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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 22 October 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

EU-UK Youth Mobility Agreement

1. **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): If he will have discussions with his European counterparts on a potential youth mobility agreement. [900782]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The Foreign Secretary cannot be at today's Question Time because he is attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Samoa with His Majesty the King and the Prime Minister. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West) is also travelling, in Vietnam.

We will not give a running commentary on our discussions with the European Union. The Minister for the Cabinet Office and others have already made a clear statement on the matter. We will continue to look at EU proposals on a range of issues, but we will not return to freedom of movement. However, we are committed to finding constructive ways of working together and delivering for the British people.

Ian Roome: Does the Minister agree that if Iceland and Monaco can be approved countries under the reciprocal UK mobility scheme, our closest neighbours, such as Ireland and France, should be too? Many schools in my constituency would like a youth mobility agreement because it would be beneficial to our youth.

Stephen Doughty: I was in Iceland the other day. Iceland is, of course, a member of the European economic area and we are not, and we do not seek to rejoin the single market, the customs union or the EU, or to return to freedom of movement. However, the Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission met in Brussels on 2 October and agreed to strengthen the relationship between the EU and the UK and put it on a more solid and stable footing. The Foreign Secretary attended the Foreign Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 14 October. Both those meetings mark a significant moment in our reset with Europe.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is welcome to hear the Minister talk about looking at what the EU might suggest. It is important to be clear that the youth mobility scheme is not freedom of movement. We already have schemes with Uruguay, Japan, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, and it is clear that strict conditions apply to when somebody can come here. Will the Minister update us on when he next expects to discuss the subject with the EU?

Stephen Doughty: Of course, we discuss a range of issues with our partners and friends in the EU. As I said earlier, I will not give a running commentary on those discussions. We have been clear that we will not return to freedom of movement or rejoin the EU.

Ukraine

2. **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support Ukraine. [900783]

21. **Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support Ukraine. [900803]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I can confirm that, alongside our G7 allies, UK support for Ukraine is iron clad. We have already made it clear that we will provide £3 billion a year of military support for Ukraine for as long as that is needed. We are investing in Ukraine's defence industrial base and we are ratcheting up the pressure on Putin's war machine and on third-country supplies. I am delighted that the Chancellor has today announced that we will provide £2.26 billion in additional support to Ukraine as part of the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loans to Ukraine scheme.

Alex Baker: Ukraine is facing a difficult winter. What steps are the Government taking to help ensure that Ukraine is in the best possible position to deal with the challenges that that will bring?

Stephen Doughty: I agree with my hon. Friend: Putin's shocking and barbarous attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure have increased the vulnerability of millions of Ukrainians before this winter. That is why I have announced and signed off £20 million in additional support for Ukraine's energy system. We are working with partners across Europe and in the G7 to support Ukrainians in this area.

Luke Akehurst: Does my hon. Friend agree that Ukraine's rightful place is with other European democracies in the NATO alliance?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend will know that the NATO Secretary-General was in London recently alongside President Zelensky, where the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary welcomed them. Our allies have made it clear that Ukraine's future is in NATO and, indeed, in Washington they confirmed that Ukraine is on an irreversible path to NATO membership. We will play a leading role in supporting Ukraine's pathway to membership.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Given that answer, does the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office consider that the reported presence of the United Nations Secretary-General at

Putin's summit in Russia will be helpful or unhelpful to Ukraine? If the latter, what is the Minister doing about it?

Stephen Doughty: While I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, obviously the meetings that the United Nations Secretary-General chooses to attend are a matter for him, not for the Government. We continue to work with a wide range of allies to support Ukraine across the G7, as we have in relation to today's announcement, and with our partners in Europe.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Does the Minister share my concern about worrying reports of North Korean troops fighting for Russia in Ukraine? What message would he give from the Dispatch Box to Pyongyang?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely share the right hon. Gentleman's concerns. The Foreign Secretary has been clear that we condemn in the strongest terms the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's continued unlawful arms transfers, and the reported deployments of its troops to the Russian Federation to support the unlawful war of aggression in Ukraine. That is not only in violation of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions, but it will also prolong the suffering of the Ukrainian people and threatens global security, so we condemn it in absolute terms.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): To move us beyond the condemnation, in the last week, troops from North Korea have arrived in Russia and are training in Russian fatigues, based on videos that we have seen. In addition, we know that Russia has procured multiple weapons from North Korea to aid the murder of Ukrainians. Putin has seized the escalation ladder, so will the Minister now declare North Korea a combatant in the renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine, *démarche* the North Korean *chargé* and confirm what unilateral and multilateral action we will be taking in response?

Stephen Doughty: I thank the shadow Minister for her points. We absolutely condemn what North Korea is reported to have been doing. She will have seen in our response to the Iranian transfer of ballistic missiles to Russia that we acted strongly, swiftly and firmly. We are closely monitoring what Russia is providing to the DPRK in return for its provision of arms and military personnel. We are deeply concerned about the potential for further transfers, including of ballistic missile-related technology. That would obviously jeopardise peace and stability not only in Ukraine, but across the world, and we condemn it absolutely.

British Indian Ocean Territory: Sovereignty

3. **Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform):** What the planned timetable is for implementing the agreement with Mauritius on the sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory. [900784]

20. **Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the potential security implications of the agreement with Mauritius on sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory. [900802]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The Government inherited a situation where the long-term secure operation of the Diego Garcia military base was under threat. The agreement that we have reached secures the future of the base and strengthens our role in safeguarding global security. The agreement is subject to the finalisation of a treaty that the Government intend to complete in the coming months. Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise the treaty in the usual manner, following its signature.

Nigel Farage: Since the mistaken opening of negotiations by the last Government on the sovereignty of the Chagos islands, it turns out that the British high commissioner and others appear to have been bugged by the Government of Mauritius. If the police investigation proves that to be true and we can see that Mauritius—their Government at least—are bad actors, is the 99-year lease on Diego Garcia even worth the paper that it is written on?

Stephen Doughty: We note the reports with significant concern, but the hon. Gentleman will understand that I am not going to comment on an ongoing police investigation. As I pointed out yesterday, the reports relate to historical conversations, not during the current round of negotiations. We are confident that we have achieved a treaty that meets our national security objectives, closes off a migration route and fundamentally respects the interests of the Chagossian people.

Gregory Stafford: How can the Minister continue to defend the ceding of the Chagos islands to Mauritius when China is rapidly expanding its influence in the Indo-Pacific? With no binding agreement against Chinese military involvement in the future, have the Government recklessly compromised British and allied security just to appease vested interests?

Stephen Doughty: I completely reject what the hon. Gentleman suggests about Mauritius somehow being in hock to China or the agreement somehow opening up a place for China. Let me be clear: Mauritius is one of only two African countries that have not signed up to the belt and road initiative. There is absolutely no way that we, or the United States, would have signed off a treaty across the national security apparatus that compromised any of our security interests or those of our allies. The unequivocal support from the United States—the President, the Secretary of State, the Defence Secretary and across the establishment—makes it clear that this is the right deal for our security and that of our allies.

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

4. **Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [900785]

6. **Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [900787]

13. **Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [900794]

14. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [900796]

16. **Dr Zubir Ahmed** (Glasgow South West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [900798]

19. **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): What steps he is taking to help bring humanitarian relief to civilians in Gaza. [900801]

22. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [900804]

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): October is likely to see the least aid enter Gaza since the start of the conflict. That is unacceptable. As the Foreign Secretary stated on 16 October, the UK is pressing Israel, alongside our partners, to allow the aid into Gaza that is so clearly needed in this desperate situation, and to enable the UN and its humanitarian partners to operate effectively.

Deirdre Costigan: I recently met representatives from the West London Islamic Centre in my constituency of Ealing Southall, who told me that they are deeply concerned about the plight of severely injured children in Gaza who need urgent medical help. Will the Minister outline what work she is doing to ensure that those children have access to the very best medical attention?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue and to her constituents and the very many people across the UK who are determined to do what they can. We have seen that with the UK public's response to the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal, matched by the Government up to £10 million. She asked specifically about young children who have been caught up and injured. The extent of disease and injury is significant and deeply concerning. We have provided significant support, including through UK-Med for its field hospital in Gaza. Last week, my hon. Friend the Minister of State announced £1 million for the Egyptian health Ministry to support medically evacuated Palestinians from Gaza.

Will Stone: Many residents from Swindon North have contacted me expressing their concerns about Gaza. What steps is the Minister taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter. We see people up and down the country who are very concerned about the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Clearly, we now have extreme levels of food insecurity. We are very concerned about the situation in northern Gaza in particular. The Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and all of us in the ministerial team have been very clear to all actors in the region and others that there must be access to the aid that is so desperately needed in all of Gaza.

Anna Dixon: Since the devastating Hamas attack on Israel more than a year ago, an estimated 42,000 Palestinians have died, including many civilians, and many more families have been repeatedly displaced. Will the Minister

assure me and my constituents that the Government are using the full diplomatic force at their disposal to secure an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and to allow the free flow of humanitarian aid?

Anneliese Dodds: Yes, I can. A resolution to this conflict has been a priority since day one of the new Government. We are calling for 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 we have made that clear at every possible moment.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: I declare an interest as a former board member of the Disasters Emergency Committee. I am delighted to see the British public's generous response to its appeal. I know that its member agencies are doing everything in their power to get aid to those who need it, but one of those agencies, Islamic Relief, told me yesterday about the situation in Jabalia where people are being "starved, bombed and shot on sight". What conversations has the Minister had with Israeli counterparts to end the indiscriminate attacks on people in Gaza and let in the lifesaving aid that the British public are so generously supporting?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. Again, I express our gratitude to the DEC for its work in ensuring that there has been that emergency appeal for the middle east. I should have mentioned earlier that that is covering not just Gaza, but Lebanon and the broader middle east where there is also that urgent humanitarian need. I can reassure her that, on issues of access to aid, the UK Government have been crystal clear on the need for the maintenance of international humanitarian law across the region, which of course includes Israel as well, as the Foreign Secretary underlined at the end of last week.

Dr Ahmed: Will the Minister reassure me that September's export licence ban with Israel covers items that we reasonably believe could be used to breach international law in Gaza? Will she further reassure me that the remaining export licences with Israel largely do not cover the Israel Defence Forces or military equipment?

Anneliese Dodds: I wish to be very clear as I think there is some confusion on this important point. Following the 2 September suspension, there are currently no extant UK export licences—I repeat, no extant export licences—for items to Israel that we assess might be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian law. There is only one exception, which is for F-35 components, and the Foreign Secretary has explained that to the House. My hon. Friend is right to say that most licences for exports to Israel are not for the IDF, and I am pleased to be able to put that on the record for the House.

Neil O'Brien: The footage of children caught up in the fighting in Gaza is horrendous, and so is the footage of those who are still held hostage. First, what is the Minister doing to ensure the protection of aid workers in Gaza and Lebanon and, secondly, given that she has just told us that our efforts to get more aid in are not working, what are her next ideas? Where will we go from here, because clearly it is not working?

Anneliese Dodds: We have indeed seen some extremely disturbing scenes. Of course, it is important that we ensure that there is verified information in the fog of such a horrendous war. We have all seen those scenes and been disturbed by them. The UK Government are determined to do all that we can to ensure that aid is accessed by those who need it. We are using every opportunity to do so, which involves working with UN agencies in detail. I have had many meetings with them. The hon. Gentleman will know that we have resumed support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. We have been in close contact with it, the World Food Programme and all others working on this, and we have also been working bilaterally with all our partners in the region. There are a number of different countries working with us to try to ensure that there is access to aid, which is desperately needed.

Catherine Fookes: I thank my right hon. Friend for all that she has done so far on this issue. My constituents, including Damon and Annie, are extremely concerned that every day things are only getting worse. The UN says that all essential supplies for survival are running out. Given the abject conditions in north Gaza, the fact that humanitarian access is nearly non-existent is unconscionable. A year on from the start of the conflict, we are still debating restrictions on the flow of aid by Israeli authorities. What more can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that people who are dying from hunger, thirst and lack of medical care receive the attention they need?

Anneliese Dodds: I can only underline the fact that the new UK Government are doing all that we can to get aid in as quickly as possible, supporting trusted partners on the ground to deliver life-saving humanitarian aid. As has been mentioned, we have agreed to match up to £10 million of public donations to the Disasters Emergency Committee's middle east humanitarian appeal. That will provide life-saving aid, including medical supplies, shelter and clean water, to people in need, on top of the support that we have released to UNRWA. That aid needs to get to the people who desperately need it, and I refer to my response to an earlier question on that point. We are using every avenue to advance that cause.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The images coming out of northern Gaza have horrified many, as has the news of yet more indiscriminate bombing, and many people have reached into humanity's darkest periods for historical comparisons. I do not know which of those is appropriate, but I do know that on each of those occasions we told ourselves that this time was different, yet it never was. Does the ministerial team realise that what they do now is what they would have done then? If they do, do they believe that the conversations that they are having are enough, and if they do not, when will they act positively to bring about a ceasefire?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his question, but he must recognise that from the first day of the new Government coming into position we have sought to do all we can to advance the cause of a ceasefire. On the issue of international humanitarian law, which he rightly and clearly stated as an imperative, we have been consistently clear as a new Government that Israel must comply with international

humanitarian law. It must allow unfettered aid access. Our message is clear: Israel could and must do more to ensure that aid reaches civilians in Gaza. We have upheld our legal requirements around that, as he will have seen in relation to decisions taken around arms export licences.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Last month, the Minister of State told the House that

"we could not be clearer: intentionally directing attacks at civilian objects is a war crime. Those attacks threaten civilian access to power, heating and water supply, impacting the safety and livelihoods of millions of Ukrainians." —[*Official Report*, 2 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 29.]

She was right, so why is it that the Government can call out Putin's war crimes the moment they happen, but they seem utterly incapable of doing that when the perpetrator is Netanyahu and the victims are Palestinians?

Anneliese Dodds: I regret the tone of the hon. Member's question. Surely he can recognise that the new Government prioritise doing all that we can to secure the required ceasefire. The Government have repeatedly conveyed not just messages but action time and again to make sure we play our part, and that has been recognised internationally. The changes we have made around UNRWA, our commitment to the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice, ensuring we hold to our legal requirements around arms exports—that is a Government that are committed to international humanitarian law.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Intercepted communications demonstrate that Hamas are struggling to find room in their warehouses for the aid that is arriving. What action will the Minister take to ensure that UNRWA actually gets that aid to the people who need it—and we accept they need it desperately—when Hamas are preventing it from reaching the Palestinian population?

Anneliese Dodds: The Government are clear that UNRWA plays a vital role in saving lives in Gaza, providing much needed food and basic services and supporting stability in the west bank and wider region. Wherever there are allegations or reports that there may have been unacceptable activity—such as that covered in the Colonna report—we have stated clearly to UNRWA that they must be investigated. It did do that with the Colonna report, and the UK Government have supported the implementation of the findings of that report. We continue to discuss that in detail with UNRWA so that it can operate in the manner that it is mandated to do by international law.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): While I appreciate the comments about aid, does the Minister condemn the ethnic cleansing and annexation of northern Gaza under the general's plan, with aid not being allowed in? If so, what action is being taken to demonstrate the UK's strongest objection?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government are extremely concerned by the situation in northern Gaza. This morning I was discussing it with humanitarians, as I have been doing just about every day. We really see a

deterioration in people's circumstances there in terms of health and access to aid. As I said at the beginning of the question, the fact that this month will likely see the lowest amount of aid since the start of the conflict is unacceptable. We are deeply concerned that we have now seen many people who have been displaced not just once, twice or three times, but up to nine times. We will continue to argue for the need for humanitarian access to Gaza.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Further to the answer the Minister gave a few moments ago, UNRWA supplies were found in the Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar's underground hideout. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said, Hamas terrorists are struggling to find warehouse space to store all the misappropriated aid. When will the Government review their commitment to funding UNRWA and actually take action to stop the misappropriation of that aid?

Anneliese Dodds: I refer the hon. Member to my previous response on that. The UK Government take any such allegations very seriously. We have ensured that those are taken up with UNRWA, and with the Colonna report we saw a thorough investigation into the allegations, some of which were proven. UNRWA has been taking action in order to deal with them. It is really important that neutrality is held to, and we as the UK have played our part by ensuring that UNRWA has the funding required to implement those recommendations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Following the removal of the international terrorist Yahya Sinwar and the possibility of an amnesty for those who now release the 97 remaining hostages, what pressure are the Government bringing to bear on Hamas to urge them to lay down their arms and release the hostages, both of which are necessary for full, unfettered access for humanitarian relief in Gaza?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for raising this incredibly important issue. The suffering, especially of the family and friends of the hostages, is indescribable. The Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have met with them, particularly those who have UK links, and have repeatedly ensured that the release of hostages must be prioritised. They have articulated that message time and time again, and will continue to do so until the hostages are able to return home, as they must be able to do.

Mr Mitchell: Co-existence is inescapable, and a two-state solution is one day inevitable, as both Israelis and Palestinians are here to stay. Just as the first intifada ushered in the historic breakthrough at Oslo, so too Britain—with its deep regional connections, UN responsibilities and brilliant diplomatic service—has a key role in lifting people's eyes to a very different future. What discussions are the Government having on this issue, building on the significant efforts started under the last Government?

Anneliese Dodds: We do not always agree across the Dispatch Box, but I strongly agree with the right hon. Member's characterisation of the need for a two-state

solution. Ultimately, that is the only way of delivering the peace and security that the people of Israel and Palestine deserve. Making sure that we play our part in exercising leadership towards that two-state solution is a long-term commitment of this Government, but of course—as he would expect—we need to show what that can deliver. A huge amount of work is ongoing around reconstruction, and I have discussed that issue in detail with the World Bank, for example. It has been conducting a survey of the needs that will have to be met, making sure that work is fully co-ordinated so that we can achieve that secure future for those who are in Gaza at the moment.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The attack saw

“more than four, five residential blocks...razed to the ground. Some...reached the hospital, some...remain under the rubble.”

That is the account of Dr Eid Sabbah of Kamal Adwan hospital in northern Gaza, which he gave to the BBC yesterday. I have noted the Minister's qualified response earlier, but as the UN special envoy for the peace process warns that

“nowhere is safe in Gaza”,

does she agree that the UK should now cease all arms exports to Israel?

Anneliese Dodds: With all due respect the hon. Member, my county colleague, I urge him to look again at what I stated, which stipulated very clearly the legal grounds for that decision about arms exports. I was clear that the restrictions that have been placed on arms due to that legal regime, which the UK Government were determined to fulfil, are because the other licences are not going to be used in the manner that some would suggest. We are very clear about the need to fulfil our international responsibilities in that regard. The hon. Member also talked about the role of healthcare workers within Gaza, and we pay tribute to all those who have been delivering healthcare. Many are British citizens; the British Government have supported UK-Med, and we pay tribute to them.

Iran: Support for Terrorism

5. **Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to counter Iranian support for terrorism. [900786]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): The Foreign Office works closely with our allies and partners to counter Iran's support for proscribed groups, which include Hamas—as many Members have mentioned—as well as Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. We currently have over 400 sanctions in place on Iran in response to its human rights violations, nuclear escalation and terrorism. We also continue to hold Iran publicly accountable for its direct support of terrorism, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary did in his intervention at the Security Council on 25 September.

Jonathan Davies: Iran's malign activity and support for its proxies is destabilising the middle east. Does the Minister agree that this must end, and will he say a little more about what steps he is taking?

Hamish Falconer: I do agree. In all of our efforts in the region, we are clear that Hamas and the other Iranian proxies that are doing so much to destabilise the region must stop. We are working with our allies to that effect, including by reviewing new measures that we can take.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): For years, the Foreign Secretary and the Labour party have promised to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the chief sponsor of global terrorism. Are the Government going to take action to tackle terrorism and extremism in the UK, or are they going to break yet another promise?

Hamish Falconer: As I understand the question from the former Home Secretary, she is saying that when she was Home Secretary she did not proscribe the IRGC, but she thinks we should have done so within 100 days. I say to my hon. Friends that we will take the necessary steps in the UK to prevent the IRGC from taking action on these streets, but as she knows well, we do not comment on whether an organisation is under consideration for proscription in the normal way.

Illegal Migration

7. **Jodie Gosling** (Nuneaton) (Lab): What steps he is taking with his international counterparts to help tackle the drivers of illegal migration into the UK. [900788]

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of illegal migration. This Government are strengthening key international relationships to tackle organised immigration crime, increase returns and secure our borders. My Department is also funding activity to address the drivers of irregular migration by improving the prospects of people in their home region, tackling humanitarian crises and targeting trafficking.

Jodie Gosling: Will the Minister please outline the ways in which the new Government are working with our French partners to tackle the shared challenges of dangerous channel crossings?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government have been absolutely determined to work with our key partners on these questions. My Department has also focused on ensuring support for what is often called upstream migration—the drivers of the reasons why people feel they have to leave their home country or region in the first place. That has included, for example, support to help refugees in Jordan to stay in the region from which they come and support for the UN's migration multi-partner trust fund.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that response. Legal immigration is very important, and people should have that opportunity if they have been persecuted or there are human rights issues, but

economic migrants have to be stopped in their countries. France also has a very clear part to play, and we sometimes feel that it has not done so as strongly as it should have done. Has the Minister had an opportunity to speak to her French counterpart to ensure that France plays its part in stopping the economic migrants coming across the channel?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his important question. This new Government have been determined to strengthen our relationships with all of our partners, including France, on these questions. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has viewed this as a priority from day one, and she has been determined to ensure that we have both the right legal framework and the right logistical measures. As I have said, we of course need to tackle the reasons why people cannot have a livelihood in their own countries, and we are doing a huge amount in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to ensure we deliver on that.

Artists Touring in the EU

8. **Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): What support his Department provides to UK artists touring in the EU. [900789]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Culture, Media and Sport Ministers are responsible for Government policy on touring artists, with support from colleagues across Government. The Government provide support for artists via the music export growth scheme, funded by the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and the international showcase fund, funded by the DBT. We are engaging with the EU and member states to explore how best to improve arrangements for touring in Europe without a return to free movement.

Zöe Franklin: Young emerging artists, the very future of our multibillion-pound music industry, are the worst impacted by the bureaucracy we now have. Will the Minister reconsider negotiating a European-wide exemption from visas, work permits and travelling restrictions to set UK artists free from frustrating red tape?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady raises very important issues, and we recognise the challenges faced by the sector that she sets out. We are committed to helping our touring artists without seeking a return to freedom of movement. I will work closely with my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, as well as with Culture, Media and Sport Ministers and other colleagues, on these issues. We are committed to seeking allowances for cabotage, carnets, and customs rules for music, performing arts and culture touring, but at this stage it is too early to discuss that in greater detail.

Relationships with EU Counterparts

9. **Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on resetting relationships with his EU counterparts. [900790]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister met the President of the European Commission on 2 October, and agreed to strengthen the relationship between the EU and the UK and to hold regular UK-EU summits. The Foreign Secretary attended the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 14 October in Luxembourg, and he and the High Representative agreed to advance discussions towards a new UK-EU security partnership. I have had many meetings bilaterally, and indeed as part of processes alongside EU colleagues, on issues from Moldova to the western Balkans in recent weeks.

Tim Roca: I welcome the Foreign Secretary's attendance at the EU Foreign Affairs Council. Will the Minister confirm if this will be part of a more regular, structured engagement with our European colleagues?

Stephen Doughty: I can absolutely confirm that that is the case. We are committed to resetting our relationship and to delivering outcomes in practice. As I mentioned, I attended the Moldova partnership platform in Chisinau last month. It is particularly important that we work alongside our EU partners when it comes to the attacks on Moldova's democratic future by Putin's Russia. We also had important discussions about the western Balkans in Berlin last week. I was there with the President of the European Commission and Chancellor Scholz, and it is absolutely important that we work together on these critical challenges.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): While we hope that it never happens, if a future American President wished to withdraw support from Ukraine, will the Government assure us that that would be a prominent item on the agenda in their conversations with EU leaders?

Stephen Doughty: Obviously, decisions in America are for the American people, but the special relationship endures, regardless of the Administration or who is in the White House, and it is deep and enduring, as the right hon. Gentleman knows well from his important former roles. We absolutely need to co-operate with our EU partners on support for Ukraine, and that is why today it is so fantastic to hear the news that we have agreed, as promised, with the G7 and with our European and indeed our American partners, the extraordinary revenue acceleration scheme that will deliver new money to Ukraine now.

Chinese Communist Party: Threat to Democracy

10. **Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** What recent assessment he has made of the level of threat to UK democracy posed by the Chinese Communist party. [900791]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): As a matter of long-standing policy, which the hon. Gentleman will understand, the Government do not comment on the detail of national security matters, but let me be clear: any attempt by any foreign power to threaten or undermine

the UK's democracy will not be tolerated. The National Security Act 2023 brings together vital new measures to protect our national security, which we are committed to as a new Government. I regularly meet my ministerial colleagues, including the Minister for Security, to discuss those matters.

