality of delivery of recent polls, to ensure we prioritise the right issues and identify solutions that work.

We will continue to provide Parliament with updates on our progress across all of these workstreams to strengthen our democracy and uphold the integrity and resilience of our elections.

[HCWS139]

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