Bobby Dean: Thousands of Hongkongers have made my local community their home under the British national overseas visa scheme, but too many of them still face the threat of surveillance, harassment, and intimidation by the Chinese state. Will the Government confirm that they have raised the issue of transnational repression in conversations with the Chinese Government, and made clear that it is a totally unacceptable interference in British democracy?

Stephen Doughty: The Government will take a consistent long-term and strategic approach to our relations with China, rooted in the UK and global interests, and the Government are deeply committed to supporting all members of the Hong Kong community who have relocated to the UK. I reiterate that any attempts by foreign Governments to coerce, intimidate or harm their critics overseas are unacceptable, and regardless of nationality, freedom of speech and other fundamental rights of all people in the UK are protected under our domestic law.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): My constituency is also home to a new and growing population of Hongkongers who, although they are now in a free country, live in fear of the repression that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) described. That is not least because of the reported presence until recently of a secret police station in Glasgow, run by the Chinese Communist party. Will the Minister join me in sending a clear signal to the Chinese state: "hands off Hong Kong Scots"?

Stephen Doughty: I have made clear our support to the Hong Kong community in the UK, and we have made clear to Chinese authorities that the existence of undeclared sites in the UK is unacceptable, and their operation must cease. We have been told that they have now closed. The Foreign Secretary was in China on 18 and 19 October, where he met his counterpart Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other senior Chinese figures, and he raised human rights, including issues related to Hong Kong.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Alicia Kearns.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Freedom of speech is fundamental to democracy, yet Jimmy Lai's sham trial is due to resume on 20 November. The Foreign Secretary has so far failed to meet Jimmy's family, as well as that of Jagtar Singh Johal, whom he promised he would meet within weeks at the last Foreign Office oral questions. Five weeks ago, I wrote to Ministers about Ryan Cornelius and Alaa Abd el-Fattah, who should both be free by now, but I have received no response from the Department. When will the Government bring forward their promised special envoy for arbitrary detention, come back to shadow Foreign Ministers, and get our people home?

Stephen Doughty: We call on the Hong Kong authorities to end their politically motivated prosecution and immediately release British national Jimmy Lai. His case remains a high priority for His Majesty's Government, and UK diplomats attend his court hearing in Hong Kong. The Foreign Secretary recently raised the case with Wang Yi during his visit to Beijing on 18 October. On 24 July the Foreign Secretary raised the case of Jagtar Singh Johal with the Indian External Affairs Minister, and I am happy to write to the hon. Lady further about those matters. She can be assured that we take these cases incredibly seriously.

Lebanon: Ceasefire

11. **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help secure a ceasefire in Lebanon. [900792]

15. **Mary Glendon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help secure a ceasefire in Lebanon. [900797]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): The UK was the first G7 country to call for an immediate ceasefire between Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel, when we did so on 19 September. A political solution consistent with resolution 1701 is the only way to restore security and stability for the people living on both sides of the blue line. We continue to press for that with vigour and urgency with our international counterparts. The Foreign Secretary did so last week, and so did I. We will continue to do so this week and every day.

Alex Ballinger: We are appalled by the increase in violence after Israel's ground invasion of Lebanon. As somebody who used to work in Beirut when the country welcomed a million Syrian refugees, it is upsetting to see people on the move again after so much violence. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his diplomatic efforts so far. Does the Minister agree that there is no military solution to the conflict in Lebanon? Will he outline again in more detail what diplomatic efforts he is making to ensure that we have a ceasefire so that Lebanese and Israeli civilians can return to their homes?

Hamish Falconer: We agree very much. Only a political solution will enable Lebanese civilians to return to their homes and Israeli civilians to return to the north of Israel. Clearly Hezbollah has been conducting terrible attacks on northern Israel for a long time—from 8 October, which was a terrible day to choose to start. We are working with all our allies on a plan based around resolution 1701. We talk regularly with all the key players in the region and in particular with Amos Hochstein, the US envoy working on a proposal to achieve the effect of 1701. We will continue to do so.

Mary Glendon: The reported attacks on United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon bases by the Israel Defence Forces show disregard for resolution 1701 and the existing diplomatic framework for peace. Last week's joint statement by Foreign Ministers and our allies condemning all the threats to UNIFIL's security was welcome, so can the

Foreign Minister tell the House what discussions he has had with Israeli political leaders to supplement that action? Were they productive?

Hamish Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. We are absolutely clear that attacks by the IDF on UNIFIL bases must stop, and they must stop immediately. We have called on Israel to that effect. We have called on all parties to uphold their obligations in ensuring the safety and security of UNIFIL personnel. I am sure that many in this House will be looking each day at the reports from UNIFIL on the situation there. As I have said in answer to previous questions, only a political solution consistent with UN Security Council resolution 1701 can restore stability and security. We continue to raise these matters with the Israelis at every level, and I will continue to do so this week.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): UNIFIL and UN Security Council resolution 1701 plainly have not prevented the construction of tunnels and forward attack positions by Iranian proxies south of the Litani river. What discussions will the Foreign Secretary be having with the United Nations to ensure that something is put in place to replace 1701, to strengthen the role of UNIFIL and prevent aggressive action by Hezbollah and its fellow travellers?

Hamish Falconer: The first thing we have to do is get Hezbollah back north of the Litani river, consistent with 1701. We should not move away from 1701 until we have made progress under it. I recognise the force of what the right hon. Gentleman says about the concerns about Hezbollah's presence close to the Israeli border, in breach of UN Security Council resolutions. I condemn the attacks, including the missile strikes that have been happening since 8 October, and all the other violence that Lebanese Hezbollah has been responsible for. It is proscribed under UK law and we hold no truck with it, but the way to get Hezbollah away from the border is 1701, and that is what we have to stick to.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Finn Pugh, who is eight years old and is one of my constituents, wrote to me. He said:

"Lebanon is a wonderful place. It does not deserve this. I would like the Government to protect the people of Lebanon and give them supplies like food and water."

What reassurances can the Minister give Finn?

Hamish Falconer: I thank Finn for the question. Over the course of the past few weeks, we have announced £15 million of aid for the people affected by the strikes in Lebanon and those who are now crossing towards Syria, which is a concerning development in the conflict. Finn is right to have the people of Lebanon in his mind, and we are doing all we can to try to ensure that the humanitarian system in Lebanon can support the people Finn is concerned about.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The new Government's call for an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon and in Gaza is, of course, greatly

welcomed. However, today we hear that one of UNIFIL's watchtowers was bombed by the Israel Defence Forces. First, was that one of the watchtowers that we have provided? Secondly, what conversations has the Minister had with his colleagues about beefing up our support to UNIFIL and taking our troop numbers up from one?

Hamish Falconer: I will have to write to my right hon. Friend about the specific watchtower and whether we have provided any aid. Underlying her point, I think, is a question about what we do when our statements about UNIFIL are not abided by. Let me be clear with the House: the current situation is unsustainable, and we continue to raise the matter through all diplomatic measures and will do so until there is progress. I can perhaps write to my right hon. Friend about our future plans regarding peacekeepers in Lebanon.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): There is only one route to sustained peace in Lebanon, and that is for the UN and the Lebanese state to stop Hezbollah carrying out its operations. That's right, isn't it?

Hamish Falconer: We agree that Lebanese Hezbollah should not be conducting the actions that it has been conducting. As I said in response to the previous question, this situation needs to be resolved in accordance with the UN Security Council resolutions. If the right hon. Gentleman is asking me whether we think what Lebanese Hezbollah is doing across the blue line is correct or justifiable, my answer is that it is not. We call on it, as we have always called on it, to stop. We have proscribed the organisation domestically and have absolutely no truck with it whatsoever. Iran's malign influence in Lebanon must stop, and we are taking actions to try to effect that.

Topical Questions

T1. [900807] **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): Over the last four months, we have been reconnecting Britain for our security and prosperity. Last week I set out my vision for modernising international development, and as I speak the Foreign Secretary is in Samoa, meeting Heads of Government from the Commonwealth, and he has engaged with countries from every continent.

Peter Prinsley: The BBC World Service is vital UK soft power. The Foreign Office's contribution to its funding is about £100 million per year—about the cost of an F-35 fighter jet. The UK has plans to acquire 74 of these fighter jets. Would the Minister agree that we might consider acquiring only 73 of them, if that was the price of preserving the BBC World Service?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): That is a very fine question. The BBC World Service is a UK soft power asset. We give £104 million to the BBC World Service—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Would the hon. Member for Plymouth Moor View (Fred Thomas) please not walk behind the Minister while he is in the middle of his answer? I am really going to have to say something to the Whips.

Hamish Falconer: We provide £104 million to the BBC World Service. That is very good value indeed. I will not seek to get into budget negotiations in advance of the Budget—I know better than that—but I agree very much about the importance of the World Service and the vital function it provides internationally.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Recent events in Moldova are yet another example of the importance of combating the modern scourge of weaponising disinformation. What new measures are the Government planning to implement to counter disinformation spread by our adversaries?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the shadow Foreign Secretary for raising such an important issue. We are launching a new global programme to support resilient, free, open and trustworthy independent media as a bulwark against disinformation. That builds on the success of previous media development programmes. We are also determined to work with international partners, including UNESCO, to make sure that we play a role in combating disinformation.

Mr Mitchell: Further to the comment from the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), does the Minister share my dismay that, although the director general of the BBC professes that it represents a key source of democratic soft power in the face of the spread of state and non-state disinformation, it now intends to cancel its internationally admired interview programme "HARDtalk", which has a global reputation for holding those in power to account?

Anneliese Dodds: Any editorial decisions on BBC content will be made by the BBC alone—that is right and proper. All I can say is that wherever I am in the world, it is clear quite how powerful the BBC is—a soft power perhaps, but a very important reflection of our values as a country and of deep connections between the people of Britain and other nations. We are determined to ensure that that remains the case.

T2. [900808] **David Taylor** (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): While we await the outcome of the Foreign Secretary's reviews and our Chancellor's forthcoming Budget, and remain confident that the Home Office's plans will be successful in reducing domestic refugee costs, this issue remains of concern across the House. Will the Minister reassure the House that she will do everything she can to protect these aspects of our foreign aid budget, and will she meet me and concerned colleagues to discuss how we can take them forward after the Chancellor's Budget?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I would be very happy to meet him and other Members, particularly from the Government Benches, where we have a considerable number of MPs

with direct experience of international development work. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is committed to bringing order to the asylum system. She has taken steps to unblock the backlog of claims. The fact that we lacked a plan to do that previously led to spiralling costs, which hit the international development budget very hard.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have to get through the list of questions, and you are not helping me. You are taking far too long. I have to get the Back Benchers in—it matters to them and to their constituents. You have to work with me, and today has been a pretty awful day all round. I call the Lib Dem spokesperson to give us a good example.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Laila Soueif is in the Gallery with us today. She is currently on hunger strike in protest against the continued imprisonment of her son, the British-Egyptian citizen Alaa Abd el-Fattah, in Egypt despite the end of his five-year sentence on 29 September. In 2022, the then shadow Foreign Secretary talked about serious diplomatic consequences for Egypt failing to release Alaa, and of leveraging our trading partnership with Egypt to progress the case. Does the Minister agree with the now Foreign Secretary on those points, and will the Government take steps—

Mr Speaker: Order. Another bad example.

Hamish Falconer: I welcome Laila to the House. I saw her in Cairo last week, and raised these issues with the Egyptian Foreign Minister. Alaa's case is very much in our mind, and we will do everything we can to secure his release as quickly as we can.

T4. [900810] **Jon Pearce** (High Peak) (Lab): In 2020, the US committed £250 million to support peace building and Palestinian economic development. Will the Minister consider how we can work with our partners in the US, using our world-leading development expertise and our experience in conflict resolution in Northern Ireland, to take a lead in this vital work?

Hamish Falconer: My hon. Friend asks an important question. Peace building at a civil society level has an important role to play in trying to resolve this conflict. I will write to him with details of our plans.

T3. [900809] **Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome this Government's ambition in seeking a new climate finance goal at COP29 in Baku shortly. Will the Minister assure me that she understands the scale of need? The UN Environment Programme says that 10 to 18 times more funding is needed for adaptation than is currently on the table. Will she make sure that it includes loss and damage and is additional to aid?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for a very important question. The UK Government could not have been clearer that climate and nature must be at the heart of all that we do, including in foreign and development policy. The Foreign Secretary underlined that at Kew, and I underlined that in the Chatham House speech that I gave last week.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members who are on the list do not need to stand. It is more confusing.

T6. [900812] **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is estimated that more than 42 million tonnes of rubble could be contaminated by unexploded bombs and ordnance in Gaza. It is vital that such a serious threat to human life is dealt with effectively to ensure Gaza's post-conflict reconstruction. Will the Minister commit to redoubling our country's support for the work of organisations such as the HALO Trust?

Anneliese Dodds: The amount of unexploded remnants of war throughout Gaza poses a serious threat to life and the provision of humanitarian assistance. The UK is working proactively with a number of key stakeholders. We very much recognise the expertise of the HALO Trust, and we will redouble the work done, particularly towards reconstruction.

T5. [900811] **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Hezbollah continues to use Lebanese civilians as human shields. On Friday, the caretaker Prime Minister in Lebanon accused Iran of blatant interference in Lebanese affairs. What more will the Minister do to help ensure that both Israeli and Lebanese counterparts can face down the threat from Iran?

Hamish Falconer: I referred to our actions against Iran in the region, and the importance of removing its influence in Lebanon as best we can. This week I will attend the Lebanon conference in Paris, where these matters will be discussed.

T7. [900813] **Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): Further to the question from across the way on climate change, what steps is the Minister taking to support climate change development internationally?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. It is critical that the UK can speak with credibility on these issues—and now, under the new UK Government, we can, given the creation of GB Energy and the other measures that we have taken. We are ensuring that climate leadership is always to the fore, including in the conferences of the parties. Of course, the COP nature summit in Colombia is fast approaching.

T10. [900816] **Mr Tom Morrison** (Cheadle) (LD): Winter is now approaching the northern hemisphere, and many civilians in Palestine and Lebanon are without homes, water and electricity. What are the Government doing to support winterisation efforts in the region?

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important question. Many displaced people have very few of the clothes and belongings that they desperately need, particularly given that the threat of winter and much worse weather is coming speedily down the track. The Government have been discussing the issue with many of our partners.

T8. [900814] **Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): What update can the Minister give us on UK support for the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace? Will the Government

convene a summit of international partners to ensure that civil society is at the heart of peace building in the coming years in the region?

Hamish Falconer: I refer my hon. Friend to my previous answer. I will also write to him with further details of what we will do.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): We are experiencing a global hunger crisis, exacerbated by ongoing conflicts and climate change. That makes the forthcoming Paris Nutrition for Growth conference even more important. What preparations are the Government making for an effective contribution to the summit?

Anneliese Dodds: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that point. We are preparing at pace for that Paris conference, which is incredibly important. We need to do all we can to secure access to the food required, and it must be nutritious, healthy food. In addition, the UK is preparing to sign up to the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty—something that I committed the UK to doing in Brazil just a few weeks ago.

T9. [900815] **James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I have lived and worked in the western Balkans, where Governments continue to increase efforts to tackle human trafficking, exploitation and coercion. What steps are proactively being taken with Albania and other western Balkan and mediterranean countries to tackle human trafficking at source?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The Government are committed to working more closely with partners across Europe, including Albania and partners across the western Balkans, to tackle people trafficking and the gangs profiting from it. That has been a regular part of my bilateral discussions. In July, we announced steps to reinforce our co-operation with Europol and committed £4 million towards the Rome process—an Italian Government project to tackle the root causes of irregular migration.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): What discussions have Ministers had with their Israeli counterparts about the application of distinction and proportionality in international humanitarian law?

Hamish Falconer: The Foreign Secretary has set out our views on the Israeli application of international humanitarian law at greatest length in relation to the decision to suspend arms licences. We keep those issues under regular review and will update the House if there is a change in our assessment.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Ind): As we have heard again today in the Chamber, war crimes in Gaza continue, making it clear that the time for empty promises and hollow words is over. Does the Minister agree that the international community must finally fulfil its responsibility and take real action, starting with immediate sanctions on the hard-right extreme Ministers in the Netanyahu Government?

Hamish Falconer: I hope Members recognise that the words that we have been speaking at this Dispatch Box have not been hollow. Since coming into government, we have restored funding to UNRWA. We have also taken steps in the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, and in relation to the arms suspension that I referred to a moment ago. As for the far-right settlers to whom I think my hon. Friend was referring, we introduced sanctions last Thursday. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear during Prime Minister's questions that we continue to review these issues, and we will return to the House.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The outgoing President of the United States has indicated that he has been told where and when the Israeli Government will respond to the Iranian terror threat. Have our Government been informed?

Hamish Falconer: I think that you, Mr Speaker, and other Members will understand that it is not appropriate to comment on that in the House.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): As the Minister will know, the ICJ has ruled that member states such as the UK are obliged to distinguish in their dealings between green-line Israel and occupied territory. In line with that ruling, as well as obligations under United Nations Security Council resolution 2334, what steps are the Government taking to address the issue of products entering the UK from illegal settlements?

Hamish Falconer: I will write to my hon. Friend about the complex issue of trade with Israel and how we make that distinction, if that is okay.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I am sure that the Minister is aware of the tragic case of Sara Sharif, which occurred in my constituency, but he may not be aware that when Sara's family fled from Woking to Pakistan, they took Sara's two siblings, and when the parents returned to stand trial, those siblings did not return with them. Will he write to the Pakistani Government informing them that unless they vouch for the siblings' safety, those children should be returned to the UK?

Hamish Falconer: I can assure the House that the safety and wellbeing of British children overseas, which appears to be relevant in this case, is of the utmost concern to the Government as a whole, and to me as the Minister responsible for consular affairs. I will write, and will meet the hon. Member, if that will be useful in helping us to understand the case and what we can best do to support those children.

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

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Even before the start of the current conflict in Gaza, 98,000 children there had a disability. Thousands more have now been horrifically injured, and those with long-term conditions have not received any medical support. While I welcome the Government's commitment to facilitating medical evacuations, how is that possible when Israel is controlling the Rafah crossing?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend has detailed knowledge of this issue through her work on the International Development Committee. We are of course determined to do all that we can for the wellbeing and safety of children in Gaza, in partnership with other countries. She raises the issue of healthcare; we have been supporting UK-Med and other organisations in that regard, and also in respect of education. Many children have been out of school for a year, and we are determined to rectify the situation.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Will the Minister update the House on the grim situation in Sudan? In particular, what pressure is being put on

regional actors to stop fuelling the crisis, and what is the UK doing to help the 16 million children who, according to an estimate from Save the Children, face severe food shortages right now?

Anneliese Dodds: The humanitarian crisis in Sudan is the worst in the world. Millions of people face food insecurity, and disturbingly, it has now been verified that there is famine in the Zamzam refugee camp. We in the UK will continue to do all that we can, for instance in our role as a penholder. We will work with partners to raise the profile of this situation and make it clear to the warring parties that they must allow access to aid.

Ukraine

12.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on Ukraine. I apologise for the delay in getting you and Opposition Front Benchers a copy of my statement; the responsibility is entirely mine.

I have just returned from three days of intense defence diplomacy—first, at the NATO Defence Ministers meeting in Brussels, where we welcomed President Zelensky, and then at the G7 Defence Ministers meeting in Naples, where we had important updates from the battlefield, agreed that this is a critical point in the conflict, and stressed the need to step up and speed up support for Ukraine. The G7 joint declaration strongly condemned Putin's illegal invasion and reinforced our unwavering support for Ukraine. It also rightly stated that

“Russia's aggression against Ukraine is posing a threat to international security, the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and the rules-based international order.”

That is what is at stake for us all. If President Putin prevails in Ukraine, he will not stop there. If big nations redraw international boundaries by force, the sovereignty and security of all nations is undermined. That is why the UK's military, economic, industrial and diplomatic support, alongside that of our allies, is so important.

I have returned to the UK knowing that NATO and the G7 are united for Ukraine, just as the UK is united for Ukraine. Our job now is to turn the talks into action, which is exactly what the Government are doing. Today, the Chancellor and I are announcing that the UK will provide an additional £2.26 billion to Ukraine. This is new money, which will be delivered under the extraordinary revenue acceleration loans to Ukraine scheme. It is part of the \$50 billion loan package from G7 countries to support Ukraine's military, budget and reconstruction needs—loans that will be repaid using the profits generated from immobilised Russian sovereign assets. Profits on frozen Russian money will support Ukraine's fight against Putin, turning the proceeds of Putin's corrupt regime against it and putting them in the hands of Ukrainians.

I want to be clear: today's new money is in addition to the £3 billion a year of military support that this Government have committed to Ukraine each year for as long as it takes. The money is in addition to that in the £3.5 billion defence industrial support treaty that I signed with Defence Minister Umerov in July; that is money that Ukraine will use to procure military equipment from British companies, boosting British jobs and British industry. Today's new money is also in addition to the extra artillery, air defences, ammunition and missiles that we have announced and delivered in the first four months of this new Government. Ukraine is a first-order priority for me as Defence Secretary, and for this Government. We will continue to step up support, to lead, and to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

It is 973 days since Putin launched his full-scale illegal invasion, and Ukraine's civilians and military alike have been fighting with great courage. There have been important battlefield developments in recent weeks. When I last updated the House, Ukrainian forces were one month into their remarkable offensive in Kursk. Three months on, they continue to hold Russian territory.

Ukraine's strategic surprise has put Putin under pressure, forcing the diversion of some Russian troops and equipment. Despite the increase in brutal Russian counter-attacks and aerial bombardments, they have so far failed to dislodge the Ukrainian incursion.

It is not just in Kursk that Ukraine is fighting back. Ukrainian forces have launched long-range attacks into Russian territory and on military targets that are directly supporting Putin's illegal invasion. In September, Ukraine used long-range drones to attack four ammunition storage facilities—strikes that successfully destroyed thousands of tonnes of ammunition—and both the defensive thrust into Kursk and the strategic defensive strikes into Russia have had an impact on the battlefield. Russia's advance towards Pokrovsk in the east—Putin's main line of effort—has been slowed.

Russian losses continue to rise. Since the start of the conflict, Russia is likely to have suffered 675,000 casualties. In September, the average casualty rate of Russians on the battlefield in Ukraine each day was 1,271—a record high, two and a half times the rate this time last year. As for equipment, Russia has now lost 3,400 tanks and 8,500 armoured vehicles, and 26 vessels in the Black sea fleet have been destroyed or damaged.

Despite the incredible resilience of the Ukrainians, they remain under great pressure from Russian forces across multiple fronts. Russian troops continue to advance and to attack Ukrainian infrastructure, targeting the important port of Odesa and striking energy infrastructure. As we head into winter, Ukraine's energy generation capacity has been reduced by up to two thirds of pre-war levels. Russian industry remains on a war footing. Russian artillery is outfiring Ukraine by at least three to one, and Russia is recruiting an additional 400,000 troops this year. Defence will account for 32%—one third—of the total Government budget in Russia next year.

In a concerning new development, it is now highly likely that the transfer of hundreds of combat troops from North Korea to Russia has begun. For North Korean soldiers to support Russia's war of aggression on European soil is as shocking as it is desperate. North Korea already sends significant munitions and arms to Russia, in direct violation of multiple UN resolutions. The developing military co-operation between Russia and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has serious security implications for Europe and the Indo-Pacific. It represents a wider growing alliance of aggression that NATO and the G7 nations must confront.

Despite this dangerous development, Ukraine remains determined to fight on its frontline in the east and in the territory in Kursk, and President Zelensky will continue to seek support for his victory plan. We want the plan to succeed, and we stand ready to work closely with the Ukrainians and allies to help it to do so. As we approach 1,000 days of this war, the conflict is at a critical moment, which is why the UK continues to step up its support for Ukraine. Ukrainians are fighting to regain their sovereign territory and to protect peace, democracy and security for the rest of us in Europe.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.47 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I offer my condolences and those of Opposition Members

[James Cartridge]

to the family and friends of Corporal Christopher Gill, who we understand tragically lost his life during a training exercise recently. We understand that he served his country for 13 years, including in Afghanistan, and more recently volunteered to train Ukrainian soldiers in the UK.

Having visited Salisbury plain last May to see Operation Interflex, I know that we should be grateful to all our service personnel, including Corporal Gill, who have played such a huge role in training the Ukrainian armed forces so that they can continue to fight and defend their homeland. That fight goes on, and we continue to offer all support to the Government for that, as well as standing by the Government, people and armed forces of Ukraine.

We therefore warmly welcome the G7 joint declaration and funding announcement, but we share the Government's concerns in relation to North Korea. I have lost count of the many times that Vladimir Putin has accused us and our allies of so-called escalatory action in our support for Ukraine, but today we are considering the very real threat of North Korean combat troops being sent to support Russia's illegal invasion. Let us be in no doubt: any potential agreement between Putin and Kim Jong-un to have North Korean boots on the ground in Ukraine at all—let alone in the numbers that have been reported—would be a major escalatory ratchet by Putin himself.

After all, as the Secretary of State confirmed, Russia has already procured munitions and ballistic missiles from North Korea. The transfer of those weapons in the first place was not only completely unacceptable, but a blatant violation of the UN sanctions that Russia itself voted for. The transfer of North Korean weapons and now the threat of combat troops show weakness and desperation, not strength, on Putin's part, as the Secretary of State said. Above all, this raises the question of what Putin is offering North Korea in return, but we should not be deterred and must respond.

We took decisive countermeasures to help constrain the transfer of weapons between North Korea and Russia. The Conservative Government imposed sanctions on the arms-for-oil trade between Russia and North Korea, including asset freezes, travel bans and transport sanctions. The new Government, in turn, must now respond to this latest threat of combat troops. Can I press the Secretary of State to look at how the UK should respond in the round? Yes, we need to look at the diplomatic tools we can use to disrupt co-operation between North Korea and Russia, but we also need to urgently look again both at our military aid to Ukraine and at the freedom we offer it to use the munitions that we supply, particularly long-range missiles.

Given the need to continue providing further capability to Ukraine, we welcome yesterday's announcement that the UK will contribute £2.26 billion to the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loan scheme for Ukraine. The Conservative Government were a vocal advocate for mobilising frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine. We strongly welcome the additional funding. When will the money be made available to Ukraine, and over what term? The sooner those funds are mobilised, the better. When exactly will Ukraine receive the funding?

Finally, we have spoken many times of the reality that we are facing not just Russian aggression, but a broader authoritarian axis that ultimately threatens the UK. We have seen that explicitly with Iran and the Red sea, and now we see it coming ever closer to home with the prospect of North Korean troops deploying in a European theatre of war. Surely that strengthens even further the argument that the Government need to deliver on their supposed cast-iron guarantee to spend 2.5% on defence. As the Secretary of State failed to answer me at Defence orals, can I once again press him to confirm that he is fighting hard, with the Treasury, to deliver a clear pathway to 2.5% in the Budget at the end of this month?

John Healey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments about Corporal Gill. I will pass them on to his widow and make sure that his family are aware of them and of the sentiments of the whole House. The hon. Gentleman is right about the enormous contribution that Corporal Gill made, including to the Interflex training programme, which I was proud to be able to commit to extending throughout 2025. The Chancellor and I visited the programme together on Sunday; we met Colonel Boardman, the commander of Operation Interflex, and the officers and soldiers of 3 Scots, together with instructors from Kosovo, Australia and Sweden, illustrating the way the UK is leading a multinational effort to support Ukrainian soldiers.

The hon. Gentleman is right and I suspect that there is unanimity in the House on concern about the developments in Russia and the growing alliance with North Korea, and that it is united in its determination to take the action required to respond and united in recognising that we must do so alongside NATO and other G7 allies.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the new loan funds available for Ukraine through the proceeds of the interest on frozen Russian assets. We expect those to be available and in Ukraine's hands from early in the new year, which will put the UK ahead of many other nations participating in the scheme.

On the hon. Gentleman's final question, we remain totally committed to spending 2.5% on defence. We must do this to meet the threats that this country faces. The Prime Minister confirmed the commitment to set out a clear path to 2.5% in our first week in Government at the NATO summit in Washington. I gently say again to the hon. Gentleman that the last time this country spent 2.5% on defence was in 2010 under a Labour Government, and that that level was never matched in any of the 14 Conservative years since.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome the announcement today of the UK's increased support for funding for Ukraine as part of the extraordinary revenue acceleration loan scheme. The Secretary of State spoke about what is at stake for us all, but can he say more about what discussions he had with his counterparts at the NATO Defence Ministers meeting about the need for them to substantially increase their support? Further to our Prime Minister's recent meeting with the US President, what update is there on the use of Storm Shadow missiles by Ukraine?

John Healey: I welcome the new Chair of the Select Committee, who I believe now has a Committee to chair. I look forward to an invitation to give evidence and to discuss these issues with the Committee soon.

At the NATO Defence Ministers meeting, there was unanimity among the 32 nations that the important commitments that NATO nations made in Washington, particularly to the \$40 billion of extra support for Ukraine, must be delivered. There was a recognition, too, that pledges made must be pledges delivered. One of the Ukrainians' striking concerns is that just a third of the equipment and support pledged has so far been delivered, so there was a determination to step up not just what we can provide, but how quickly we can provide it. That is something that as a new Government we did from day one.

On Storm Shadow, only Putin benefits from a discussion about this. There is no single weapon that has turned the tide of any war. Whether it is artillery, ammunition, armoured vehicles or missiles, the UK provides support to Ukraine to pursue its UN right to defend its territory and its people.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Liberal Democrats welcome the new measures announced today to use the profits of frozen assets for Ukraine. That £2 billion will be of immense value to our Ukrainian allies as they seek to repel Putin's illegal invasion, not least following the alarming news that 1,500 North Korean troops are currently being trained in Russia to fight in Ukraine, but we must go further, faster. Russia must not and cannot succeed.

Some £22 billion in frozen assets remains locked up in our country. We urge the Government, as we have done for years, to seize those assets and repurpose them for Ukraine right away. Will the Secretary of State commit to doing so? Is he having conversations with our democratic partners to that effect? With the US elections fast approaching, it is deeply worrying that our commitment to our Ukrainian allies is uncertain. A second Trump presidency could have a devastating effect on the security of Europe and of Ukraine, so we urge the Government to seize these assets now so that we can support Ukraine come what may.

We must lead with Europe on this. The EU countries between them have close to €20 billion-worth of frozen assets. Will the Secretary of State consider convening an urgent summit with European counterparts to begin that process? Does he agree that if the US cannot, Europe must?

John Healey: In fairness to the Conservatives when they were in government, and to the hon. Lady's party before the election, we were all united in the efforts to get the interest drawn down from the frozen Russian assets put into Ukrainian hands. The UK Government, before the last election and since, have been leading this work.

These are practical steps that we can take now. Whatever declaratory position the hon. Lady wants to adopt about seizing Russian assets, this is valuable additional funding that, from the new year, will be in the hands of the Ukrainian Government to spend on, in the UK's

case, the military aid that they need. That comes in addition to all the other increases that we have put in place since the election. I hope that despite the hon. Lady's calls for going very much further, she will recognise how significant this move is and recognise that the UK is among the first of the nations to move on this. I hope she will give this House her full support when we introduce the primary legislation that will seek the parliamentary spending authority to provide this financial assistance in pursuance of a bilateral agreement that we will strike with Ukraine over how to do it.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): When this Government said that our support for Ukraine was absolute, we meant it. My right hon. Friend referred to the recently signed defence export treaty between the UK and Ukraine, which will support Ukraine's defence industrial base while helping to replenish our own stockpiles. As far as he is able, will he update the House on the treaty's progress?

John Healey: I was proud to sign that treaty, which means that Ukraine can draw down the export credit cover and contract with UK companies. It is also a framework that, like some other frameworks the UK has put in place, other nations and their companies can use to deal with the difficulties that many face in contracting with Ukraine. The Ukrainians will use it for contracting and procuring munitions and ammunition. It will allow us to step up not just the provision but the production of essential military aid to Ukraine.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I welcome the statement, but the BBC reports that the money will be paid not in one go but in tranches over time. We have the Budget next week. Will the Secretary of State assure us that, given that the money is what accountants would call an "exceptional item", it will in no way be included in the overall defence budget next week, or attempt to bolster or bump that up? There are rumours of cuts, so will the right hon. Gentleman assure us that the money is a one-off that will be treated completely differently in the Red Book?

John Healey: I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. The money is a one-off. It is additional and separate, and it will be accounted for and set out separately in the Treasury documentation. Its significance is that it is a loan to Ukraine that Ukraine will not have to pay back, because it will be serviced by the interest on the frozen Russians assets. He asks whether the sum will be paid all in one go. It will be made available soon in the new year, and the Ukrainians will be able to draw it down as they need it for the purposes that they determine.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments about North Korea and the growing alliance of aggression that needs to be confronted. I hope that we will have a strong response to that. I also welcome the extra £2.26 billion. My right hon. Friend made the important point—one of many—that the Ukrainians are being outgunned three to one in artillery by the Russians. Although the additional support is vital, how quickly can we ensure that we get extra munitions, artillery and missiles from the alliance and the G7 to Ukraine?

John Healey: We can get that into the hands of Ukrainians as soon as it is available for that purpose. I announced the new contract to produce short-range air defence missiles, the LMMs—lightweight multirole missiles—in the UK. The initial contract is for 650 and they will be in the hands of Ukrainians from the beginning of next year. We hope to step that up during the course of 2025. Where other nations are ready to make available the weaponry that Ukrainians need, the established arrangements for getting it into the hands of Ukrainians are in place. It is a question not of how, but of how quickly.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The delicious irony of the interest on Kremlin kleptocrats' ill-gotten gains being used to fund the resistance against Russian aggression will not be lost on Members across the House. I welcome what the Defence Secretary has said in its entirety. He will know better than any of us the crucial importance of the NATO alliance machinery in assisting Ukrainian resistance. Given that one recent former American President and one current French President have both made disobliging remarks about the NATO alliance in the fairly recent past, will the Secretary of State reassure us that at least President Macron is now fully on board with the alliance and France's important contribution to it?

John Healey: I will indeed. At no point during the two days of NATO Defence Ministers' talks was there any indication of the sort of views that the right hon. Gentleman suggests that some in America may hold, or that President Macron might have previously expressed. Indeed, in the good bilateral meeting that I had with the French Minister for the Armed Forces, Sébastien Lecornu, it was clear that the French commitment to supporting Ukraine is as strong as the UK's. I am glad to say that the determination of the French to work more closely with us on security and defence is equally strong.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I welcome the statement and the announcement of further funding. To ensure that we sustain the pace with which we are providing aid to Ukraine, and that we energise our own logistical enterprise, what action is my right hon. Friend taking to boost UK defence industrial production to support the Ukrainian armed forces and defence supply chains throughout the UK?

John Healey: My hon. Friend knows this territory as well as anybody else in the House. He will know that over the 973 days the UK Government have changed fundamentally the way in which we go about procuring what is required. British industry has responded magnificently to that. It has been able to respond more quickly, innovate more rapidly and devise what it can produce to meet the needs that Ukraine says it has on the frontline. The UK Government's task is to be the middle man to ensure that that can happen at greater volume and speed. We will continue to do that.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Do the Government think that Ukraine is winning or losing?

John Healey: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was listening to my statement, but I made it clear that this is a critical period in the conflict. Ukraine is under

huge pressure, especially on the eastern front, but it is fighting, conducting a counter-offensive and putting Putin under pressure. The only conclusion that the 32 nations drew from the discussions in Brussels, confirmed by the G7 nations in Naples, was that now is the moment when Ukraine's allies must step up our support, put Ukraine in the strongest possible position to withstand the Russian onslaught and put pressure on Putin—a military, economic and diplomatic response.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): I welcome the statement, which is good news for Ukraine. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Ukraine is the frontier of war with the Kremlin, that international support is now more critical than ever and that we must be absolutely clear that defence of the UK begins in Ukraine?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. Her very words were spoken by several Defence Ministers in Brussels. Defence of the UK and of Europe starts in Ukraine. Ukraine is fighting for the same values and for the rest of us in Europe.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): In sharp contrast to the presence of the United Nations Secretary-General at Putin's summit in Russia, which sent out all the wrong signals, this statement is hugely welcome, so I thank the Secretary of State. Further to the question that the Chairman of the Defence Committee asked, is it not now time that not only Storm Shadow but all the matériel supplied to Ukraine by the western alliance should be used by Ukraine in the manner that it sees fit?

John Healey: We provide Ukraine with the weaponry and support to defend its country, freedom and people. There is a consistency in that and there is no bar to Ukraine striking Russian military targets, so long as that is consistent with international humanitarian law and part of the proper defence of the country. I spoke about the long-range drones and the successful attacks they have been making—defensive attacks, but nevertheless on military targets in Russia. It is for the Ukrainians to determine how best to defend their country, and we will support them in whatever ways we can.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): I warmly welcome the £2.26 billion of aid announced today. It is great news for those fighting for democracy in Europe and a day of low morale in the Kremlin—it is fantastic. The Ukrainians might well use some of the money to continue to innovate at pace. Every few weeks they create new cutting-edge and adaptive technologies to use in the fight against Putin. Will we learn from our friends in Ukraine and ensure that we, as a country, invest in our own small and medium-sized defence enterprises, so that we can have the same output in the future?

John Healey: While there has been no change in the basis on which we provide military aid to Ukraine, there is a change in the approach we take not just to providing aid but to producing some of the military equipment and ammunition. Our challenge now is to take the lessons of what we have demonstrated can be done to support Ukraine to equip our own forces better to fight in the future.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, its content and for advance sight of it. The additional funding for Ukraine is very welcome, but it is what matériel they turn the funding into that will have the effect on the battlefield that we wish to see. With the shell production of European partners still well short of a million units per year, will the Secretary of State indicate how UK shell production has grown, either in numeric or percentage terms? If he cannot share that with the House, will he give us an assurance that it is increasing?

John Healey: I can absolutely assure the hon. Member that it is increasing. I have already spoken about the production of short-range air defence missiles—the LMMs—which is increasing to meet what the Ukrainians need. The Ukrainians are clear that air defence systems and long-range drones are the things that matter most to their defence and to their ability to put Russia properly under pressure.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I warmly welcome today's announcement of an additional £2.2 billion in financial support for Ukraine, generated by frozen Russian assets. Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about the concerning development of North Korean soldiers supporting Russia's war of aggression on European soil, and how that underlines the importance of us using every tool in our box to support Ukraine's efforts?

John Healey: I regret to say to my hon. Friend that I am not in a position to give the House any more details about that. Suffice it to say, we are watching and monitoring this extremely closely. We and the House have detected a growing co-operation between North Korea and Russia, and between Iran and Russia, at least over the past 12 months. It is a sign not of strength but weakness on Putin's part, but it introduces a dangerous new development, both for Ukraine and for wider European security.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I welcome the Defence Secretary's recognition of President Zelensky's victory plan and his support for that, but he will know that part of that plan is the use of long-range missiles. I get his point about long-range UK drones being used only for military targets in Russia, and within the norms of international rules of law, but I detect, perhaps, from his answers to two questions on long-range missiles that he is edging towards a position where he might publicly declare that Ukraine can have the freedom to hit military targets in Russia using long-range missiles. That will change the war and have an impact.

John Healey: We have stepped up the support we provide to Ukraine, but there has been no change in the basis on which we provide that support to Ukraine.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and his clear personal commitment. It is very expensive for Putin to fight this war, but he is getting a lot of money from the sale of oil. There are real concerns that British firms, or firms with British connections, are facilitating and enabling the illegal oil trade. What more can be done, in co-operation with the Foreign Secretary, to ensure that sanctions are more effective against the Russian oil trade?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. It is not just that we can confirm today that we are making the additional loan money available to the Ukrainians; it is also important to remember that the sanctions themselves are responsible for freezing at least \$400 billion that Russia would otherwise be able to use to feed its war machine. The UK Government and others have taken steps on the shadow fleet—the shipping in the grey zone, trying to avoid sanctions—but wherever we have the evidence required to act and sanction, we will do that and we will continue to do that.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): Not only is a full battalion of North Korean soldiers set to be deployed to assist Russia in Ukraine, but Putin is benefiting from components and weapons provided by the Iranians and the Chinese. This all represents an unprecedented conflation of threats to global security. I echo the question asked by hon. Friend the shadow Defence Secretary: the commitment to invest 2.5% of GDP is right, but when will that be backed up with action?

John Healey: The right hon. Lady is right. We totally condemn North Korea's involvement and support for Russia, from arms transfer to any further developments. As I said in my statement, that is in breach of multiple UN resolutions and we continue to watch the situation.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the UK armed forces who are providing vital support to our Ukrainian allies, and to the Ukrainian armed forces who are fighting valiantly against Putin's unlawful invasion of Ukraine?

John Healey: I will indeed. I have had the privilege of visiting Interflex training courses four times now, I think. I visited the second ever course at Salisbury plain. It is deeply moving to see the level of commitment of British forces to the task of training the Ukrainians, and to spend time with those Ukrainian recruits. They are lorry drivers, bank clerks, PR executives of all ages, who have volunteered to fight for their country and their freedom. They are trained by British forces, now with those from other countries alongside them, who are equipping them to be able to fight for their country. Knowing that they will soon return to the frontline in their own nation is deeply sobering.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome this £2.26 billion, but has the Defence Secretary had the opportunity to study the National Audit Office report published last month into the impact of our operations in Ukraine, particularly Operation Interflex, on the availability of the defence estate for the training of units of the British Army? While that is acceptable in the short term, in the long term it probably is not. What impact assessment has he carried out, and what proposals does he have to make available the defence estate we need to train British soldiers?

John Healey: Nothing will shake our commitment to continuing the Interflex training programme. We are determined and we will continue that throughout 2025. Many of the partner countries that have been alongside us this year have already committed to doing that again

[John Healey]

next year. The right hon. Member asked me about Interflex, the defence estate and the training of Ukrainian soldiers. That will continue. On the National Audit Office report, I have indeed read that report. It is a welcome change from the normal run of National Audit Office reports into the Ministry of Defence that we have been used to in recent years. It praises a good deal of what has been done by the Ministry of Defence in support of Ukraine, and it is very welcome.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his very welcome statement. He mentioned the importance of the Ukrainian forces' efforts in the Black sea against the Russian Black Sea Fleet and how important that is to the Ukrainian economy. Could he go a little further and describe how this funding for Ukraine will help to ensure that security and perhaps go even further in the Black Sea?

John Healey: The principle behind this funding is that we put it in the hands of the Ukrainians. The Ukrainians are in the best position—and must be in the position—to decide how best to use it. We have said that they can use it entirely on military support if they choose to do so; the support that they choose to procure with it will be a matter for them, in discussion with us.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Is the Defence Secretary able to share with us any conversations that the Foreign Secretary had while in China about China's engagement in this situation, and particularly its willingness to bring to bear the influence that it undoubtedly has on both Russia and North Korea?

John Healey: Happily, I can indeed. The Foreign Secretary was in China on 18 and 19 October. He met his counterpart, the Foreign Minister, and talked about the areas on which our countries may disagree, including on Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. He also raised the UK's concerns over China's supply of equipment to Russia and to Russia's military industrial complex.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I, too, very much welcome today's statement from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It provides evidence not just of warm words, but of real practical support for our ally in its desperate hour of need. But this country cannot do this on its own. Can he update the House on any discussions that he or his ministerial colleagues have had with our friends in the rest of the G7 on combating Putin through economic measures?

John Healey: I can indeed do so. I came away from the G7 meeting in Naples and from the meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in Brussels reinforced in my view that there is a determination not just to stand with Ukraine now, but to do so for as long as it takes. I will send my hon. Friend a copy of the communiqué from both meetings. I think he will be encouraged, as I was, by the degree of unanimity and determination not to allow Putin to believe that, if he holds out, the west will give up.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I welcome the announcement of the acceleration loan scheme. I also welcome the timing; the British Government are

not simply waiting to see the outcome of the US presidential election, as some other Governments are doing. Will the Defence Secretary repeat the assurance he gave in the House last week that, regardless of US policy, military aid to Ukraine from European NATO nations will not decrease next year?

John Healey: We are determined, on the contrary, to maintain and step up the military aid required from the UK. I found a similar determination from Defence Ministers across the NATO nations. We recognise that the Ukrainians are not only mounting this fight for themselves, but waging it on behalf of us all and the values that we share with them.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for this additional £2.26 billion for Ukraine, which will find a strong echo from the hundreds and thousands of individuals across this country who have opened their doors to Ukrainian refugees, and in many charities and organisations such as Jeeps for Peace in Scotland, which sends direct aid by taking pick-ups across Europe to the frontline. Does this money and the individual support from Britain not show that we will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes?

John Healey: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his thanks, but those thanks should really go to the Chancellor, because the Treasury has led the work on ensuring that we can put in place this new system of loans and make this additional money available to Ukraine. He is completely right to say that part of the strength of the support that we can offer as a country to Ukraine rests on the strength of the support of the British people—the warmth they have shown from the outset for Ukrainian refugees and the determination of many groups, such as the one he cites, which have been willing to collect and, in some cases, transport support for Ukraine and its people out to the country itself. I pay tribute to their efforts.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is concerning that we have received only the briefest of updates in this House on the direct involvement of North Korean troops, after one week of it being widely reported in the media. Last week, during Defence questions, the right hon. Gentleman gave his full-throated support for Ukraine but made no mention of the Government's awareness of the potential deployment of North Korean reinforcements up to brigade strength. What is the Government's current assessment of the scope of North Korean involvement, and how do overt North Korean boots on the ground in Ukraine necessitate a change in our posture?

John Healey: I have just given the House the assessment of the involvement and the extent, at present, of the involvement of North Korean troops.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Given the potential of North Korean boots on the ground joining Iranian drones in the air above Ukraine, it seems clear that the calculus that Russia is operating to is very different from that of the western alliance. Does the Secretary of State agree that there is a risk that, when the fear of escalation is one-sided, that itself becomes escalatory? Therefore, while welcoming the additional support that he has announced today, I wonder whether

he will join me in saying that it is time for other countries to follow the lead that the UK has shown today.

John Healey: Wherever there are signs of the breaching of UN resolutions and sanctions or of a dangerous escalation in support of Russia, we will act. We have acted before. My hon. Friend is right to point to the growing alliance between Russia and Iran and between Russia and North Korea.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and, indeed, for his very welcome news. Everybody in this House is incredibly pleased with the Government's decision today.

As the US election draws closer and uncertainty grows over the level of support that will come from the US after that election, does the Secretary of State agree that Ministers or Members of this House must exercise caution when expressing an opinion on that presidential race? I ask that with great respect. Will he take the opportunity to reaffirm the strong and resilient view of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that we should stand against Russian aggression and support those who need our help through aid, weaponry and diplomacy?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is right: the US elections are for the US people. As a UK Government and a UK Parliament, we will deal with whoever the American people choose to elect as their president. I am glad that he welcomes the support that the Government have stepped for up Ukraine. I say to him and to the House—I think the shadow Defence Secretary will recognise this—that it makes the job of the UK Government so much easier when there is such united support in this House for what we must do to support Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I would not expect him to comment on the US presidential election, but naturally there is a nervousness about the policy of a future US Government, which makes what European partners and allies do even more important. There is a huge disparity in the aid being provided by different partners across Europe. Denmark has been phenomenal in providing 1.86% of GDP—or more than €6 billion—and other countries such as Spain have not provided so much. Can he assure us that there were robust discussions in private among his Defence Minister colleagues in Brussels?

John Healey: Yes, I can. There were discussions, which were about the level of commitment we must make collectively to Ukraine and the level of commitment we must make collectively to NATO. I welcome the fact that this year 23 of the 32 NATO nations will meet that 2% of GDP threshold. It is a bare minimum—there is more that we need to do, particularly as European nations in NATO, in the years ahead.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I warmly thank the Secretary of State and the full ministerial team for their hard work mobilising the additional money from frozen Russian sovereign assets. I hope that other countries will follow UK leadership on this. In mobilising every tool across the Government, and with winter approaching, may I ask the Secretary of State to continue the push to realise the assets from the sale of Chelsea football club—the £2.5 billion from Roman Abramovich that could go towards humanitarian needs, which are also increasingly urgent in Ukraine?

John Healey: The Government understand the case that my hon. Friend makes. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), met him last night to discuss this further.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): On a visit to Kiev with parliamentary colleagues last month, I saw at first hand the incredible bravery of the Ukrainian people, who will welcome this statement. Unfortunately, Russia's war machine continues to be powered by western-made semiconductors that are smuggled into the country. May I ask the Secretary of State what work the Government are doing to make sure that Russia does not get access to that technology?

John Healey: One of the Government's great assets is my hon. Friend the Minister of State because of the work that he does with many other countries. Whenever discussions are required or evidence is gathered he speaks to many of the countries that may find that they have within them companies that might be involved in those supply chains. Wherever that happens, my hon. Friend is on it, and he is leading the charge to ensure that where we can identify those supply chains, we take the action that is necessary to close them down.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his very welcome statement.

As we approach 1,000 days since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, it is increasingly clear that Ukraine's survival depends on the west increasing its manufacture of munitions. Can my right hon. Friend say a little more about boosting our defence industrial supply chains, including in the west midlands, where defence manufacturers are keen to contribute?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. The importance of the British defence industry is not just in the greater security that it gives us as a nation but as part of the economic boost that will drive growth in future. One feature I was pleased to see at the recent Government investment summit was the confirmation that defence would be one of the eight economic growth sectors that would receive priority policy focus and support as we develop that for the future. That is in the interests of Ukraine immediately, and it is in our own interests in future. It is how we can combine both the strengthening of our national security and the boost to our national economy.

Sentencing Review and Prison Capacity

1.34 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on how the Government will address the crisis in our prisons, not just today, but for years to come.

The House has heard me recount my inheritance as Lord Chancellor before. The crisis in our prisons was, I believe, the greatest disgrace of the last Conservative Government. They left our prisons on the point of collapse—a situation that would have forced us to close the prison doors, cancel all trials and force the police to halt arrests. Crime would have gone unpunished, victims would never have seen justice done, and we would have witnessed the total breakdown of law and order. The previous Prime Minister knew he had to act. His Lord Chancellor begged him to do so, but instead he called an election.

As I announced to the House on 18 July, we had no choice but to bring forward the release point for some prisoners. Some of those serving standard determinate sentences have seen the custodial element reduced from 50% to 40%, spending the rest of their sentence on licence. They can be recalled to prison should probation staff judge that necessary to protect the public. As we saw over the summer of disorder, these releases could not come soon enough. After the August bank holiday, we were left with fewer than 100 spaces in our men's prisons. The system was only held together by the heroic work and considerable good will of our prison and probation staff. We were, on many occasions, just one bad day from disaster.

Today, the second tranche of emergency releases takes place, creating desperately needed space in our prisons, but that is not the long-term solution. I will now set out the long-term plan for our prisons, which will ensure that never again is a Lord Chancellor placed in the invidious position that I was on taking office.

This must begin by building more prisons. For all their rhetoric, the last Conservative Government's record on prison building was abject. They like to mention that, between 2010 and 2024, they built 13,000 places. What they are less keen to admit is that, in the same time, they closed 12,500. In 14 years, they added just 500 places to our prison capacity. In our first 100 days, this Government are already close to matching that. The previous Government promised to build 20,000 new places by the mid-2020s, but by the time they left office, they had built only 6,000. They were simply too terrified of their own Back Benchers, who supported prison building vociferously, as long as those prisons were not built anywhere near them.

This Government will build the prisons that the last Conservative Government promised but failed to deliver. In seeking a lasting solution to our prisons crisis, we must be honest, in a way that my predecessors were not. We cannot build our way out of this problem. Every year, our prison population grows by around 4,500 prisoners. This is a question of simple mathematics. To build enough prisons to meet this demand we would have to build the equivalent of HMP Birmingham—which is in my constituency of Birmingham Ladywood—four and a half times over, every single year. To put that in context,

in the past 10 years, the last Conservative Government built just three prisons. While we will speed up prison building and build as fast as we can, that pace is simply impossible. For that reason, if we are to address our prisons crisis, we must be smarter about who receives a prison sentence.

Let me be clear: there will always be a place for prison, and there will always be offenders who must be locked up, but we must expand the range of punishments we use outside prison and consider how we punish those offenders who have broken our rules but are not a danger to society. For that reason, today I am launching a review of sentencing. It will have one clear goal: to ensure that we are never again in a position where we have more prisoners than we have space in our prisons.

The review will follow three principles. First, sentences must punish offenders and protect the public. For dangerous offenders, prison will always remain the answer. Punishment and public protection will be the Government's first priority. There are some offenders whom I will task the review with considering, such as prolific offenders, who account for just one in every 10 individuals, but nearly half of all sentences. Some of them are hyper-prolific offenders, committing hundreds of crimes. I will ask the reviewers to consider whether a longer sentence might punish them better and force them to engage with rehabilitation on the inside.

The second, related, principle of the review is that sentences must encourage offenders to turn their backs on crime—we need both sticks and carrots. I will be encouraging the reviewers to learn from others who have succeeded. In Texas, for instance, Republican legislators faced a problem similar to ours: a soaring prison population; sky-high reoffending rates; and prisons that had run out of space. Working across political divides, the Texans introduced a system of good behaviour credits, where well-behaved prisoners could earn time off their sentence by engaging in rehabilitation programmes. The results were remarkable. Crime fell by nearly a third, reaching the lowest levels in half a century. The prison population fell by over 20,000, and after two decades, the Texans had closed 16 prisons rather than building new ones.

The third principle of the review is that it must expand the punishment that offenders receive outside of prison. There are already ways that we severely constrain offenders, limiting their freedom outside of prison. Those under home detention curfews are, in practice, under a form of house arrest. With a tag on their ankle and a sensor in their home, they are placed under curfew, generally for 12 hours each day. Should they break that curfew, they can be picked up and, if needs be, locked up.

In some ways, punishment outside of prison can be even more restrictive than prison. It is a sad fact that in many of our prisons today, a drinker can all too easily procure a drink. On a sobriety tag, however, with their sweat measured every 30 minutes and a 97% compliance rate, their teetotalism is almost as strict as mine. All of that is just using the technology that is immediately available to us, and used already in this country. I will be inviting the reviewers to consider the technology they have available to them now, and the next frontier of technology, used in other countries but not yet in ours. I believe that the modern world presents us with the opportunity to build a prison outside of prison, where the eyes of the state follow a prisoner more closely than any prison officer can.

Moving punishment out of prison for those who can be safely managed there has huge benefits. Outside of prison, offenders can engage in work that pays back the communities and individuals whom they have harmed. The evidence is abundantly clear that those who serve their sentences outside prison are far less likely to reoffend. That cuts crime, with fewer victims and safer streets, and reduces the huge cost to society of reoffending, most recently valued at over £22 billion a year.

This Government believe that crime must have consequences and criminals must be punished. We also believe in rehabilitation—that those who earn the right must be encouraged to turn their backs on crime. This Government believe in prison, but we must increase the use of punishment outside of prison too. The sentencing review will be tasked with pursuing those goals.

I am pleased to say that the review will be led by a former Lord Chancellor, David Gauke, a highly regarded Minister who served in multiple roles across Government. He has rightly gained the respect of both the judiciary and the legal sector, as well as many within this House. I will work with him to assemble a panel of reviewers who will draw together deep expertise and experience in the criminal justice system. The review will take a bipartisan and evidence-based look at an issue that has for far too long been a political football, booted around by both sides. David Gauke will report back with his recommendations in the spring, and I have placed a copy of the complete terms of reference of the review in the Library of the House.

It is right that the review is given time to do its work. As I have noted already, however, the capacity crisis in our prisons has not gone away. When we introduced emergency measures we believed that they had bought us about a year, but after the summer of disorder, the next crisis could be just nine months away. For that reason, I announced last week an extension of the sentencing powers of magistrates courts, which allows us to bear down on the remand population in our prisons. But we must go further.

While I will not countenance any further emergency releases of prisoners, there are operational measures that I will lay before the House in the months ahead. The first, which I have already referenced, is home detention curfew. This modern form of house arrest curtails freedom and helps offenders turn their lives around. Offenders are subject to electronically monitored curfews, which must be imposed for nine hours a day, are generally 12 hours long, and can extend to 16 hours.

As the shadow Lord Chancellor noted in the House in February, the reoffending rate for the average prisoner, which was measured a few years ago, is close to 50%, but for offenders released on a home detention curfew, it is 23%. This Government will soon extend the use of that measure, following in the footsteps of the previous Administration, who rightly expanded its use on a number of occasions. We will increase the maximum period that eligible offenders can spend under house arrest from six months to 12 months.

The second measure that we will introduce will address the soaring recall population, which has doubled from 6,000 to 12,000 in just six years. Risk assessed recall review is a power of the Secretary of State to re-release, on licence, those who pose a low risk to the public, avoiding the long waits they often face for a Parole Board hearing. In the past, the measure was used often:

it was used between 1,000 and 1,500 times each year between 2017 and 2019; but its use has fallen in recent years, reaching as low as 92 times in 2022.

Later this month, I intend to review the risk assessed recall review process, so that lower-risk cases can be considered for re-release after they have been recalled to prison for two to three months, and where their further detention is no longer necessary to protect the public. I should note that this will only change the cases that can be considered for release, with the final decision still in the hands of experienced probation officers and managers.

The final area where I intend to make progress is in the case of foreign national offenders. I share the public's view that, with 10,000 in our prisons, there are far too many foreign offenders in this country, costing £50,000 each a year to house at His Majesty's pleasure. It happens to be my personal view that deportation is as good a punishment as imprisonment, if not better. We are currently on track to remove more foreign national offenders this year than at any time in recent years. But I will now be working with my colleagues across Government to explore the ways that we can accelerate that further, including working with the Home Office to make the early removal scheme for foreign offenders more effective.

When I walked into the Ministry of Justice for the first time as Lord Chancellor just over three months ago, I encountered a prison system on the brink of collapse. It was the result of the inaction of the last Government, who thought they could dither and delay, and led us to the precipice of disaster. But their failure was longer in the making: they failed to build the prison places this country needs, and they failed to address the challenge of an ever-rising prison population.

In July, this Government took action to avert immediate disaster, but the plan that I have set out today does more than that. It will ensure that this Government and our successors are never forced to rely on the emergency release of prisoners again—a measure over which I had no choice, one that I took despite my personal beliefs, and one that must never happen again. I commend this statement to the House.

1.47 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): As always, I am grateful to the Lord Chancellor for early sight of her statement, and for her coming to the House to deliver it, giving us the opportunity to ask questions. She is always unfailingly courteous in her dealings with this House.

The Lord Chancellor made several announcements today. It is important that we see the detail of her sentencing review, and that, whatever the outcome, it ensures that victims' voices are heard throughout, that the worst offenders—for example, violent or sexual offenders—stay behind bars for longer, and that, as she alluded to, prolific offenders who cause so much blight and harm can still be subject to a custodial sentence where appropriate.

We saw an overall fall in reoffending since 2010 under the last Government, from around 31% to just over 25%, but there is of course still more to do. It is right that we look at all sentences, including tough community sentences, through the prism of what reduces reoffending, boosts rehabilitation and best protects the public. With that

[Edward Argar]

in mind, I know David Gauke well; he was my first boss as a Minister. He is a decent, honourable, able and thoughtful man, and I regard him as a friend, so I will not prejudge what he will conclude in his review. But the Opposition will rightly, as the Lord Chancellor would expect, scrutinise the review when it is published, and hold the Government to account on the choices they make on how to proceed subsequently. I hope the review's terms of reference might include not just male prisoners, but female prisoners and female offenders, building on the female offenders strategy that David Gauke and I put in place many years ago.

As the Lord Chancellor has set out, prison capacity has been under significant pressure for some time, and while the situation was incredibly acute in 2008, 2009 and 2010, it remains a significant challenge. That is due to an increased average sentence length for first offenders—for which we make no apology—matched by the biggest prison-building programme since the Victorian era, with thousands of additional places built while tackling the legacy of the crumbling prison estate we inherited in 2010 and the Labour party's absolute failure to build the 7,500 Titan prison places it promised while in government. Of course, though, the impact on the remand population of the decisions to not mass release during the pandemic and to rightly retain jury trials, compounded by the Bar strike, undoubtedly significantly increased pressure despite our prison-building programme.

The Lord Chancellor has set out her chosen approach, with more convicted criminals released today at the 40% point of their sentence, rather than the 50% point in tranche 2 of SDS40. We are seeing significant levels of concern from victims of crime about that approach—Sky News ran a powerful package this morning highlighting that concern—so I have several important questions on that aspect of the Lord Chancellor's announcement. She said that she will publish data on SDS40 in the coming weeks in the normal run of statistics. I understand that, but we would be grateful if she could provide the date on which those statistics will be published. In the media this morning, she alluded to the rate of recalls being “very high” but disputed—based on her internal data—that it was as high as 50%, as was suggested on Radio 4. Can she expand on what that rate looks like?

In response to a written question from me, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin) acknowledged that hotels are now being used in some cases to accommodate released prisoners under SDS40. In the light of the Lord Chancellor's commitment at oral questions last month to be transparent about this matter—although it took a written question from me to get that confirmation—how many hotel rooms or places are being used, and at what cost? We have heard little thus far about deporting FNOs, so I am pleased that she has focused on that issue in her remarks, but when will she set out more details of her plans to improve the deportation rate of FNOs, and what targets is she setting for that?

Does the Lord Chancellor now acknowledge that—as we pointed out at the time, and as victims also pointed out—although the Government claimed that domestic abuse and domestic violence offences would be excluded from SDS40, that is simply not the case? DA offenders committing actual bodily harm or grievous bodily harm

are not excluded. Will she revisit the exclusions list to review this matter? Will she also commit to building more prisons, over and above the six new prisons that we funded and have already been completed or are being built, and will she commit to funding that additional prison building?

Home detention curfew will further reduce the time that convicted criminals spend behind bars. Someone with a four-year sentence who is not excluded from SDS40 would now be out at around 19 months; with the possibility of 12-month HDC, that could mean that they were only inside for just over six months of a four-year sentence. I recognise that the interaction between different schemes and calculations is complex and may be different in individual cases, but can the Lord Chancellor reassure the House that a fixed minimum percentage will always be served by those sentenced to prison?

The Lord Chancellor will appreciate that with layer upon layer of reductions, some people will struggle to see that punishment or public protection are at the fore, so can she clarify a number of further points? While most DA offences would be presumed ineligible for HDC, that presumption is not absolute, and again, many common DA offences such as ABH or common assault are not presumed ineligible. What will the Lord Chancellor do to address that issue? Does she intend to examine the list of exclusions for both schemes—SDS40 and HDC—and come back to the House with a tougher list? Tagging is a vital part of HDC, but while there may be the tags, as she has mentioned, it appears that the ability to fit them swiftly is sadly lacking at present. What reassurances can the Lord Chancellor give that there is now no backlog at all in tagging? What steps is she taking to ensure that victims are contacted when perpetrators are released, and what additional resource is going into victim support services and probation, over and above what we had already committed to?

Turning to the rehabilitation activity requirement, it is right that experienced staff judge these cases. As the Lord Chancellor knows, the smaller numbers reflect both risk assessment and the complex interaction of RAR with other release schemes. I therefore fear that the bounty she might expect to get from the changes she intends to make will be limited. Will she confirm details of those proposed changes for the House in due course?

Finally, and most importantly, as I pressed the Lord Chancellor on last week, it is vital that the criminal justice system is not subject to a flat budget or, worse, cuts in next week's Budget—cuts that would let down victims, those who work in the system, and the public. I fully appreciate that she will not be able to prejudge that Budget, either at the Dispatch Box or in the media, but a fair financial settlement, alongside her setting out her long-term plans for the system—a little of which I acknowledge we have seen today—will be absolutely essential if victims and the public are to have confidence in her Government on law and order.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the shadow Lord Chancellor for the courteous way in which he has approached this debate, and for his detailed questions.

Let me start with his point in relation to the sentencing review. The voice of victims will be heard: there will be a representative with experience of working with victims to make sure that is covered in the review, and I look

forward to announcing further members of that review panel over the coming days. The review will be free to consider every aspect of the sentencing framework, including the use of whole-life orders and minimum sentences. We have not constrained the sentencing review in any way: the review panel should take a proper look at the sentencing framework that we have and go where the evidence takes them.

I acknowledge the progress that was made on reducing reoffending, but as the shadow Lord Chancellor accepts, there is much more to do. We know that 80% of offenders are reoffenders and that 90% of those sentenced to custody are reoffenders. We have a big problem with that revolving door in and out of our prisons—as a country, that is a significant challenge that we must overcome. As I said, I will be placing the terms of reference in the House of Commons Library. The shadow Lord Chancellor will be pleased to see that those terms of reference refer to cohorts of offenders, including female offenders. He will also know that in my conference speech in September, I laid out a different approach to how this Government deal with women in our prisons.

Edward Argar: I followed it closely.

Shabana Mahmood: I know that the shadow Lord Chancellor followed it closely. I am setting up a women's justice board, which will report with a strategy in the spring. We need to do more with female offenders, especially given the impact that the incarceration of women and the breaking up of family homes has on their children, particularly as two thirds of women in prison are there for non-violent offences. I hope there is cross-party consensus in this House on dealing with women offenders differently.

On prison capacity, I say gently to the shadow Lord Chancellor that we can trade numbers across this Dispatch Box about things that the last Labour Government did before 2010, or he might want to acknowledge the failure that took place over his Government's 14 years in power. He knows that only 500 net prison places were added by his Government over those 14 years, and that the crisis that faced me when I walked into the Department was acute—he knows that, because he had walked out of that same Department only a few days before. The previous Government ran our prisons boiling hot for far too long, so my inheritance when I took over was dire, leaving me with no option other than the emergency release of prisoners.

I note the shadow Lord Chancellor's point about domestic abuse and domestic violence cases, but I remind him that his own early release scheme that his Government implemented for many months before the last general election—the so-called end of custody supervised licence scheme—contained none of the SDS40 exclusions. He knows that; he also knows that we pulled every lever available to us within the law to exclude the offences that are most closely connected to domestic abuse and domestic violence. As a matter of law, it is only possible to exclude offence types, rather than offenders. I have had to pull that emergency lever; I have sought to do so in the safest way possible, to make as many exclusions as possible, and to give the Probation Service the time it needs to prepare for this measure and to make sure victims are notified under victim notification schemes in the usual way.

I will be publishing the data in relation to tranche 1 and 2 releases in two ad hoc statistical releases before Christmas, so that data will be in the public domain. As the shadow Lord Chancellor will know from his time in the Department, the recall rate usually hovers between 6% and 10%—it can vary quite a bit between those numbers. Our current information is that the SDS40 releases are not showing a higher recall rate than we would expect compared with normal releases, but those statistics will of course be published in the usual way in due course.

On hotels, I made provision to allow the emergency use of hotel accommodation for prisoners released under the SDS40 scheme to prevent any homelessness that might lead to higher rates of recall. Fewer than 20 prisoners have been housed in hotels, and at a very low cost. This is a temporary measure, and I do not anticipate that it will be used any more extensively than it has been already. On foreign national offenders, I will return to this House on that matter, but work is under way across Government and I am working closely with my colleagues in the Home Office.

I will be publishing for the House, and will return to the House with, the detail of the further measures on the home detention curfew. The shadow Lord Chancellor rightly says that not everybody is automatically eligible for a home detention curfew. There is still a risk assessment, and safeguarding concerns are the No. 1 way in which domestic abuse issues show up as a red flag for a particular prisoner. I would not imagine that those previous and current arrangements will change very much with the measures we will take.

I thank the shadow Lord Chancellor for the contract concluded with Serco to deliver the tagging. It may not have been him directly and personally, but it was his Government. The performance of Serco has been unacceptable. Let me be very clear with the House: there is no shortage of tags in this country. It has failed to make sure that it has enough staff in place to tag everybody who needs a tag. Its progress has been monitored daily by me, my Ministers and officials in the Department, and we will continue to hold its feet to the fire. We will levy financial penalties, and all options remain on the table. Performance has improved a little—it has made progress—but all options are on the table if that falls back in any way.

The shadow Lord Chancellor will know that I am not going to comment on anything relating to the Budget. The Chancellor will make her statement in due course. I gently remind him that the budgets of the Ministry of Justice under the Tory party left a lot to be desired.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I welcome the approach the Lord Chancellor is taking to the management of the prison system, and the appointment of David Gauke to head the sentencing review. Given that the initiatives she has announced today to relieve pressure on prisons will create additional work for already overstretched probation officers, will she make a further statement when she has decided what operational changes she is going to make to the Probation Service? The additional 14,000 prison places she has promised to build will take prison capacity to above 100,000. Is that desirable in the long term?

[*Andy Slaughter*]

Given her intention to expand punishment outside prison, will she make it her aim in time to close some of the worst of our existing prisons, built two or three centuries ago, which warehouse crime and, despite the best efforts of prison staff, do little or nothing to reform or rehabilitate their inmates?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his questions. On probation, I recognise the very high workloads that probation officers are working under. We committed in our manifesto to a strategic review of probation governance. I have made sure that we have brought forward the recruitment of an extra 1,000 probation officers by March next year. We are working closely with probation unions and probation staff on the frontline to manage the situation. I am very conscious that we do not want to take the pressure out of the prisons and just leave it with the Probation Service instead. This is a whole-system response, and the whole system needs to be stabilised and able to face the pressures we see in it.

On the prison population, make no mistake: the number of prison places will increase in this country. We will deliver the 14,000 the previous Government did not deliver, and the prison population will therefore rise. However, as I have said, we cannot build our way out of this crisis, and we do have to do things differently. We are a very long way away from any of the changes the Chair of the Select Committee may want to see, but fundamentally we must make sure, and the review must make sure, that we never ever run out of prison places in this country again.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

Having myself grown up in a home of domestic violence at the hands of my mum's former partner, I share the concerns of the Victims' Commissioner and survivors of domestic abuse that loopholes in the early release scheme's criteria could mean that some of their abusers, who have been convicted of violent offences but not of domestic violence-specific offences, may have been released early today. I know the Secretary of State attempted to provide some reassurances, but I can say to her that I have received communications from affected people outside this Chamber who are not satisfied with those assurances yet. Domestic abuse survivors deserve to be safe. Can she address these concerns today?

We welcome the Government's determination to fix the mess that the Conservatives made of our criminal justice system through the evidence-led, independent sentencing review. The former Lord Chancellor chairing it and I have a track record of fixing things together. In my past life, I used to run a social enterprise phone repair company staffed by ex-offenders, and we ran pop-up repair shops in the MOJ, at one of which the then Lord Chancellor David Gauke eagerly presented his phone for repair. I hope this Lord Chancellor shares that collaborative fixing spirit when it comes to engaging with the Liberal Democrats and me on this review—and I will happily sort the Secretary of State out with a phone repair if she needs one.

While empirical evidence will be critical to this review, some of the most valuable insights on this matter are held by victims and survivors themselves. I was therefore disappointed not to find the words "victim" or "survivor" mentioned once anywhere in the terms of reference, although I have heard the Secretary of State say them today. Will she put that right, and outline specifically how victims and survivors will be represented and formally consulted in the sentencing review?

Finally, even though the Secretary of State has said there will be no constraints and no constrictions, something else missing from the review is the injustice of indeterminate imprisonment for public protection sentences, under which almost 3,000 people remain imprisoned with no release date. What is more, people are serving IPP sentences who have committed lesser offences than those being released today under the Government's early release scheme. Reforming these sentences could help address prison overcrowding and the safety crisis, so why have the Government explicitly excluded IPP sentences from this review, and will she reconsider that decision?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for his questions. I am sorry to hear about his personal experiences, but they will of course inform the valuable contributions that he makes in this House from his own lived experience.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, there is not a specific offence of domestic abuse in our legislative framework. To bring in the emergency release scheme to prevent us from running out of prison spaces in July, I have pulled every lever at my disposal. We can make these changes in law only by excluding offences, not offender cohorts or offender types. That is why the list of offences covered includes those most closely connected to domestic abuse situations, but it is not of course fully comprehensive. It cannot be, because we can exclude only offences, not offender types. I hope he will recognise that I pulled these levers as early as possible in the Parliament—almost as soon as I walked into the Department—because I wanted to give the Probation Service time to prepare for this change. Specifically, it was so that it could notify victims, work on proper release plans for these offenders, make sure that the licence conditions are the right ones and make sure that the monitoring of these offenders in the community is as strong as it needs to be.

The hon. Gentleman will also know that those who are flagged as having a domestic violence background are prioritised for tags. Every choice I have made in bringing forward these emergency release changes has been made to try to minimise the impact on victims. I really empathise with and am very affected by the concerns of victims that those who have offended against them are being released some weeks or months early. That might sound small, but I know it has a huge impact, and I do not seek to minimise that in any way. As I say, I have pulled every lever at my disposal to try to minimise those concerns.

On the sentencing review, when we reveal the whole panel we will ensure that victims' voices are represented, as that is important. In the terms of reference we have tried to capture the fact that all of society suffers collectively when we do not get reoffending rates down. This is a strategy for cutting crime and producing fewer victims in future, which I hope the hon. Gentleman will support.

IPP sentences are specifically excluded. That is a challenging cohort of prisoners in our system, and where it is safe to do so I am determined to make progress on releasing those who are currently serving an IPP sentence. I worked with the previous Government and supported changes to the licence terms and conditions brought in by the Conservative Administration. We are implementing changes that were made in the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, which was enacted just before the general election. What we cannot do is release people who still pose a risk to the public, and with this cohort of offenders I cannot release those who are still a danger to themselves and to others. Getting that balance right is incredibly important, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that it is not appropriate to put that cohort of offenders within the sentencing review.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): Under the Conservative Government, more than one in two people who served short-term custodial sentences went on to reoffend. In total, reoffending is costing our country £20 billion a year. That is not working at all, and not working for the taxpayer. In my constituency, and across Hertfordshire, fantastic charities such as the Hertfordshire Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders are running innovative and pioneering programmes, and working with ex-offenders to ensure that they do not offend again. Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about how the Government will adopt a new approach and work with charities and broader civil society to cut reoffending for good?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right: reoffending has a huge cost for us all as a country because it creates more victims of crime. Indeed, it costs us more than £20 billion at about £22 billion a year. Charities and other groups have a huge role to play in helping to bring down the reoffending rate, but to allow that work to succeed we must bring down overcrowding and the capacity crisis in our prisons. I hope the sentencing review will help us to chart a new course when it comes to bringing down reoffending.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I thank the Lord Chancellor for her statement. In the first wave of early releases, 37 prisoners were wrongly released. What steps is she taking to ensure that those mistakes are not repeated? Does she agree that the best way to reduce reoffending is to ensure that released prisoners are able to participate in the labour market, and what will she do to improve education and training within the prison system?

Shabana Mahmood: On the 37 who were wrongly released, I had never imagined that it would be possible for people to be charged and sentenced under an older Act of Parliament, and not the more recent Sentencing Act 2020, and as soon as that issue was brought to our attention we took immediate steps. All 37 were ultimately returned to custody, and I will ensure that that mistake cannot happen again. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about reducing reoffending. Access to literacy training and skills and the ability to get a job are important in helping an offender turn their back on a life of crime, and I hope the sentencing review will make further positive suggestions on that. We know we have to tackle reoffending, and we know that jobs, housing and so on are part of the picture if we are to persuade

people to become the better citizens that we need them to be, rather than the better criminals that our system currently produces.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's review of sentencing, but as she may know, people who are neurodivergent are hugely over-represented in the prison population. What steps will she take to ensure that prisoners with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism do not reoffend?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right to say that the support prisoners receive in prison must be tailored to take account of needs such as neurodivergence and autism, much of which has gone undiagnosed in the life of prisoners, and often does not even get diagnosed within the prison estate. We must obviously turn that around, and I am confident we can make progress in that area. First we have to deal with the capacity crisis, because when prisons are very overcrowded offenders are locked up for 23 hours a day, and in that one remaining hour little good work can be done. We must deal with the capacity problems so that we can then deal with the underlying issues that prisoners face before they can make the positive choices that we all want.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Secretary of State has identified a good set of principles for her review. On the Texan approach, does she think that it would be fairer to victims if, rather than us looking at extending early release further, we used the reward of the existing access to early release? She talked a lot about evidence, but she will understand that it is harder to evidence victims' feelings about justice, and that risks greater weight being given to statistics on reoffending, and other information that the Ministry of Justice has to hand. How does she propose to close the gap in evidence relating to how victims and their families feel about sentencing?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman makes good point. The Texan model is of interest because it sought to incentivise the positive behaviour that reduces reoffending and ultimately cuts crime, and Texas saw some pretty spectacular results. There is no exact read-across from that model to our system, and it will be for the review to consider that model and others around the world to see what approaches might work here. It is imperative that any measures we take retain the confidence of victims and the wider public. Any punishment that takes place outside a prison needs to still look and feel like proper punishment to every community in our country. That is non-negotiable. Public confidence must be maintained, and that speaks to the hon. Gentleman's second point. Evidence is important, and in my experience, when victims are engaged in the process, they appreciate the need to reduce reoffending, because they do not want other people to be victims. Their voice will be heard in the review; I hope that reassures him.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): In June 2019, David Gauke made a speech as Lord Chancellor on smarter sentencing. It was a helpful, coherent, cogent, evidence-based speech about sentencing reform. Four Conservative Prime Ministers later, no progress has been made, so I am pleased that the Labour Government will grasp the nettle. We were just discussing the Texan example of problem solving and sentencing, but can the

[*Jake Richards*]

Lord Chancellor reassure me that the review will also consider family, drug and alcohol courts, and the progress and positive results that we have seen in the family courts?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend makes the case well for why David Gauke is the right person to lead this review. As I said, he brings deep expertise to this debate. I am sure that the sentencing review panel will be interested, as many are, in some of the pilots that are being run on problem-solving courts, and also in the family courts.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What measures is the Lord Chancellor taking to ensure that the review considers the impact of sentencing policies on different socioeconomic groups, and addresses concerns about disproportionate sentences for marginalised communities and minority groups?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member raises an important point. That issue is not within the review's terms of reference. It will not consider disparities in sentencing because it is looking at the overall sentencing framework, and how we ensure that we never run out of prison places again. There is an important debate on disparities in the criminal justice system. The review on sentencing is not the proper place for that, but we will take forward that other work in due course.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I declare an interest: I am the honorary life president of the Prison Officers Association. I thank the Secretary of State on behalf of the POA for her open-door policy on engagement with the union. I congratulate her on bringing forward the sentencing review. The POA has long argued that there are too many people in prison, in particular with mental health problems. They include veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder who should not be there, but should be treated elsewhere. Will she ensure that the unions are fully involved in deciding on the composition of the panel and the engagement process for the review?

Shabana Mahmood: Working closely with our trade unions is important to us. We have already engaged with the Prison Officers Association. Let me place on record my thanks to all who work in our prisons and our probation system. In our prisons in particular, the rates of violence against prison officers have been too high for too long. I salute the hard work that prison officers do in a difficult job on behalf of us all. My right hon. Friend can be assured of our close engagement with everybody who works in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service going forward.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Parliament legislated for a maximum sentence of life imprisonment for causing death by dangerous driving, but judges are yet to impose such a sentence, despite such cases as the one in my constituency in which three people were killed by a driver in a case with five aggravating factors. Will the Lord Chancellor ensure that when the review considers longer custodial sentences, it looks at how victims can get justice, and how the maximum sentences legislated for by this place are applied?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member will know that sentencing decisions in individual cases are a matter for the independent judiciary, who have to consider all the facts in front of them and sentence accordingly, based on the law, the sentencing guidelines and the framework. I cannot comment on the specifics of the case he mentions. The review will not be constrained in any way in its inquiry, or on maximum sentences, whole life orders and so on. The whole range of sentences that are available is open for the review panel to consider and make recommendations on.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her handling of the issue and the approach she is taking in response to the challenges she faces. This morning, I met local police leadership to discuss the challenges around drug-based criminality in Leyton and Wanstead. The situation they face could not be clearer. After 14 years of Tory failure, overstretched police services, over-capacity prisons and woefully underfunded probation services and councils have led to a vicious cycle of reoffending. Does she agree that the whole system needs reform and investment to restore public trust in our justice system, and to keep my constituents safe?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend will know that in our safer streets mission, improving confidence in the criminal justice system is one of the key outcomes we are focused on. He is right to make the point that the whole criminal justice system requires stabilisation. It all needs to be put on a better trajectory than the one we inherited from the previous Government. We are talking in detail about prisons, but it is difficult to divorce what is happening in our prison system from what is going on in probation and the courts. I reassure him that I conceive of this as a whole-system approach. I am aware of the challenges in other bits of the system; they are things that this Government will ultimately sort out.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Lord Chancellor speaks with great clarity and determination on this issue, and I am sure that she will remember last week promising me a ministerial meeting involving my constituent, Andrew Duncan, and a specialist team. They are working on a new concept of community detention that I believe is tailor-made for the vision that the Lord Chancellor has outlined to us today. Can she confirm that the meeting will go ahead, notwithstanding the extra opportunity to give evidence to the Gauke review in due course?

Shabana Mahmood: I knew immediately that the right hon. Gentleman was going to ask about the meeting he referenced last week, when I made my other statement. I assure him that I will follow that up. I am interested in the work of the group that he mentions, and I am sure that the sentencing review panel will also be interested in it.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I thank the Lord Chancellor for her statement, and for the leadership she has shown in trying to turn around a Department that, by any metric, was failing. I thank her for the transparent and considered approach that she has taken in reaching some of the difficult decisions she has had to make since taking office. While I accept the inevitability of the early release scheme, what conversations

has she had with ministerial colleagues on improving victim support for those who have seen perpetrators return to the community earlier than they were perhaps mentally prepared for, so as to reduce harm as far as possible?

Shabana Mahmood: I can assure my hon. Friend that my ministerial team and I have been working closely with our colleagues, primarily in the Home Office, but also across Government. Support for victims sits in different Departments, but we are making sure that we have a “one team” approach to this important matter. I have sought to pull the levers at my disposal in such a way that we gave the Probation Service the time it needed to prepare for the SDS40 changes. I did that because I wanted to ensure that our obligations under the victim notification scheme could be met. I am monitoring progress on that regularly, and I will ensure that any improvements required are made on a continual basis. We keep this under constant review.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Neil Foden is in prison for the sexual abuse of four vulnerable schoolchildren. He was the headteacher and strategic headteacher at two secondary schools in Gwynedd. Foden was convicted of 19 charges and sentenced to 17 years in July this year for his abhorrent crimes. The judge said he showed no remorse. Can the Lord Chancellor advise me how to seek assurance for his victims that Foden will not be released until he has served at least two thirds of his sentence?

Shabana Mahmood: I can confirm that all sex offences of all types are excluded from the SDS40 measures.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Ind): I very much welcome the Lord Chancellor’s sentencing review, but on immediate systemic issues, privately run Forest Bank prison in Salford is at 138% capacity, with continued reports over the years of high levels of violence and insufficient rehabilitative training for prisoners. The contract runs out in January. Can the Secretary of State confirm who will be running the prison after that date? Will she be bringing it back under state control? What measures is she taking to urgently ensure safety in the prison and adequate rehabilitative training?

Shabana Mahmood: I will not pre-empt any future decisions on any particular prison, but I am not ideological about whether a prison is run by the state or privately. There are good prisons of both types in the sector. There are some failing state-run prisons and some failing privately run prisons. The most important thing is that we get on top of the capacity crisis across the whole prison estate. We have to reduce overcrowding so that we can focus on the good-quality rehabilitation activity that I know governors in every type of prison want to ensure, so that prisoners can be helped to turn their life around.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I congratulate the Lord Chancellor on recognising that for some prisoners, the shortcomings of short sentences are properly remedied by providing for longer ones. On the review and David Gauke, it is difficult not to like him and even admire him, but I am not alone in regarding him as a notorious wet, am I?

Shabana Mahmood: I will leave those characterisations to the internal workings of the Conservative party. I consider David Gauke to be a person with deep expertise in this area. He is a former Lord Chancellor who knows this territory very well. He will be able to hit the ground running, and I know that he will go where the evidence takes him.

Mike Amesbury (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): The Lord Chancellor referred to successful work in Texas. If we adopt such a model over here, how will victims be involved in shaping that tough rehabilitation approach?

Shabana Mahmood: We will make sure that the review panel, when it is fully put together, includes somebody with experience of working with victims of crime to make sure that that perspective is fully reflected in the investigations that the review undertakes and, ultimately, in its findings and recommendations.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): May I congratulate the Lord Chancellor on the terms of reference of this review, and the appointment of the excellent David Gauke? I remain concerned, however, about the Government’s evident enthusiasm for increasing capacity. May I ask the Lord Chancellor directly whether she agrees with her colleague in the other place that we imprison too many people in this country? Is the Lord Chancellor’s ultimate aim to reduce the prison population?

Shabana Mahmood: We need to make sure that we have the prison places we need to lock up those who have to be locked up. That is fundamentally non-negotiable. We have to see an increase in prison capacity. I mentioned earlier that the previous Government failed to deliver 14,000 places. Without them, we will run out of prison places again. We have to build the supply, and we have to do better on reoffending. All these things are equally important, and they all have to be done at the same time. I will not set arbitrary figures for how many people can and should go to prison. I want to ensure that we never again run out of prison places, that we do better on rehabilitation and that we expand punishment outside prison.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of the bipartisan sentencing review panel and thank my right hon. Friend for her continuing work to fix the mess of the last 14 years in this Department. The evidence shows that 55% of adults on short sentences go on to reoffend, while community orders have a 34% reoffending rate. Can she assure me that the panel will consider that as part of its remit?

Shabana Mahmood: That is exactly the sort of area that the panel will review. Although the reoffending rates for community orders are lower, they are still far too high. I am sure that the sentencing panel will want to consider how to bring all the numbers down so that we can ensure we are rehabilitating more people and ultimately cutting crime.

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): In 2021, the Justice Committee highlighted the fact that too many offenders were imprisoned because community orders with mental health requirements were unavailable in many areas across the country. Does the Lord Chancellor

[Dr Beccy Cooper]

agree that we must now work across the health and justice systems to ensure that adequate provision is available in this essential area?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I can assure her that I will work closely with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make sure that there is join-up across Government and that we do everything we can to reduce reoffending, rehabilitate more people and ultimately cut crime.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, particularly her preference for the deportation of foreign criminals and her comments that for hyper-prolific offenders, a particular problem in my constituency, longer sentences may be best. Whatever the outcome of the review, can she commit that dangerous criminals who pose a threat to the public, in Hartlepool or anywhere else, will always be locked up under this Government?

Shabana Mahmood: Yes, I absolutely can. The whole point of the review is to ensure that the country is never again in a position in which we might run out of prison places, and to ensure that those who must be locked up to keep the public safe will always be locked up.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Keeping a prisoner in prison costs the taxpayer over £50,000 a year, whereas punishing the prisoner out of prison costs less than £5,000 a year. What is more, the prisoner is then far less likely to reoffend. Does the Secretary of State agree that taxpayers' money would be better spent on having a much cheaper and better alternative to prison?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend makes a really important point about the relative costs of imprisonment and of punishment out of prison. Delivering the 14,000 prison places that the previous Government failed to deliver is a big cost, but it will be met by this Government. We must also ensure that we expand punishment out of prison. All options must be pursued if we are to get to grips with this crisis.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I am not given to hyperbole; I will simply say that my right hon. Friend has inherited a shocking and dangerous situation and is dealing with it in a calm and collected manner. I applaud and support the move to a more sensible and sustainable policy on sentencing, but will she assure my constituents in Rugby that we will always lock up violent and dangerous offenders where necessary to keep the public safe?

Shabana Mahmood: Let me assure my hon. Friend that the answer to his question is yes and yes. Part of the reason for doing the review is to ensure that this country is never again on the brink of running out of prison places, and that dangerous offenders who need to be locked up to keep the public safe will always be locked up.

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): I welcome the sentencing review and thank the Secretary of State for her explanation of why IPP sentences are not included in the review. What steps will she take to accelerate routes out of custody for prisoners serving IPP sentences, including a re-sentencing review that can be done without

prejudice to public protection, to end an injustice once and for all and to increase capacity on our prison estate?

Shabana Mahmood: I hear the point my hon. Friend makes, and she makes it very well. We are not considering a re-sentencing exercise for IPP prisoners, because that would automatically release a number of people who we do not believe it would be safe to release. I am not willing to compromise public protection. I know that there is a huge injustice at the heart of these issues and that IPP sentences have rightly been abolished, but we have a problem with the cohort, in particular those under an IPP sentence who have never been released at all. I am determined to make more progress, wherever it is possible to do so safely, on releasing more IPP prisoners, but never in a way that compromises public protection.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to cross-party working, transparency and rebuilding public trust. Does she agree that this is a significant departure from the previous Government, who released over 10,000 prisoners not in the open but in secret?

Shabana Mahmood: I agree. My hon. Friend is right to remind the House of the last Conservative Government's end of custody supervised licence scheme, for which we, in the end, had to release the numbers. Over 10,000 offenders were released under that scheme, without transparency and without the same exemptions that we have applied to the SDS40 changes.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): What a mess we have inherited! I thank the Lord Chancellor for the steps that she has taken today to sort it out. We know that offenders who are subject to home detention orders are 50% less likely to reoffend, but can we put them to work as well during unpaid work sessions? Can we ensure that offenders who commit further offences while on licence are dealt with more robustly in the courts as they are recalled to prison?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend raises really important points about how we break the cycle of recalls to prison and ensure that licence conditions are abided by, and about the scope for putting more offenders to work. I am sure that these will be matters of great interest to the sentencing review panel. I look forward to seeing its findings in due course.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): The past 14 years have shown that Governments ignore the prison estate at their peril. My right hon. Friend rightly says that we must redesign punishment outside the secure estate. Will she elaborate on how offenders will have their liberty curtailed and how the public will be made aware of that liberty being taken away?

Shabana Mahmood: The modern world, with different technology, presents the best possible opportunity for us to expand the use of punishment out of prison, but in a way that gives the public confidence that offenders are being supervised, that the eyes of the state remain on them and that their behaviour and their liberty are effectively curtailed. I expect that new technology, as well as current available technology, will be of great interest to the review panel. I look forward to its findings when it reports in the spring.

BILL PRESENTED**TRADE AGREEMENTS
(EXCLUSION OF NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICES) BILL***Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Seamus Logan, supported by Stephen Flynn, Pete Wishart, Kirsty Blackman, Dave Doogan, Stephen Gethins, Chris Law, Graham Leadbitter, Brendan O'Hara, Claire Hanna and Ben Lake, presented a Bill to exclude requirements relating to National Health Services procurement, delivery or commissioning from international trade agreements; to require the consent of the House of Commons and the devolved legislatures to international trade agreements insofar as they relate to the National Health Services of England, Scotland and Wales and Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 17 January 2025, and to be printed (Bill 109).

**VEHICLE REGISTRATION DOCUMENTS
(SALE OF VEHICLE) BILL***Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Mr Richard Holden presented a Bill to require a seller of a vehicle to record their home address or specified information about a company that owns the vehicle in the vehicle's registration document; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 28 March 2025, and to be printed (Bill 107).

**DOGS (PROTECTION OF LIVESTOCK) (AMENDMENT)
(No. 2) BILL***Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Joe Morris presented a Bill to make provision changing the law about the offence of livestock worrying, including changes to what constitutes an offence and increased powers for investigation of suspected offences; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April 2025, and to be printed (Bill 52).

**Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
and International Committee of the
Red Cross (Status) Bill [Lords]***Second Reading*

2.39 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I put on the record my previous engagements with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, on many excellent and informative trips that contributed to our relationships across the Commonwealth, and my past engagement with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

I am delighted to see the Bill back in the House; I hope that there will be wholehearted unity today to ensure that it makes it to Royal Assent. I think this is its fourth iteration. The last time it was debated here was as a private Member's Bill in the last Session, but sadly it ran out of time before the Dissolution of Parliament for the general election. I pay tribute to the former Member for Basingstoke for her tireless work in introducing that Bill and pushing it through, and to many hon. Members, some of whom I see here today, for their past work with the CPA and the ICRC.

It is critical that both the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross be given their correct status in UK legislation to conduct their work and deliver their objectives while operating in the UK. This will help to guarantee that the CPA remains headquartered in the UK and will ensure that the UK can guarantee the ICRC that the confidential information that it shares as a matter of course with the UK Government is secure and protected.

The UK is deeply committed to the Commonwealth and believes that the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, which the Foreign Secretary is attending in Samoa, will be an important opportunity to mobilise action on shared interests, including upholding shared Commonwealth values. Those values are embodied by the CPA's important work to strengthen inclusive and accountable democracy across the Commonwealth. I think back to my own many engagements with the CPA in which I have seen that work at first hand, both when delegations have visited and when I have been part of delegations. The UK values its partnership with the CPA and is proud to support the work of the CPA and its regional branch CPA UK. That includes developing benchmarks and indicators of parliamentary democracy and addressing modern slavery in supply chains and issues such as gender-based violence with Parliaments and parliamentarians across the Commonwealth.

The ICRC is an essential partner in achieving the UK's global humanitarian objectives. It has a unique mandate from states to uphold the Geneva conventions and works globally to promote international humanitarian law. Its impartiality, neutrality and independence allow it to engage and negotiate with all parties to a conflict and to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations, often in contexts in which other agencies are unable to operate. I have witnessed its important work, in opposition and in my past career in the humanitarian sector.

[Stephen Doughty]

Clauses 1 and 2 will therefore provide for both organisations to be treated in a manner comparable to an international organisation, with the associated privileges and immunities. Treatment as an international organisation will allow the CPA to continue to operate fully across the Commonwealth and international fora. It will allow the organisation to participate fully in areas in which it is currently restricted, including signing up to joint international statements and communiqués. That is vital to ensure that the CPA can continue its work to promote democracy and good governance across the Commonwealth. The CPA is currently registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales and is not an international intergovernmental organisation; it therefore has its own unique constitutional arrangements that reflect its specific international mandate.

Clause 2 is critical to enable the ICRC to operate in the UK in accordance with its international mandate, maintaining its strict adherence to the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence and its working methods of confidentiality. The ICRC is not an intergovernmental organisation either; it has its own unique and historical international humanitarian mandate to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Nobody doubts the good work of the CPA or the ICRC—we have all seen it as parliamentarians—but does the Minister understand that many of us are a little wary about conferring privileges and immunities by Order in Council after the Bill is passed, since this House is not, in general, in the habit of granting privileges and immunities without scrutiny?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman can be assured that these are the appropriate measures. We have determined this way in line with previous discussions on the previous iteration of the Bill. This is the best way to achieve the aims of the Bill in a timely fashion, so that the provisions are put in place for the CPA and the ICRC. I am very happy to write to him further on this matter. The Bill will face scrutiny in Committee, where we will be able to discuss these matters in greater detail.

The provisions in clauses 1 and 2 will ensure that the CPA and the ICRC can be accorded comparable treatment to an international organisation, even when the definition of international organisation in existing legislation is limited to intergovernmental organisations. For the CPA, this treatment will be limited to its core international organs, such as the secretariat. It is not intended that any privileges, immunities or other facilities be extended to any of the national or sub-national branches, so this is a limited provision.

The arrangements for both organisations will detail the day-to-day management of the privileges and immunities granted on a functional needs basis, and other facilities. They will make it clear that there will be no immunity for the CPA's secretary-general or representatives of the ICRC in respect of damage caused by, for example, a motor vehicle operated or owned by either. The way that the limitations and requirements have been set out in this regard is important.

Clause 2(1)(e) lays out an important confidentiality provision, to protect certain information provided in confidence to His Majesty's Government by the ICRC from being disclosed in UK civil court proceedings or under any statutory provision or rule of law. As my noble Friend Baroness Chapman stated on Second Reading in the other place, this provision reflects the ICRC's standard working method of confidentiality, which is designed to protect its staff and operations in active conflict zones. I am sure that Members will understand that publicly disclosing information that the ICRC obtains from confidential dialogue with conflict parties is likely to put at risk its ability to have confidential dialogue with conflict parties, its humanitarian access and, indeed, the security of its staff, and might result in the ICRC restricting the information it shares with the UK.

However, in relation to the concerns that Members have raised in the past, the Bill does not provide an absolute blanket exemption for disclosure requirements for all ICRC communications. Important limitations have been incorporated, such as the exclusion of criminal cases. The Government continue to be committed to respecting the confidentiality of ICRC information as a matter of policy. Past practice has demonstrated the importance of doing so. The Bill is an opportunity to end any uncertainty about the Government's position and to put this practice on a statutory footing.

I want to turn briefly to clause 3, which is equivalent to section 8 of the International Organisations Act 1968, which allows the Secretary of State to certify questions of fact relating to the status of, or the privileges and immunities conferred on, the organisations. In the context of court proceedings, if a question arises of whether a person is entitled to any privilege or immunity by virtue of an Order in Council made under clauses 1 or 2, such a certification is to be treated as conclusive evidence of those facts for the purposes of proceedings.

Clause 4 details the scope and extent of the Orders in Council that confer privileges and immunities on both organisations under clauses 1 and 2 respectively—this relates to the intervention from the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). An Order in Council may make different provisions for different cases or persons, and it may also contain consequential, supplementary, incidental, transitional or saving provisions. Clause 4 also provides the enabling power for two important aspects: first, the Order in Council may specify circumstances in which privileges and immunities do not apply, either because of an exception or because they have been waived by the organisation; and secondly, the Order in Council may specify that fiscal reliefs and exemptions are subject to arrangements or conditions imposed by the Secretary of State.

Clause 4 provides that any Order in Council made for these purposes will be subject to the draft affirmative parliamentary procedure, which means that they will require the approval of both Houses before they may have effect. The list of privileges and immunities that may be conferred on both organisations is set out in the schedule to the Bill and has been informed by the International Organisations Act.

Briefly, clause 5 explains that the term "ICRC" means the International Committee of the Red Cross, as given under clause 2(1)(a), and it ensures that the definition of "statutory provision" allows for the treatment of the CPA and the ICRC as international organisations in

respect of all relevant primary and secondary legislation, including devolved legislation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland whenever made.

In conclusion, and to reiterate what was said in the other place, the Bill will give the CPA and the ICRC the correct status in UK legislation to allow both organisations to continue their international operations without unnecessary restriction. The Government have a strong commitment to the Commonwealth. It continues to support our global humanitarian objectives through our work with the ICRC, and the Bill is a true reflection of that. I hope that it will enjoy the wholehearted support of the House as it proceeds swiftly into law. I commend it to the House.

2.50 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): First, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the former Member for Basingstoke, Maria Miller, who championed the Bill so vigorously and brought a Bill on this issue to the House no fewer than three times. I thank the Minister of State for his kind words about her.

Before Parliament was dissolved, the Bill had completed its passage through the House of Commons and its Second Reading in the House of Lords. Although the number of hon. Friends behind me may suggest otherwise, we on the Conservative Benches will support the Bill, an update of it having been brought before Parliament. I also thank my noble Friend Baroness Anelay of St Johns, who has long campaigned for the Bill's provisions in the other place, and Lord Ahmad, the previous Minister for the Commonwealth, who fully understood the need for and importance of the Bill. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), who wrapped up this debate when we were last in government; I fear that I shall not do it the justice that he did. As his constituency neighbour, I shall do my best.

The Bill may be small and technical, but it is important. The legal changes it contains will ensure the continued success of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross—two organisations that do vital work—in the UK. As you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker is president of the UK Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, whose work is indispensable in helping to realise the Commonwealth charter's commitment to the development of free and democratic societies.

As the Minister said, it is timely that we should be debating the Bill today as the Commonwealth Heads of Government meet in Samoa. It is the first ever Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting to be held in a pacific small state island. That demonstrates the importance of the Commonwealth in empowering the voices of smaller states and the equity of membership of all of those in the Commonwealth.

I have been privileged to both attend and speak at CPA summits under Mr Speaker's presidency and I have learned a huge amount from Commonwealth colleagues—although, perhaps surprisingly for those in the House, I do not have any foreign visits with them to declare. The CPA creates pathways to friendships across the Commonwealth, building up the person-to-person relationships that matter so very much. We are all very aware of the acute threats to democracy internationally. The CPA is a genuinely positive institution, allowing

best practice to be shared, linking parliamentarians in friendship, and strengthening resilience across our societies. Long may it continue.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I very much welcome the Bill, which supports two important organisations. The King is currently in Australia as the Head of the Commonwealth. Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the Commonwealth—that family of nations with shared values—and to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which, as she has said, provides such an opportunity to share best practice and spread the common good of democracy right across the Commonwealth?

Alicia Kearns: I thank my hon. Friend. It is so rare for us to celebrate the positive in this House, but the Bill does exactly that. We should be proud of how His Majesty has championed the Commonwealth, both before he became our monarch and since. I look forward to his arrival in Samoa in the coming days.

The Conservative Government proudly ran multiple projects with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to strengthen the democratic nature of legislatures and how decisions are approached and made. Ultimately, the Bill will amend the legal environment to ensure that the CPA remains headquartered in the UK; again, we can all agree that that is unambiguously positive. In an increasingly dark world, it is worth fighting for those small shoots of light that offer a glimpse of a path to a better future. This is one.

I will turn to the International Committee of the Red Cross. The ICRC has a unique legitimacy to engage all parties to conflicts and unparalleled access to vulnerable people in conflict zones. Frequently, it is the only agency operating at scale in conflicts. For example, it is currently operating in Ukraine, Afghanistan and Syria—I declare an interest, as I have previously worked with the organisation in some of those zones.

In 2023 alone the ICRC's 18,000 staff supported over 730 hospitals, mainly in conflict zones, and provided food assistance to more than 2.7 million people. I am proud that the previous Conservative Government committed £1 million to the ICRC to provide life-saving care and essential supplies to people affected by the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Bill will guarantee to the ICRC that the sensitive information that it must be able to share with the Government will be protected. We do not want the ICRC to have to restrict the information that it shares with the UK because of the risk of disclosure, so the Bill makes an important step, particularly when it comes to hostages. Given that there is so much suffering globally, we need to take every possible step to ensure that our humanitarian efforts are effective. I am pleased that there will be, I hope, cross-party agreement on that.

The Bill will mean that the UK extends the privileges and immunities to both organisations in a manner comparable to that of an international organisation of which we are a member. The measure may be a little novel, but it is a neat legal solution that addresses both central challenges around which the Bill is centred. Although the changes provide a firm footing for the future work of both the CPA and the ICRC, they also offer the opportunity for the fulfilment of foreign policy objectives. If they are to be a success, the Government must seize the opportunities presented by the Bill.

[Alicia Kearns]

Once our relationship with the ICRC is secured, how do the Government plan on improving collaboration and, most importantly, results? What shared areas of interest will the Government focus on and how will those manifest in tangible outcomes? Has the Minister assessed which specific parts of the Bill will facilitate that work? If so, will he share that assessment with the House?

On the CPA, has the Minister scoped any additional support that the Government could provide to both the delegation and the institution as a whole to bolster its work? Will he commit to building on the good work of the Conservative Government to help strengthen institutions in Commonwealth countries, using a whole-ecosystem approach? Finally, when we were in government we committed that the Foreign Secretary would consult the chair of the UK branch and the secretary-general of the CPA and the president and director-general of the ICRC respectively, before finalising secondary legislation. Can the Minister confirm that that has taken place?

If democracy is to thrive, there needs to be equilibrium across a range of areas—from justice and the application of the rule of law, to the protection of human rights, freedom of speech, safeguards against corruption, effective efforts to counter extremism, integrity in the public sector, and the capability to face down external threats and protect our people. At a time when the world is more insecure and more dangerous, we are faced by authoritarian states bent on undermining the open international order on which so much of our security and prosperity rest.

The Commonwealth is more important than ever, and we must not allow any insinuation otherwise to undermine our efforts on its behalf. The organisation accounts for more than quarter of the membership of the United Nations, and more needs to be done with it. Crucially, through the Commonwealth charter, it is a champion of the sound values and principles that must prevail in the future if we are to build a better world. The Government must not forgo the opportunity to deepen that co-operation with Commonwealth partners and enhance the benefits of membership.

Membership of the Commonwealth can and must be seen as a route to a better future, fundamentally rooted in the noble values set out in the Commonwealth charter. We must strengthen intra-Commonwealth trade, build up the economies of countries struggling to attract inward investment, boost resilience, particularly when it comes to small island developing states, and do what is central to today's debate: promote democracy and good governance through respectful understanding and collaboration.

For every tyrant sacrificing innocent lives in pursuit of unbridled power, there are thousands of hard-working, conscientious people working to make their contribution for a better future. The CPA and the ICRC embody that noble tradition, and the changes today will secure their continued success. We support the Bill, as we did in the last Parliament. We will encourage the Government to make the most of every opportunity that it confers.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

2.58 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a real honour to follow the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns). I agree with her high praise of both the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

I am going to focus on the Red Cross/Red Crescent but should also say that personally I have benefited so much from the CPA. Its members have shared their experiences, and it is always a joy when they come to Parliament here—as parliamentarians, we love learning from each other. To build on the points made by the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford, I should say that we are in a very fragile world. This is an opportunity for us to invest time, money and commitment into our Commonwealth family. We need each other right now more than ever.

Let me now turn to the International Committee of the Red Cross, and, indeed, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement as a whole. Every day, they provide hope for hundreds of thousands of people across the globe who are facing disasters of many kinds. I want to thank the ICRC personally for its consistent and valuable engagement with my Committee. For those reasons, I fully support the Bill.

The network consists of 80 million people, most of whom are volunteers. They help others facing disasters, conflict, health issues and social challenges, and I pay tribute to them. The movement consists of the ICRC, 191 national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The ICRC itself has more than 18,000 staff in over 90 countries, and its work has gained it three Nobel peace prizes. At a time when more than 65 million people are fleeing 120 armed conflicts globally, the work of this organisation is vital and cannot be underestimated.

The ICRC is also crucial to parliamentary engagement with these situations, and I am sure that Members on both sides of the House have benefited from its wisdom. Its ability to provide the International Development Committee with up-to-date, impartial, trustworthy and relevant briefings from the ground—and it does that in private when necessary—has allowed successive IDCs to raise the profile of disasters, and, importantly, to hold Governments to account for their responses. In February this year, its teams in Egypt met our Committee to discuss the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The Egyptian team were co-ordinating all the supplies into Gaza at that point, and their work was phenomenal. Here was a group of volunteers who uprooted themselves to go where others needed their support the most, and what I witnessed was nothing short of remarkable.

The brave workers in this movement continue to pay the ultimate price. In 2023-24, six ICRC staff members were killed globally. As of 21 October, 21 Palestinian Red Crescent Society workers had been killed in Gaza and the west bank. Six members of the Magen David Adom, the Red Cross in Israel, have also been killed while helping others since 7 October 2023. Yet their colleagues continue the lifesaving medical care, food distributions, water and sanitation projects, supporting those who have been detained and reminding parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law in diabolical war zones. I should like us all to remember and pay tribute to their sacrifice today.

Early in my first tenure as Chair of the International Development Committee, I met the former ICRC president, Peter Maurer—virtually, as this was during the covid-19 pandemic. We discussed the impact of covid on conflict-affected communities, the situation in Yemen, Syria and Myanmar, and the need for the IDC to continue to shine a light on conflict-affected contexts around the world. That is a commitment that we continue to honour. In November last year, the Committee met the ICRC's director for the Africa region to discuss Sudan. In the last Parliament, the ICRC submitted evidence for the inquiries into climate change, aid effectiveness, racism in the aid sector, and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse. Its submissions were hugely helpful as the Committee made its recommendations to the Government, and, again and again, they have proved to be an invaluable resource for Parliament on the application of international humanitarian law.

This much-needed Bill will allow the ICRC to continue to operate in the UK with its international mandate, and will provide the securities needed for it to continue its vital, impartial work with immunity from jurisdiction. I hope that the House gives it a safe passage.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.3 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I am pleased to welcome the Bill and support the recognition of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross as international organisations. As liberals we are internationalists, and the Bill fits with Liberal Democrat policies of international co-operation and the upholding of international humanitarian law by supporting the strengthening of international bodies and organisations that seek to forward those aims. Anything that can be done in this fragile global environment to strengthen global collaboration is something that we must support. Treating these organisations as international bodies would be a testament to the House's shared commitment to international humanitarian law—which we want to be practised even in the most fraught zones of conflict—and our commitment to good governance and its promotion in the world.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is an independent body that plays a crucial role in protecting civilian lives in the midst of conflict and war zones. Today, when there are more than 120 ongoing armed conflicts in the world, its work is needed more than ever. It has been active over the last year in Ukraine, helping to ensure that over 4 million people have had access to water, heat and electricity. It has worked in Sudan distributing food assistance to more than 42,000 people and helping with water purification, benefiting more than 2 million people. In Gaza, it has been supporting basic needs and medical equipment. It has engaged the parties of the conflict and reminded them of their responsibilities under international humanitarian law, and has worked to facilitate the release, transfer and return of hostages and detainees from both sides. It is important that we strengthen its ability to do this work without fear. The new designation merely means that we are catching up with many of our peer nations: more than 110 states have now granted the ICRC relevant

privileges and immunities—including every other member of the UN Security Council—in recognition of its unique mandate, which demands above all that it be allowed to maintain its neutrality.

The ICRC's history is singularly bound up with the history of the Geneva conventions. It persuaded Governments to adopt the first and original Geneva convention 160 years ago this year. That treaty obliged armies to care for wounded soldiers, whatever side they were on, and introduced the red cross on the white background—the unifying emblem for medical services for any and every side, across borders and enemy lines. The committee's remit expanded alongside the successive Geneva conventions, and in 1949 expanded to include civilians. I am sure Members will acknowledge, given current conflicts, that the ICRC's obligation to civilians is as essential now as it was 75 years ago; indeed, in 2022 the UN estimated that 87% of casualties resulting from hostilities were civilians. In such zones, the ICRC is often almost alone among agencies in co-ordinating and delivering aid at scale, and, crucially, in having lines of communication with belligerents. For these reasons, the FCDO refers to the ICRC as an “essential partner” for achieving the UK's humanitarian goals, as well as our wish to see international humanitarian law upheld.

Liberal Democrats believe in the universal conceptions of civilian rights asserted by the fourth Geneva convention and the additional protocols. In working across conflict zones with non-combatants—with prisoners, hostages and the wounded—the ICRC acts as a guardian of international humanitarian law. That status is possible only because the committee is understood to be neutral, applying universal rather than partisan principles. The privileges and immunities laid out in the Bill include inviolability for its archives and premises, which will assure parties to conflict of the confidentiality of its information and its independence. They also include the testimonial and narrow criminal immunities that will permit the ICRC's staff to maintain the necessary conversations with proscribed groups, without which their most challenging work would not be possible. Neglecting to take these steps risks threatening the fundamental mission of the ICRC at a time when it is needed more than ever. As part of its mandate, the committee is in the vanguard of clarifying and developing international humanitarian law. Sadly, there has been an increase in permissive interpretations of IHL, and without the ICRC's perspective and experience, the analyses through which we protect those caught in conflict zones would be poorer.

The Bill also provides for international organisation status to be conferred on the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which is made up of 180 Commonwealth legislatures from 53 Commonwealth countries. As other Members have pointed out, this seems a particularly fitting moment for the Bill to reach the House, given that leaders are now gathering in Samoa for the 27th Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. The Commonwealth is a rare organisation, being a voluntary association of states bound not by economic or security ties, but by shared values and, even more, by shared aspirations. As the instrument through which aspirations and values are pursued, the constitution of the CPA upholds shared principles of democracy, development, equality, human rights and environmental protections.

[Monica Harding]

The CPA has promoted and strengthened parliamentary democracy since its establishment in 1911, and it allows for parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth to engage in dialogue and learn from each other. We support enhancing the status of the CPA by granting it protections and immunities that are comparable to those of the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning.

In 2006, the CPA published its benchmarks—87 indicators against which parliamentary democracies can be measured. These were updated in 2018 to include the UN's sustainable development goals, which chimes with the Liberal Democrats' manifesto commitment to put the SDGs at the heart of our international development policy. Although we were disappointed that the Labour party's manifesto did not mention the SDGs, we have been encouraged by the fact that they were referenced in the Chatham House speech given by the Minister for Development last week. I hope that Members of all parties are united in our commitment to the SDGs.

The Commonwealth includes both the world's most populous democracy and its least populous. Since 2018, 33 jurisdictions have undertaken assessments using the CPA criteria, and many have subsequently participated in technical assistance programmes—multi-year programmes that are focused on strengthening institutions and building parliamentary capacity. With its new status as an international inter-parliamentary organisation, the CPA will be enabled to sign the international agreements that it has been prevented from signing, hold Commonwealth Governments to account for actions against parliamentarians, provide member Parliaments with better governance, and participate fully in Commonwealth work, including at CHOGM.

I am glad that the House is considering this Bill, which is designed to support the work of the CPA and the ICRC by designating them as international organisations. This step will simplify the challenges that they both face in working so widely across the globe as essential vehicles for the delivery of international humanitarian aid and democracy, which is never more needed than now. It will underscore our commitment to the Commonwealth, keep the CPA headquartered in the UK and ensure that the ICRC remains secure in the UK. Anything that this House can do to ease the execution of their work, which has such noble aims, should be jumped at, and the Liberal Democrats support this Bill.

3.12 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I rise to support the Second Reading of this Bill, which is long overdue and, as we have heard, has cross-party support. It has received unwavering support in both this parliamentary Session and the previous Parliament, which is a testament to the importance that Members on both sides of this House place on its intentions. As we have heard, the debate is timely, given that the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting is taking place this week to address global security and the environmental and social challenges affecting us all.

The Commonwealth nations are united in their belief in the rule of law and the importance of democracy. Since its birth in 1911, the Commonwealth Parliamentary

Association has promoted those enduring values as the Commonwealth's parliamentary arm. With the threat of global conflict more present than ever, the work of the CPA to protect, develop and advance parliamentary democracy is more important than ever before. It is therefore crucial that the CPA, which is currently limited by its status as a UK charity, can participate fully in the international community. I am pleased that this Bill will address that issue, for the following reasons.

First, the Bill provides some 18,500 Commonwealth parliamentarians with the credibility and authority that they need to operate on the international stage. By granting similar privileges and immunities to those bestowed on comparable international organisations, the Bill places the CPA on an equal standing at international fora, so that members have the required platform to address global challenges. This also means that the organisation will enjoy a similar legal status to its parliamentary-strengthening counterparts such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Switzerland, reinforcing its reliability as a preferred partner for legislatures in capacity building.

My second point relates to the organisation's scope. I welcome the Bill, because it extends the potential breadth of the CPA's work by treating it like the other international organisations of which the UK is a member. This will allow the CPA to expand its programmes, projects and activities on parliamentary practice and procedure. As a UK charity, the CPA is currently subject to restrictions under UK legislation on the charity sector. For example, it is limited in its ability to sign international conventions and pursue political purposes. The CPA is therefore restricted in its ability to fully promote the values set out in the Commonwealth charter, and to address the priorities of its membership.

An example of the CPA's priorities is found in its recommended benchmarks for democratic legislatures. These are 132 good governance indicators that Commonwealth legislators should measure themselves against, covering minimum standards on financial oversight, engagement with the media, and political petitioning, to name but a few. This Bill gives the CPA greater freedom to promote good governance programmes throughout the Commonwealth nations.

Furthermore, this Bill is important for maintaining the UK's involvement in the CPA and the Commonwealth. The CPA's past two annual conferences saw its governing body decide to relocate its headquarters to a member state that would provide the recognition that it needs, if this could not be given in the UK. The Bill does not just empower the organisation; it protects the UK's global influence by keeping the CPA based here, so that our parliamentarians can have an active role in promoting parliamentary democracy and good governance globally.

The second organisation on which the Bill focuses, the International Committee of the Red Cross, does vital work to protect victims of violence around the world. With growing conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and elsewhere, the ICRC's work as an independent humanitarian organisation is crucial. This Bill seeks to protect that independence. Clause 2 will provide for protected ICRC information to be

"exempt from any legal disclosure requirement imposed by a court or tribunal order in civil proceedings, or by a statutory provision or rule of law",

with exemptions for a court order in criminal proceedings. The Bill allows us to give the ICRC the guarantee that any information shared with the UK Government is protected, so that it can continue to do crucial work in assessing victims of armed conflict.

The ICRC operates under a long-standing method of confidentiality, which means that it engages mainly in confidential bilateral dialogues with states and other parties, and it expects states to respect the confidentiality of any information shared with them. Were such information to be made public, it would hamper the ICRC's ability to have confidential dialogue with, and to gain the trust of, conflict groups.

The ICRC needs to be perceived as a trustworthy organisation when seeking dialogue with all actors, so that it can have full access to frontlines and contested zones. Indeed, this allows the ICRC to continue to provide humanitarian assistance in conflict areas such as Gaza and Sudan. For example, it has delivered 962 metric tonnes of medical equipment amid the crisis in Gaza, and provided food assistance to over 42,000 people during the conflict in Sudan.

In addition, the Bill will recognise the ICRC as an international organisation. Its mandate to act in times of global conflict is based on international humanitarian law under the Geneva conventions of 1949. Over 110 states, including all the permanent members of the UN Security Council, have accorded the ICRC relevant privileges and immunities that are comparable to those of an international organisation. The absence of privileges and immunities provided by the UK has resulted in significant operational challenges for the ICRC, so it is important that the UK follows its international partners. That would allow the ICRC to operate in the UK and to manage its resources in a manner that is most beneficial to affected persons, preserving its principle of neutrality.

This Bill is a vital step towards ensuring that the CPA and the ICRC have the full confidence of the UK Government to promote our shared values of democracy and the rule of law, and to provide humanitarian assistance to those who need it. Having recently been elected to the UK executive committee of the CPA, I look forward to working with other Commonwealth parliamentarians to further those values and promote the standards of good governance that are necessary to make democracy work in today's world.

With the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting taking place in Samoa this week, it is important that the UK places itself at the heart of global diplomacy, and the Bill signifies our intention to do so. This Bill is long overdue, and in granting privileges and immunities to the CPA and the ICRC, it further secures their future and shows that the UK is back to play an active and important role on the international stage.

3.19 pm

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous), who I have attended many inter-parliamentary events with, and who is an active participant of the CPA, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and everything else he can be involved in. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

My comments will be short, because we have seen this Bill before and this is probably the third time that I have spoken in one of these debates—definitely the second time on Second Reading. I am delighted that it has been brought back and that we will have the chance to get it to Royal Assent. It is vital for the reputation of this place, for our view and for the work we do with the CPA UK. I will restrict my comments to the CPA, which is the body with which I am most familiar.

On that note, I pay tribute to Maria Miller, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) did. She tried many times to pass this Bill—she was an enormous advocate and a true champion for the CPA. I also pay tribute to Ian Liddell-Grainger, late of this parish, who stepped into the role of chairing the CPA with great aplomb, as hon. Members will be able to imagine, when the previous chair passed away suddenly. He made certain commitments at the last Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Ghana, and it is great that they will be fulfilled before the conference in New South Wales next month.

I first became aware of the CPA's work when I was a Minister, because the CPA UK has a specific role with regards to modern slavery. It has ringfenced funding from the FCDO to promote across the Commonwealth the work that we can do together to tackle that heinous crime. In fact, I am grateful to have been called now, because I will shortly disappear to speak on a panel in a seminar that the CPA UK is holding on strengthening legislation to address modern slavery in supply chains and gender-based violence. I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate before I take part in the reality of the CPA's work, which is an incredibly powerful tool for all of us.

If hon. Members have not yet been involved in an inter-parliamentary group, please join one. They will make friends for life, learn about what is going on in the rest of the world, and meet people from other legislatures—not just national legislatures. The great advantage of the CPA is that it involves Parliaments at all levels of Commonwealth countries, which means that there is a chance to meet people from devolved Parliaments, regional Parliaments and provincial Parliaments. When we are in this place, we are very focused on what is happening here. I do not think that many people outside Westminster are aware of what we are doing, but we are really focused on CPA and ICRC status, and we will be for some time to come this afternoon and beyond. Beyond that, however, people are looking at other things in other Parliaments.

Last week, at the IPU assembly in Geneva, it was wonderful to meet parliamentarians from around the world and hear what they are doing, what their focus is and what challenges they face. When we do, we learn that many of those are common—we all face the same challenges—but there are some unique things that other countries face that we need to be aware of, working on and debating in this place. That is where the CPA, the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union, BIPA and the British-American Parliamentary Group can bring parliamentarians together and give us that insight.

I am delighted that the Bill is before us today and I support it wholeheartedly. I hope that, by the time we reach the next CPC next month, it has received Royal Assent, and the promises that Ian Liddell-Grainger gave to the conference last year can be delivered on. I wish the Minister all the best in his endeavours.

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

3.24 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my maiden speech. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) on speaking with such passion and purpose. She spoke with clarity and detail, so I thank her for that.

I want to thank my neighbours, the great people of Ilford South, for entrusting me with the honour of serving them in this House. Each one of us here serves by the grace of God and the will of the people, and I will spend my life repaying the trust bestowed upon me by the great people of Ilford South.

At just seven years old, I travelled to Ilford from the Punjab, not speaking a word of English or knowing anyone outside my family, yet Ilford gave me a home, an outstanding education and opportunities to build a better life. Ilford gave me a community without whom I would not be standing here today.

It was in Ilford that I first met my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), and we began our journey together in local government a decade ago. I will be forever grateful for his help, guidance and friendship, and I feel immensely proud of his tireless work to reform our NHS and create a service fit for the future. Together with my predecessor, Mike Gapes, my right hon. Friend and I successfully fought to save the A&E at our local King George hospital from closure, cementing an enduring friendship and a formidable reputation for Redbridge Labour as a campaigning tour de force to be reckoned with.

Mike Gapes spent his parliamentary career speaking up for the marginalised communities, securing the future of our local NHS provision and steadfastly serving our local communities, all while staying true to his values. I endeavour to honour his legacy and continue his great work.

Ilford South is a unique and inspiring place—a town that people travel to from all across the world to call home. Since its formation in 1945, those eager to dedicate themselves to public service have fought for the honour to represent the people of Ilford South, including my predecessor, Sam Tarry. I would like to thank Sam for his service to the people of Ilford and for his work advocating for local access to essential public transport as shadow Minister for Buses and Local Transport.

My story is a story of Ilford South. Like so many of my neighbours, I was born overseas, raised speaking a different language and arrived in Ilford seeking a better life. Ilford South's fantastic schools educated me, our high street's businesses employed me and our local communities inspired me to be ambitious for my family, for the future of our home town and for our great country.

People travel from across the world to call Ilford home, because Ilford is a place of promise, a place of opportunity and a place where communities lift one another up, celebrating our diversity as well as our shared experience. It is a place where a Sikh can be invited to share iftar with his Muslim brothers and sisters, a place where I can join in the annual chariot festival at the Sri Selva Vinayagar temple, light a candle

on the menorah during Hannukah, mark the festival of Janmashtami at the Albert Road mandir and every year turn on the Christmas lights in Ilford town centre.

As a Member of this House I am determined to deliver on the promise of Ilford South, to ensure that families can find a welcoming home, safe streets, exceptional schools and the opportunity to succeed. In Ilford South our communities came together to save King George Hospital's A&E department, and now this Labour Government will save our NHS so that hard-working healthcare professionals can deliver the lifesaving care that patients deserve. I will continue to lift up communities, just as they once supported me to grow from a frightened seven-year-old immigrant to a Member of this House.

It is thanks to the democratic process of this country that I stand here today ready to serve my neighbours across Ilford South. In recent years we have all been reminded that the security of democracy is not guaranteed. Across the world, battles for free and democratic elections are hard fought, and the freedom we enjoy must always be resolutely defended. The great work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, promoting good governance and sharing best practice across the Commonwealth, is to be admired and I am pleased that this debate recognises the need for a change to the status of association, and of the International Committee of the Red Cross, to enable them to better fulfil their vital endeavours.

My parents came from Pakistan with nothing. We came here from India with nothing. It is my mission to repay my debt to my parents, to the people of Ilford South and to the place that adopted me, raised me and gave me opportunities my parents could only dream of. Each day that I arrive in this place, I will never forget who sent me here, and I will not rest in my fight for my neighbours and for the bright future Ilford South deserves.

3.30 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What a pleasure it is to follow such a splendid maiden speech by the new hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal). As a third-generation immigrant myself, whose family lived in the city of Swansea for more or less exactly 100 years, I know precisely how he feels in his gratitude to the place in a new country that gave him every opportunity to develop his talents and abilities to the point at which he deservedly finds himself in this place. I am sure he will make maximum use of that opportunity. I particularly welcome his warm reference to his predecessor, Mike Gapes, who served in this House for no fewer than 27 years and was the epitome of moderate, patriotic Labour. He won respect on the Conservative side of the House as well as on his own side, and it was sad that a point came when he felt he could no longer remain a member of the Labour party, although I am glad to see from his Wikipedia entry that he is back in the fold today.

This uncontroversial Bill seeks to change the status of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross, to convert each of them into what is known as a body corporate. These are sensible proposals, which I broadly support. However, as stated during the Sir David Amess Adjournment debate on the rising of the House on 12 September, there is one other organisation, with which I am rather familiar, that requires the same

change in status as the CPA and the ICRC, to make it into a body corporate too. That organisation is the office that supports the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, and this Bill presents us with the timeliest opportunity to achieve that necessary change. Indeed, it is a perfect fit, so I trust that the House will bear with me while I explain the serious conflict of interest that has arisen, why that conflict matters to Parliament and how it can easily be rectified with a simple addition to the Bill before the House today.

For the benefit of newer Members in the Chamber, I should explain that the ISC is a cross-party Committee of both Houses of Parliament created by statute in 1994. Under the Justice and Security Act 2013, the ISC was given the legal responsibility for overseeing the UK's intelligence community on behalf of Parliament, yet Parliament's intent, as expressed in that Act, is currently being undermined. Right hon. and hon. Members might be surprised to learn that the ISC's office, with a very small number of staff, belongs to the Cabinet Office, despite the ISC overseeing certain sensitive organisations within the Cabinet Office. They would be right to be surprised, because that is indeed a fundamental conflict of interest, which is why, when the Justice and Security Act was passed, the Cabinet Office was supposed to be only the temporary home of the ISC's office. Yet here we are, more than 10 years later, with the Committee staff still beholden to, vulnerable within, and unfairly pressured and even victimised by the very part of the Executive that the Committee is charged with scrutinising and holding to account on behalf of Parliament.

The Executive should not be able to constrain and control the Committee's democratic oversight on Parliament's behalf by exerting control over the ISC's small staff team to prevent them from doing their job independently. Such control means that part of the Cabinet Office can—and does—starve the team of resources so that the ISC's staff are unable to fulfil the Committee's legal responsibilities. That completely contravenes and disregards a clear ministerial undertaking given by the then Deputy Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden), before the recent general election about vital extra resources for the ISC staff.

Control by the Cabinet Office also means that it can stigmatise and penalise the ISC's staff, blaming them for the Committee's robust scrutiny, with damaging consequences for their future careers in the civil service. Such deplorable behaviour has included repeatedly downgrading highly positive assessments, submitted by me as ISC Chairman at the time, of staff performance in recent years. In reality, the members of the ISC in the last Parliament valued the Committee's staff very highly indeed, as I believe all members have since the Committee was first established 30 years ago. We certainly found the arrangements that I have described totally unacceptable.

The ISC therefore formally resolved, by a unanimous vote across all three political parties on the Committee, that it is essential for parliamentary democracy and its scrutiny system for the Committee's office to move out from under the control of the Executive—that is, from the Cabinet Office—and instead to be established as an independent body corporate with a link to Parliament rather than to the Executive. That unanimous decision was confirmed by the members of the Committee at its meeting on 19 March, following expert and authoritative

external advice that it is within the ISC's power to take such a step and to determine the suitable mechanisms for implementing it.

That constitutional change, which the Cabinet Office has predictably attempted to ignore, is essential to protect the separation of powers. It is also extremely easy to achieve. It requires a very short amendment to the Justice and Security Act to change the status of the ISC's office. The amendment would establish the office as a body corporate to support the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament and safeguard the independence of the Committee itself.

I had hoped that the amendment would be included in the new legislative programme. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly in the Committee's absence since Parliament was dissolved for the general election, the Cabinet Office has hitherto managed to block it. However, that is to underestimate the previous members of the Committee, from both sides of the House and in both Chambers, who are convinced that the Committee's office cannot and must not continue to be controlled by the Cabinet Office.

The Bill, in seeking to change the constitutional status of the CPA and the ICRC and allow better provision for their staffing arrangements, is the ideal vehicle through which to achieve the same for the ISC's beleaguered office. It is the obvious place to include a short amendment to the Justice and Security Act to change the status of the ISC's staff organisation too. We must not pass up this opportunity: parliamentary time is precious, and there may not be another suitable vehicle during this Parliament.

As a measure to secure democratic oversight, I am confident that the amendment should and would secure cross-party support in both Houses. Prior to the election, both the then Government and the then Opposition seemed to accept that this reform was needed, which does rather beg the question why it has not yet happened. I intend to return to the issue at a later stage of the Bill with an amendment, and I trust, for the reasons I have set out, that the House will support it.

Having chaired the Intelligence and Security Committee for the past four years, and having also served on it throughout the 2010-15 Parliament, I reiterate what I said in 2019 after more than four years as Chairman of the Defence Committee: it is better to stop while people wish you to carry on, than to carry on until people wish you to stop—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am glad to have that endorsement. Hopefully, I can still be a friend of both Committees on the Floor of this Chamber, while giving support to my successors in office.

It was as extraordinary as it was shameful that no Prime Minister saw fit to meet with the Intelligence and Security Committee during the entirety of the last Parliament, although to her credit, during her short time at No. 10, Liz Truss did offer to do so. Perhaps the latest occupant of Downing Street will show greater respect towards a body that has consistently undertaken sensitive inquiries, and produced reports of the highest quality and the soundest judgment over the past 30 years, largely because of the calibre and integrity of its professional director and her dedicated staff. Let us now do the right thing by them all.

3.42 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). I enjoyed his detailed and comprehensive remarks.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate on this important Bill, but I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) for his maiden speech, which shared his story and the promise of our country. I declare my interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Commonwealth, a role I was elected to before the summer recess, and my newly minted role as a member of the executive of the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

The Commonwealth is all about creating opportunities, and never more so than today, because I have the opportunity to give my first speech without a time limit, which I will enjoy. I welcome the Minister to his place. It is the first time I have had the opportunity to speak with him on the Front Bench. I am looking forward to working with him and the Foreign Office team in the years ahead. I have known my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary for most of my life. I had the benefit of being his constituency twin during the election campaign, so he had the great pleasure of being able to visit Newcastle-under-Lyme and enjoy our warm hospitality, not least at the Victoria pub on Brampton Road.

The Bill has been through the wars and was rudely interrupted, as we have heard, by the general election. I am very pleased that the Government have brought it forward so speedily. Where we can work together and make cross-party progress, we should do so as often as we can. I join the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), in acknowledging the work of the former Member for Basingstoke, Dame Maria Miller. I also acknowledge all the CPA staff, led by the excellent Sarah Dickson, who I believe may be watching the deliberations this afternoon.

The Bill is about our standing on the world stage, and our role as a leader in the fight for human rights, respect, decency and togetherness. As the Minister pointed out, it grants international status to both the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross, enabling both those reputable and long-standing bodies to benefit from the immunities and privileges of all other international bodies, as set out in clauses 1 and 2. Those immunities and privileges include the power to confer the legal capacities of a body corporate on the CPA and the ICRC; to grant the organisations, their information and staff certain privileges and immunities commensurate with their functional needs; to provide that references to international organisations in general legislation include from now on references to the CPA and the ICRC; and to allow for certain confidential information.

As ever, the United Kingdom must lead by example, so although the Bill may feel technical in nature, as the shadow Minister said, there is a wider point here about our leadership at home and abroad. That is why it is so important that we keep the CPA headquartered here in the United Kingdom. The Bill has my full support and, I hope, judging by the comments of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson and the shadow Minister, it will have support right across the House later this afternoon.

This may not be the most oversubscribed Second Reading debate since the general election, but that should not be misinterpreted as a lack of support for, a lack of faith in, or a lack of commitment to the Commonwealth, its legacy and its potential. With that in mind, and given that the Bill will help improve our reputation with our Commonwealth partners and friends enormously, I wish to take a moment to talk about the Commonwealth, and what it means for today's world and for people in Newcastle-under-Lyme and right across the global community. As we look to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting taking place in the Pacific, we can see that this Bill is an important and long overdue step being taken by the United Kingdom.

In Samoa, Heads of Government, women, men and young people from across the Commonwealth will come together to share ideas, best practice, values and thoughts for moving our global family forward, and for making their deliberations mean something in each of our communities and nations. That is important, because our world is in a state of real flux. We at once seem ever more interconnected and as though we are being driven further and further apart. Political leaders across the world seem more interested in putting up barriers and walls than tearing them down, more interested in what divides us than what unites us, and some have no interest in bringing people together. That is a matter of deep concern to me, but it also shows the power and the importance of the Commonwealth family of nations.

The Commonwealth is a voluntary organisation of 56 independent and equal countries—perhaps not equal in size of economy or population, but equal as their leaders sit round the table, engage and listen. Our Commonwealth family is made up of about 2.5 billion people, and includes both advanced economies and developing countries, sun and snow, global north and global south, palm trees and oaks, kangaroos and cattle, and women, men and children who all deserve a chance to get on in life, to succeed and to feel safe and secure.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Adam Jogee: I will happily give way to the Member of Parliament who represents my in-laws in South Antrim.

Robin Swann: The hon. Member makes the case on international relationships. The right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) referenced the devolved Assemblies; may I ask him to acknowledge the contribution of the CPA branches across the devolved Assemblies, in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales? I served as chair of the Northern Ireland branch of the CPA, and look forward to joining the hon. Member as an executive member of the CPA branch here.

Adam Jogee: It is a pleasure to have my genuine friend intervene. He served honourably and nobly in the Northern Ireland Assembly. His point about the importance of the CPA branch in Northern Ireland, and of branches across our United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, is well made.

As the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) noted, 33 of the Commonwealth's members are small states, and they include many island nations,

such as Jamaica, the land of my grandfather's birth. There is something very important about the leaders of small islands and small nations being at the table with the leaders of countries such as Singapore, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and, yes, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

We all know that the Commonwealth's roots go back to the British empire, and that is a complicated history for all of us. We should not forget, or airbrush out, in taking the steps forward that this Bill will help us to take. We must embrace our history and our collective experiences. My grandfather came here to serve King and country on a British passport in the 1940s. We would not have beaten the Germans on the beaches of Normandy, or at Gallipoli, without the bravery and valour of young men—black, white and Asian—from across the Commonwealth, or the colonies as they were then.

Today, any country can join the modern Commonwealth. The last two countries to join were Gabon and Togo in 2022. Their admittance was interesting because neither had age-old colonial ties to the United Kingdom—indeed, there was very little that bound them with Britain—and that in many ways proved a step in the right direction. There is more to do on this. I am very proud of my Zimbabwean roots, but it is a matter of deep personal sadness that a nation that once hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in the presence of Her late Majesty now sits on the outside looking in. With membership comes responsibilities, expectations and standards, as is the case for any club or team one joins. That is why the Bill is so important. I hope that the discussion on Zimbabwe is given a thorough and detailed hearing when the leaders gather in Samoa.

I am one of few Members who can claim to represent the birthplace of a leader of a Commonwealth country. The sixth Prime Minister of Australia, Joseph Cook, started off in the Labor party but ended up a Tory—*[Interruption.]* I thought Opposition Members would enjoy that. He was born and raised in Silverdale in my constituency, and after leaving our shores for Australia, he went on to hold the highest role in the land. It is a legacy we are very proud of in Newcastle-under-Lyme. A couple of weeks ago, I was at St Luke's primary school in Silverdale, where there is a fantastic plaque that honours the memory of Cook and cherishes the ties between our community and Australia.

The Bill is important, because it heralds, I hope, a change in British Government policy. We cannot just engage when it suits us, or when we feel like it; we cannot and must not allow the bonds to fray, the contact to cease, or let the phone calls go unanswered. We have seen many examples across Africa and the Caribbean and, increasingly, in the Pacific of the Chinese Government having people on speed dial. The perception—certainly mine and in many other parts of the world—is that the United Kingdom, for at least the past 30 years or so, has failed effectively and properly to seize the opportunities that the Commonwealth provides.

I am pleased that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are both going to the Pacific—there are competing demands on senior colleagues from all of us every day—but Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth always said that she had to be seen to be believed, and she was right. That is why it is important for the Prime Minister to make the admittedly long journey to the meeting. Our departure

from the European Union was meant to lead to a global Britain agenda, and I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to make sure that that agenda becomes a reality. The Bill and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association will help us to do that. They show our allies and friends across the Commonwealth that we take our relationships and our responsibilities seriously, that we understand the example we must set, and that we are determined to build, as Gordon Brown would put it, a renewed Commonwealth with a renewed purpose for new times.

As the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) noted, if the Bill is passed, colleagues will engage with parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth through the CPA, as I will in the period ahead, and will have something positive to say, which is important. The viability and future of the Commonwealth is on the line if we do not get this new relationship right. The new Government have a lot to do to get our country back on track, and this is part of it. Being good stewards at home and good neighbours abroad are not mutually exclusive. We must do both, and we can do that by supporting the Bill.

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

3.52 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): It gives me great pleasure to make my maiden speech, and it is appropriate to do so in a debate on the Commonwealth of nations. First, I pay tribute to the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal). He spoke passionately about the opportunity and the community that Ilford has afforded him, and his commitment to his people there. I am sure that he will make a great contribution to Parliament.

We share a set of values with our Commonwealth kin: a belief in the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech, property rights, and innocent until proven guilty by a jury of our peers, all built on a shared constitutional heritage. I want to fight for those principles during my time in Parliament.

My Windsor constituency is at the beating heart of Parliament, because it is not just a series of beautiful towns and villages, although that is undoubtedly true; it also encapsulates the glorious history of our constitution, the evolution of our parliamentary democracy and the very best of our shared Commonwealth of nations. My predecessor was a son of the Commonwealth, with a Ghanaian father and an English mother. Adam Afriyie came from a tough background, growing up on a council estate in Peckham, but he became a successful tech entrepreneur and the first black Conservative Member of Parliament. Adam spent his years in Parliament campaigning against Heathrow's third runway—I will continue that campaign—as well as supporting many local good causes, including the children's charity, Sebastian's Action Trust. I also appreciated Adam's work on fintech and his role as the longest serving chair of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. As someone with an academic background in mathematics and physics, it is clear to me that this place needs more of a quantitative and scientific approach. Above all, Adam is a good man and a person I am proud to call a friend. I wish him and his family all the best for the future.

[Jack Rankin]

Windsor's link to the royal family is self-evident: the Conqueror first built the castle, and the royal house proudly carries our name. But fewer know that the Windsor constituency was the home of monarchs long before the arrival of the Norman yoke. Old Windsor was an important palace of Saxon kings, documented as a defended royal manor in Edward the Confessor's time, but evidence suggests that there were royal connections since at least the ninth century.

William the Conqueror chose the site for Windsor castle, a strategically important position high above the key medieval route to London on the River Thames. It was part of a ring of motte and bailey castles around London, each a day's march from the city and the next castle, allowing for easy reinforcements. The first king to use Windsor castle as a royal residence was William's son, Henry I. Perhaps he was attracted by the proximity of the royal hunting forest—then Windsor forest, now Windsor Great Park in the centre of my constituency. I represent most of the communities around it, including Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale, where my wife Sarah and I have made our family home with our sons, Edward and Christopher.

Henry's great-grandson John was besieged by the barons in 1214 and signed Magna Carta the following year. Whether it was signed north of the river in Wraysbury or south on Runnymede meadows is lost to time. Whichever the true site, both are in the Windsor constituency, thanks to the most recent boundary changes, and we welcome Runnymede meadow into the patch, together with the Surrey villages of Englefield Green and Virginia Water, as well as the east of Langley in Slough.

Whether Wraysbury or Runnymede, it remains undeniable that there is a propensity for there to be too much water in those places. One of the things I will advocate for in this place is proper flood defences for Datchet, Wraysbury, Horton and Old Windsor. Disgracefully, if the River Thames scheme is built as currently envisaged, those villages will be the only parts of the Thames, from Taplow to the North sea, that remain materially undefended. What was proposed as channel 1 of the River Thames scheme must be funded centrally as national strategic infrastructure. This House will hear from me again on that topic, I assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In the handful of weeks I have been here, I have already lost count of the times this place has been incorrectly referred to as the "mother of Parliaments"—a misquoting of John Bright. It is England that Bright referred to as the mother of Parliaments. In that speech, Bright was arguing for what became the Reform Act of 1867, which, for the first time, enfranchised part of the urban male working class, from which I hail. England is the mother of Parliaments because of the principle, established in Anglo-Saxon England, that yes, we owe our allegiance to His Majesty the King—then in Old Windsor; now in new Windsor—but within a framework that protects our ancient individual liberties, as articulated in Magna Carta. That heritage is proudly ours. The Saxon Great Councils started to be called Parliaments by the 13th century; the principles underpinning them—among other things, that the King could only make law and raise taxation with the consent of the community of the realm—now belong to the whole Commonwealth and the wider free world.

That concept—that taxation should be raised only with the consent of the community of the realm—should give the new Government pause for thought. I recommend it as a good conservative instinct. In this House, those on the Treasury Bench—the Crown—should be cautious about levying taxation, especially if punitive or excessive, without gaining wide common counsel. As this new Government raise taxes in breach of their manifesto commitments, my counsel would be that taxation will gain wide consent if, and only if, it leads to a material improvement in the quality of public services. That will not happen without quite radical public sector reforms to drive productivity improvements, which I seriously urge the Government to consider.

Tax without proper consent is something that Governments over the years have come a cropper over—most famously the British in North America in the 18th century. I hope our American cousins may rejoin the Commonwealth one day. It is often they who remember our shared constitutional heritage most keenly. The Magna Carta memorial in my constituency was erected in 1957 by the American Bar Association, which alongside us and our Commonwealth kin is the beneficiary of that great legacy.

I assure the House that I will be bringing its attention on many occasions to the extraordinary wealth of cultural and historical riches, tied to the history of our great country, that originate in my constituency—from the foundation of Eton college in 1440 and of Royal Holloway University by Victorian social pioneers over 170 years ago, as one of the first places in Britain where women could access higher education, to the establishment of Ascot racecourse in 1711, when Queen Anne found a flat expanse of heathland that she thought would be perfect for racing horses. That tradition continues over 330 years later; I say to Labour Members and particularly to the new Ministers that it is a fantastic place for a freebie. Please see my updated entry in the register of interests next month.

The foundation of Combermere barracks in 1796 and of Victoria barracks in 1853 made Windsor a proud double-garrison town. We owe our armed services so much for protecting the legacy of which I am talking. We will remember them. Of course, none of this compares to the events of 1996, with the foundation of the great institution of Legoland.

I cannot give my maiden speech without turning to the house of Windsor, our British royal house and the reigning house of our brothers and sisters in the other 14 Commonwealth realms. It gives us enormous pride that King George V proclaimed:

"Our House and Family shall be styled and known as... Windsor".

It was felt inappropriate during the first world war that the royal family be called Saxe-Coburg-Gotha as London was being bombed by aircraft of the same name. It was thought that Windsor sounded necessarily regal and English; I wholeheartedly agree.

We have now seen our fifth monarch of the house of Windsor, albeit that it is sometimes better that we forget about the second. They have all made Windsor their home, but few monarchs will be more associated with Windsor than Her late Majesty of blessed memory, Elizabeth. Our late Queen made Windsor her principal weekend retreat—indeed, she made it her home—but retreating was something that she very rarely did. Her great

passion was the Commonwealth. On her 21st birthday in South Africa in 1947, she dedicated her life to the service of the Commonwealth, famously saying:

“I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong”.

Didn't she just? She was the living embodiment every day of the model of Christian service and of the history and continuity of this country and its constitutional monarchy—the very essence of our great nation. Throughout her reign, as the then Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip said on her passing, she was

“the keystone in the vast arch of the British state”—[*Official Report*, 9 September 2022; Vol. 719, c. 499.]

But she was more than that. She was head of state, yes, but she was also head of the nation and, more widely, the head of our family of nations. She deeply understood the role to which she had been called in the context of a millennium of constitutional development, lots of which is local to my constituency but relevant to free people the world over.

I come from a much more modest background, but all of us in this House, like Windsor's Elizabeth the Confessor, would do well to appreciate that we are but the momentary trustees of our country. As Burke said:

“Society is...a contract...between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”

Yes, we have a responsibility to our constituents today, but we also have the shared inheritance of our history and our great parliamentary democracy, and we all have a duty to uphold the great traditions of our past in order to safeguard its future.

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

4.4 pm

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the contribution of the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) to this debate on the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross. It does not need saying how important the work of both those organisations is.

I have listened to many hon. Members delivering maiden speeches in this House and have been struck by all their excellent contributions, but I stand before the House today with immense gratitude and a profound sense of responsibility. It is the greatest honour for me to have been elected to this House to represent the people of Kilmarnock and Loudoun, a place that I have called home for nearly 20 years. I have been a local councillor serving the ward of Kilmarnock West and Crosshouse for 12 of those years. I moved to Kilmarnock after meeting my partner Nettie, and we have been together ever since. She is my best friend and my anchor—I just don't know what I would do without her.

I want to extend my love and my thanks to my family for their everlasting support and encouragement. I am thinking today of my aunty June, who was only 10 years older than I am. We said goodbye to her just six days before the election, but I know she will be watching over me with my gran and Arthur. Arthur was my granda, but I fondly remember that as a child I would call him by his name, which just stuck. As Members can imagine,

that raised curiosity among the teachers at my school, who would always inquire if Arthur was my gran's boyfriend, much to my gran's amusement. As they look down on me, I hope I make them proud.

I thank my friends and colleagues who gave up every spare moment to help me. My friend Maureen, the Labour group leader on East Ayrshire council, is a woman like no other. She invested time and energy in me and has mentored me since my first election to East Ayrshire council in 2012. Despite her own personal challenges, she was determined to do all she could to get me here to this place and to play a huge part in my campaign. Barry, who is known affectionately as our local stato genius, kept us well drilled and well informed—and, boy, did that pay off, with a 5,000 majority. I would not be standing here today if it were not for the contributions of those who believed in me and supported me throughout this journey. I thank every one of them.

I pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Alan Brown, who was first elected to this House in 2015 and was committed to working hard for his constituents throughout his time in Parliament. I wish Alan and his family well for the future.

In 1945, Clarice Shaw was the first woman elected to this place to represent the people of Kilmarnock on a platform of jobs for all, industry in the service of the nation, public ownership, a welfare state from cradle to grave and a new national health service. Some 57 years later, I took up a post in our national health service. I was later privileged to join a team of dedicated colleagues who helped to shape me into the person I am today. It was and still is an honour to have been part of the hospital at night team, which was first launched in Glasgow in 2007, and to have forged many friendships that will last a lifetime. I am thinking today of my former NHS colleagues; I pay tribute to all members of the team who selflessly did their duty throughout the coronavirus pandemic and who continue to do so in sometimes very challenging circumstances.

Clarice was a tireless campaigner for equality, an unwavering agitator for peace and a dedicated socialist Member of Parliament. Her legacy serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration for all of us who believe in the power of collective action and social justice. Sadly, just days after Clarice was sworn in, she became seriously ill and was unable to return to Parliament to deliver her maiden speech. In October 1946, Clarice stood down. Sadly, she died a few days later.

As a working-class woman elected to this House, I reflect on Clarice Shaw's contributions and am inspired to carry forward her vision into today's world, where it is just as relevant now as in 1945. It is a vision in which peace prevails over conflict, co-operation triumphs over division and equality is not just an aspiration but a reality for every citizen—one that ensures that our national health service will be there when people need it most and for future generations.

The second woman elected to represent Kilmarnock and Loudoun was Cathy Jamieson in 2010, although by that time she had already been a parliamentarian for 11 years in the Scottish Parliament. Her wealth of knowledge and experience saw her appointed to the official Opposition Front Bench in 2011 as shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury. Cathy will be a hard act to follow, but I will do my absolute best. Cathy is also arguably Kilmarnock football club's biggest fan.

[Lillian Jones]

I was delighted to learn that the club won the 2024 best-kept war memorial competition for its satellite garden and memorial, thanks to Kilmarnock's branch of Royal British Legion Scotland and to the club ambassador, Raymond Montgomerie.

My constituency is not only famous for having the oldest professional football club in Scotland, or for its famous sons such as Nobel peace prize winner John Boyd Orr, who was born in Kilmaurs in 1880, Andrew Fisher, the fifth Prime Minister of Australia, who was born in Crosshouse in 1862, and Sir Alexander Fleming from Darvel, who discovered penicillin. This month, it may interest the House to know that in Killie we are unique: we celebrate Halloween before anyone else in the country. This year is even more unusual, because we are celebrating Halloween before the clocks go back—something that cannot happen in the rest of the country.

On the last Friday of October, Killieween comes to life, supporting our local economy, with weans young and old in fancy dress out in the streets trick-or-treating. Over recent years, it has become a favourite date in the calendar for communities across the constituency. It is fantastic to see so many schools, volunteers, businesses and organisations such as Kilmarnock community fire station putting effort, energy and pride into making Halloween such an exciting time for so many children across the towns and villages of my constituency.

I am shaped by the people who have loved, mentored, taken a chance on and believed in me. I stand before the House today as a proud public servant with a combined 34 years of public service. Being in the service of people is when I am at my best. This is who I am. I know that my life and work experiences will serve me well in the role of Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call David Mundell.

4.12 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a great honour to serve under your stewardship for the first time, and to follow the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones). I lived in her constituency in Scotland's Moscow for a number of years. It was not quite a socialist republic at the time, but my children attended Fenwick primary school and I have many happy memories of the constituency.

I was inspired by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), whose story of the opportunities that are available to grasp should be inspiring to everyone who comes to this country. I very much enjoyed the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin): it was a tour de force on parts of English history with which I was not fully familiar, although I do not know whether that will help him in his service on the Scottish Affairs Committee. One thing we have in common is that as a new Member of the House I was required to serve on that Committee: I was on it for five years and it was indeed a learning experience.

In speaking in favour of the Bill, I will concentrate my remarks on the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I am particularly pleased that the Minister is taking the Bill forward, because I know he has played

a positive part in the workings of the association and has been part of many previous delegations. I have also had that opportunity: like the hon. Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge), for South Antrim (Robin Swann) and for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous), I am pleased to have been elected to the executive of the CPA, which hopes to meet for the first time in its new guise this afternoon after the debate has concluded.

It is extremely important that we understand the significance that Commonwealth countries placed on this change. It is all very well to have a discussion about the procedural niceties, but this issue was impacting on the United Kingdom's reputation within the Commonwealth. I have twice led delegations to South Africa, and this issue was top of the list of issues to be discussed by the Speaker of the South African Parliament. When the Speaker of the Ghanaian Parliament visited this country, it was the top issue on their agenda. It impeded the discussion of other issues that we might want to raise, so it was vital for that impediment to discussion to be removed.

As one or two other speakers have touched on, particularly the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, malign forces are at work. When we were in South Africa, we were attacked by the Economic Freedom Fighters party as neo-colonialists. The structure of the international Commonwealth Parliamentary Association was given as one reason we were neo-colonialists, because the organisation was not a full standing international organisation, but an English charity. People used that to further their arguments.

This Bill is not just a nice thing to do, but vital to ensuring that we can be fully participative and respected in discussions. If we want to raise difficult issues—there are difficult issues to raise in the Commonwealth, in particular the assault on the LGBT community in many Commonwealth countries—we cannot then be confronted with, "What are you doing about this issue that is important to us?" It is important that we are taking the Bill forward, and undertakings were given at the last Commonwealth Parliamentary Association international conference.

I join others in paying tribute to colleagues. Ian Liddell-Grainger had stepped in to be the head of the international Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, having been the chair of the CPA UK when the incumbent passed away suddenly. Ian, as those who know him will appreciate, could have been a diplomat in another life. He was able to assure those present at the summit that something would be done in the UK and that the changes would be made. Dame Maria Miller, in her usual tenacious way, sought to do everything possible to bring those measures forward. I was personally disappointed that the Bill was not in the last Government's King's Speech, because it was considered too niche, whereas various things that I or my constituents would have considered niche did appear. However, Dame Maria pursued the Bill through other channels and got so very close to it being enacted. I am delighted that the new Government have taken it forward and that it got through the House of Lords without undue difficulty.

Although there are other issues to be raised around the Bill, I hope that it can complete a straightforward parliamentary passage, because not only do we have the Commonwealth leaders event in Samoa, but in two weeks'

time we have the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference in New South Wales. It will be very important—in particular to me, as I have been tasked with reporting to the conference what is happening with the Bill—that I can report positively that the Bill has passed Second Reading today, that we have heard across the Chamber that it has widespread and cross-party support, and that it has the Government's impetus behind it to deliver Royal Assent as soon as possible. That is the message that I hope and believe I can take to the conference.

The final point I would like to make to the Minister is that the CPA UK branch is an asset to the Government. The Government, and in particular the FCDO, need to work more closely with the branch, because MPs on delegations can be a soft power source that the Government cannot be. Many Members who have been on delegations find that posts, consulates, embassies and high commissions welcome their visits, because MPs are able to raise issues or ask questions, or they themselves are able to ask questions or raise issues, that they would not otherwise be able to do if it were a formal ministerial event. Going forward, I ask them to work with our CPA UK branch, so that we can work as effectively as we can on behalf of the United Kingdom and deliver some of those soft power benefits.

4.21 pm

Alicia Kearns: With the leave of the House, and with thanks to all Members who have contributed today, I want to reiterate the Opposition's support for the Bill. I also want to repeat my tribute to my right hon. Friend the former Member for Basingstoke, Dame Maria Miller, for her unending work to promote the Bill, and to my noble Friends Baroness Anelay and Lord Ahmad for their respective roles. It shines a positive light on this place that a private Member's Bill can be introduced, supported by a Conservative Government and then reintroduced by a new Labour Government. I hope we will see it complete its passage into law in the same spirit of co-operation.

Turning to today's debate, it is a delight to serve opposite the Minister of State at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). He has a genuine passion for the Commonwealth and a commitment to building friendships across the world. I am sure he will continue to do all that he can to build those friendships and ensure that the Commonwealth goes from success to success.

The Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), set out not only the value but the joy that the CPA brings. She is absolutely right that the ICRC is an organisation of hope, and that its losses—those it has lost in the course of its work—demonstrate just how important it is and how important it is that we support its work. I also thank her for reminding me that I, too, should thank it for all the submissions it made to the Foreign Affairs Committee when I was the Chair of that Committee over the last few years.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the ICRC. I have to say that I learnt many things I was not aware of before the debate, so I thank her for that.

The speech by my friend the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) demonstrates the importance of the CPA's work. He is a representation of the importance of what the CPA does for this Chamber, which is bring people together from across the Chamber to build friendships that matter. The Chamber can often appear combative and to some extent rude, frankly, in the way that we speak to each other, but behind the scenes it is vital that we have the relationships that enable us to get things done. I am grateful to count him as a very good friend.

Turning to my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), who I am sure is rushing back in a frenzy to the Chamber from her meeting with the CPA, it is quite impressive for her to make the same arguments so cogently for a third time and to find a way to structure them so very differently. I pay tribute to her work on modern-day slavery, which is exceptional and demonstrates the importance of the CPA's work. She has made a demonstrable difference to the way Commonwealth countries around the world have tackled modern-day slavery within their own countries.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) on making his maiden speech. It is quite clear that he has a passion for the home that his communities gave him. He has clear aspirations for the communities he serves, and I wish him every success in delivering on those aspirations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), the former Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, set out his concerns for the freedoms and protections of the Committee staff. Scrutiny is always at the forefront of his mind. I am sure that he was heard by the Minister, although I am sure that his staff from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in the Box were even more excited to hear the news that there will be an amendment in Committee. The Opposition will review his amendment very closely—he knows how closely I hold the importance of scrutiny in my own heart. It was very interesting to hear the challenges that he faced as the Committee Chair in the last few years.

The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) spoke of the Commonwealth family, although I suspect that perhaps in preparing for today's debate he accepted a challenge to try to get “kangaroo” into *Hansard*. I congratulate him on doing just that. The maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) was typical in the tribute that it paid to his predecessor. It is clear that he will be a passionate campaigner for civil liberties and low taxes during his time in this House, but I gently suggest that he may find his declared campaign to prevent a third runway at Heathrow at odds with the CPA's own demands on the airport, which are rather significant. He may have to come to terms with that before he applies for any future delegations.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones)—I apologise if that was not accurately pronounced—showed heartfelt gratitude to those who have supported her to come to this place. She brought the history of her constituency to life in her maiden speech.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) demonstrated so well the courtesies of this House. It is so important

[Alicia Kearns]

that, as we move forward as a new Parliament, we do not forget those small courtesies, whether it be paying tribute to a predecessor or recognising the contributions of other Members. I thank him for doing that. He also raised the importance of the CPA when it comes to the challenges and disagreements that we have within that family, because like all families within the Commonwealth, there are disagreements.

My right hon. Friend has been vocal in his efforts, particularly on global LGBT rights. I have been able to use the CPA family as an opportunity to flag my concerns when there have been attacks on LGBT rights globally, and about women's rights and the way in which national security legislation sometimes can be perverted or misused for the interests of individuals. Although we talk about the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in such a positive light, is an important vehicle for challenge within our own communities. He also set out the importance of the Bill to the Commonwealth. I congratulate him on his re-election, and when he goes to the Commonwealth meeting hopefully he will be able to confirm that the Bill has passed Second Reading—that seems to be the will of the House in today's discussion, although I would never prejudge any vote—and that it is making progress through the Houses.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the International Committee of the Red Cross do vital work. The CPA furthers the aims of the Commonwealth charter to the development of free and democratic societies. It allows us to share best practice across borders, learn from one another, connect with likeminded colleagues in the Commonwealth—and sometimes not so likeminded—and together strengthen our democratic resilience in an increasingly volatile world. As the Chair of the International Development Committee said, the ICRC is often the last line of humanity reaching the most vulnerable when others cannot, and administers lifesaving aid. Each is staffed and supported by hard-working and upright people, trying their best to make a positive impact and etch out a brighter future from our stormy present.

The Bill may seem to address minor issues in comparison to some that pass through this House. None the less, it is vital not just for us but for our Commonwealth partners around the world, many of whom I am sure will be watching today's debate. The legal challenges in it strengthen the foundation on which the work of both the CPA and the ICRC relies. The Bill solves two problems—though my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East will attempt to make it solve three—but its real value is in the many opportunities it will create. It will be up to the Government to grip those challenges with both hands. They will have our support because the Opposition will always stand steadfast behind the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth family.

4.28 pm

Stephen Doughty: With the leave of the House, let me first say that it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker—I think for the first time since I have been in the Chamber. We have been opponents at some times and allies at others, but it is a pleasure to see you, and I welcome you to your place. I thank Members from both sides of the House for their insightful

and valuable contributions. It is clear that the work and values of both organisations are highly regarded by all Members and that the legislation has support—I hope; I do not want to prejudge a possible vote.

As I noted earlier, this is not the first time that the House has considered forms of this legislation, and we are all pleased to see it back again. On Second Reading in the other place, my noble Friend Baroness Chapman said that she thought the Bill was the first to receive a Second Reading in this Parliament under the new Government; I think it is now the first Bill to receive a Second Reading in both Houses. Could it be the first to gain His Majesty's signature? I wonder. I certainly hope that before the conference I can provide the answers the shadow Minister was looking for.

I thank the shadow Minister for her kind words. I welcome her and the Opposition's warm support as well as her tribute to the past proponents of the Bill. I agreed with her comments about the Commonwealth, particularly when she spoke about the friendships and the best practice that we can share, and with her tribute to His Majesty the King. A number of Members referenced Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and her decades of service; her particular engagement with the Commonwealth is recognised by all sides. The shadow Minister also paid tribute to the work of the ICRC and its staff, particularly on Nagorno-Karabakh.

The shadow Minister asked a number of questions, which I will try to answer. If I do not get them all, I will be happy to write to her. She asked specifically about the funding to the ICRC. His Majesty's Government provide £48 million each year as core unrestricted funding and are on track to provide at least an additional £80 million this year in direct contributions to the ICRC's work around the world. She and other right hon. and hon. Members raised the importance of the FCDO's working with the CPA. I certainly hope that all our high commissions and embassies will provide a warm welcome to delegations and support the work; the points about the benefits in soft power and about representing this place in its broadest sense, with all our expertise and traditions, are well made.

Like other right hon. and hon. Members, the hon. Lady made much wider points about the Commonwealth. We attach great importance to our membership of the Commonwealth, which is a vibrant network of 2.5 billion people united in the pursuit of freedom, peace and prosperity. We fundamentally believe that a modern, cohesive and effective Commonwealth can play an important role in delivering progress on UK priorities across the globe—whether in the sphere of democracy, common values, defending the rights of women, girls and minority communities, dealing with climate change and the energy transition, or the particular challenges faced by small island states. We will work on all those key issues together. There is also the issue of growth and economic development; the Commonwealth's 56 members include some of the world's fastest growing economies and it is vital that we partner with them for their and our global benefit. Importantly, those issues, among many others, will be discussed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Samoa.

I also pay tribute to my good friend the Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). She paid particular tribute to the International Committee

of the Red Cross; I particularly recognise what she said about the loss of its workers in current conflicts as well as many others in the past. All of us across the House salute the resilience and bravery of those who work in such trying circumstances.

I welcome the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) to her place and thank her for her party's support for the Bill. She rightly pointed to the example of other countries and why we need to follow suit. I assure her of the new Government's commitments to international law, the multilateral system, humanitarian principles and the sustainable development goals; my noble Friend Lord Collins and others will be speaking about those matters in due course. The hon. Lady also rightly referenced the recent speech made by the Minister for Development.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) on his election and all those elected to the CPA executive. I thank him for his work and support for the Bill. The right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) has had to attend the important CPA event; she rightly paid tribute to Maria Miller and Ian Liddell-Grainger and highlighted the important work on modern slavery. I wish her well on her panel today. Like me, she is passionate about the personal relationships that we can develop.

The right hon. Lady and others mentioned the importance of the CPA in relation to devolved Administrations. Ironically, the first CPA conference that I attended was in the Senedd, in my own constituency of Cardiff South and Penarth, and brought together representatives of devolved Administrations along with UK and other Members of Parliament—as well as representatives of the overseas territories, for which I now have responsibility. That learning, sharing, friendship and understanding of our different ways of working as well as our common challenges was hugely important.

We have heard some fantastic maiden speeches today. First, we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) a passionate account of his journey from Punjab to Ilford, which he described as a place of promise. He spoke of the community and the home that he had found and contributed to, and the passion that he clearly felt for his diverse and dynamic community, which has many similarities to my own, was very inspiring. I also noted his pledges on health and the Government's commitments on NHS reforms, and his campaign for King George hospital. I thank him for that excellent maiden speech.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) always makes important points. I heard very clearly what he had to say, but, as I take a key interest in these matters as well, I would gently stress the point that, as he knows, the Clerks have particularly strong rules relating to the scope of Bills, and the amendment that he suggested may not be in the scope of this Bill. Obviously, it is for the Clerks to opine on the matter. I have heard the right hon. Gentleman's remarks and will certainly take them away, but there is clearly a stark difference between the Intelligence and Security Committee situation that he described and the position of the CPA and the ICRC.

Sir Julian Lewis: May I urge the Minister, when the Government are considering the political dimension of what is being proposed, to engage in consultations with

Lord West of Spithead, his own party's representative on the previous ISC, and also with the new Lord Beamish, formerly Kevan Jones of this parish, who likewise was firmly committed to the sort of measure that I am proposing?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman has mentioned some well-respected people—my noble Friends—and I will ensure that colleagues across Government hear what he has said, and also his request for the ISC to meet the Prime Minister, although, as he will know, the Prime Minister's diary is incredibly stretched.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) took the opportunity to make a lengthy speech. The Whips will probably teach him not to do that too often, but he made a fantastic contribution including some thoughtful insights on the importance of the Commonwealth and its future, particularly in a world where we are contesting with autocratic and repressive states that seek a very different future for the world. I believe that the Commonwealth provides a set of values and principles on which we can all unite. He spoke of his own family history, and also noted the Commonwealth contribution in the two world wars, which we need to remember regularly, especially as we approach the season of remembrance.

The hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) made another excellent maiden speech. Like many other Members, I know his constituency well—I have sung at Royal Holloway's Windsor building, I have visited the fields at Runnymede, and I recently attended a conference on Ukraine in Windsor Castle itself—and I know that it is home to many and varied activities from the cultural to the historic. He spoke of his passion for physics. I wanted to be a physicist myself until my English teacher told me to go into politics, and the contribution that science and mathematics can make to the House is key. The royal history of the hon. Gentleman's constituency is, of course, well known. I welcome him to the House, and thank him for an excellent speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones) paid a heartfelt tribute to the family, friends and campaigners who brought her to this place, along with her own clear commitments to public service. She also paid warm tributes to her predecessors, including Clarice Shaw and Cathy Jamieson. I got to know Cathy Jamieson well when I first came to this place 12 years ago. She ensured that I was given a tour around "Killie" football club at one point when I was in her constituency. My hon. Friend may not know this, but there is a direct connection between her constituency and mine: Loudoun Square is at the heart of Butetown. The name denotes the strong links between the coal and shipping industries of Cardiff and the west coast of Scotland. That connection is deep and abiding. My hon. Friend spoke with passion about the huge community assets in her constituency and the strength of that community, and I wish her well in this place.

Last but not least, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) made some very important remarks and some kind remarks about me, and I congratulate him on his election to the CPA's executive committee. The significance of this change is understood by the Government, which is why we want to get the Bill through. I am glad that he highlighted some of the challenges we see around the Commonwealth, particularly those facing the

[Stephen Doughty]

LGBT+ community. He knows that I take those issues very seriously, and I have taken advantage of my time with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to raise such concerns in the past. These are issues that I and other Ministers take very seriously.

I will conclude by saying that I am well aware not only of the excellent work that the ICRC does, but of its importance to the Commonwealth. My own constituency has people from Cyprus, Malta, south Asia and Africa. It is vital that we continue those links at the parliamentary level and work together, and we Ministers are committed to doing so. I thank everybody for their contributions today. I look forward to seeing this Bill progress—rapidly, I hope—and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION AND INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (STATUS) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Wednesday 13 November 2024.

- (3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

- (4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

- (5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

- (6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Christian Wakeford.)

Question agreed to.

COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION AND INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (STATUS) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any amount refunded in respect of any tax or duty in accordance with arrangements made under the Act.—(Christian Wakeford.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

SANCTIONS

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 4) Regulations 2024 (SI, 2024, No. 900), dated 4 September 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5 September, be approved.—(Christian Wakeford.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ENERGY

That the draft Contracts for Difference (Electricity Supplier Obligations) (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 30 July, be approved.—(Christian Wakeford.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

DEFENCE

That the draft Armed Forces Act 2006 (Continuation) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 20 May, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(Christian Wakeford.)

Question agreed to.

Postal Voting at General Elections

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

4.42 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): What a delectable, delicious prospect we have before us: a two-and-a-half-hour Adjournment debate on postal voting. If the Whips thought that the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) made a long speech, I am tempted to say, “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”

First, may I welcome the Minister to her place? I assure her from the start that this is not an attack Adjournment debate; it really is designed to be helpful to her and colleagues. I sought to secure this debate having reflected on the operation of postal voting during the general election, which I did through the prism of being the then Minister in charge of elections policy. Just for the record, I note that Mr Speaker has kindly invited me to join the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, and I have accepted.

If the House will indulge me for just a moment, I want to put on record one of those things that often do not get noted when Ministers are ushered out of office by the electorate. This place, all of us who have been returned to it, all who stood in the election and represented their party interests across the United Kingdom, and all our electorates owe a debt of thanks to the elections team at the former Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—I see one or two of them in the Officials Box. The team worked flat out to deliver the policies that came from the Elections Act 2022, and they had the local elections in May and then the general election shortly thereafter. They worked tirelessly to support the delivery of those elections, and I put on record my thanks to them.

I also thank David Gold and his team at the Royal Mail, and all the people at the Royal Mail who strove so hard to deliver the postal votes and all the other literature and documentation that supports the delivery of a general election. David and his team were more than generous with their time and, during the election campaign, as issues were coming to the fore that they were trying to manage and we were trying to raise as the Government, they made themselves available on a daily basis, if necessary, and certainly on a weekly basis to make sure that the ship of state was still afloat.

It would be remiss of me not to thank the Association of Electoral Administrators and all those in local government who keep the electoral register and deal with the paperwork and the logistics, which certainly became more complex and demanding, as the Minister will doubtless have been briefed by her officials, as a result of the changes to the rules and regulations in the Elections Act. I had the great honour of speaking at the annual conference earlier this year—I am sure that the Minister will be invited to do it; if she can, I urge her to—and they are a great bunch of women and men who work tirelessly in our town halls and county halls to make sure that elections are delivered. Of course, we should also thank the Electoral Commission, which is the guardian watchdog that keeps an eye over all of us to make sure that the rules are adhered to.

Our democracy works only when and because the defeated and their supporters—not the victors—accept the result. We saw the dangers of that in the previous American presidential election, and just how close we can get to anarchy and a complete collapse of confidence, the ramifications of which are still being felt in the States, when the people who lose say, “We was robbed. The system was against us.”

We have been hugely lucky in this country that all our election results have been beyond challenge and have been accepted by the victor and the defeated, and that the legitimacy of those who have been chosen to govern has been accepted and agreed, but we cannot rest on our laurels. We cannot presume that just because that is how it has always been, that is how it will always be, and that is the spur that prompted me to apply for this Adjournment debate.

My message to the Minister is that although 2029 seems a long way away, in governance and organisational terms it is effectively tomorrow. The Government and the House need to think about whether and how any changes are to be delivered to the way that postal voting operates, such as through amendments to the Elections Act or statutory instruments, to ensure that the electorate accept the legitimacy of the result.

The next general election will not be fought on the same franchise that we had this year. We have an ageing population, so it is a legitimate presumption that there will be a higher demand for postal votes as people get older. There is also the potential to increase the franchise by giving the vote to 16 year olds, which could increase future demand for postal votes, and I understand that proposals may be in train about franchise rights for EU citizens, which would create another demand. If all the newly enfranchised overseas voters had registered to vote who were hitherto exempt because of the 15-year cut-off point, who would by definition be seeking a postal vote or a proxy vote, the totality of additional voters coming on to the roll—I am giving this figure from memory—would have been about 3 million.

I do not know what percentage of that 3 million got on to the register and had a vote; the Electoral Commission’s report about the operation of the election will be published in November. As sure as eggs are eggs, though, as time goes by—their legitimacy to vote was accepted by my then shadow, the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi), so there will be no change in policy there—one can only presume that a greater percentage of those 3 million will apply for a vote as their knowledge and understanding of their ability to secure one grows.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Hoare: I am tempted to say that this Adjournment debate would not be an Adjournment debate—it would fail the Trade Descriptions Act—unless I gave way to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. He is absolutely right to bring this issue to the Floor of the House for consideration by the Minister. I would like to make a helpful contribution. He is very knowledgeable in relation to Northern Ireland. We have had a postal vote system for some time, but

[*Jim Shannon*]

there was a problem at the last election. When people were taken ill suddenly, the doctors in the hospitals could right away send a letter, and those people were accepted for a postal vote. However, those in their late 70s and 80s who were infirm and perhaps not so mobile were not able to get postal votes even though they needed them, because for some unknown reason, their GPs took a decision not to sign their forms for postal votes. To me, that is absolutely ludicrous. If you are elderly and infirm and not able to get out, you should get a postal vote. There should be no two-tier status for those with postal votes.

Simon Hoare: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that all those who are entrusted with the discharge and delivery of our elections—our police, our medical certifiers and others clearly play a part—should play an active and engaged part. It should not be an option to opt out; this should just be an accepted part of the job. I will mention Northern Ireland specifically in a moment or so.

I want to give the House some facts provided by the Royal Mail, which I think are of interest to put this issue into scope and scale. At the general election just gone, on 4 July, the Royal Mail delivered more postal votes and candidate mail than in any previous general election. Postal votes were up by 50% and candidate literature was up by 30% in comparison with 2019—and that was just your election literature, Madam Deputy Speaker! The Royal Mail delivered 50.8 million poll cards, 7.26 million postal votes and 184 million candidate leaflets. It did sweeps of all its 37 mail centres and 1,200 delivery offices to ensure that all the postal votes that had gone into the system were delivered to the counts, to make sure that those votes were counted. On election day itself, 70,000 postal votes were handled by the Royal Mail across the United Kingdom to be delivered. That is a huge number.

This is the challenge that I set for the Minister. I am not looking for the *de facto* answer today, but I would like an assurance that it is on the radar and people are thinking about it. We know full well that the Royal Mail is going through a period of change. I think we feel this particularly acutely in rural areas. It is by definition, because of email and everything else, handling fewer and fewer letters, and staff numbers reflect that. One of the joys of the 2015 general election, as far as Royal Mail was concerned, was the fact that we still had the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 and it could structure additional recruitment to deliver the demand—and that demand was far less than that which prevails at the moment—because it knew with certainty when the general election was going to be held. The snap elections of 2017 and 2019, and the perhaps earlier than expected 2024 election, caught the Royal Mail napping, because it had to put on a sudden spurt to recruit people to deliver all the pieces of paper that needed to be delivered. In the absence of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, that issue will remain with us.

I made the point to the Royal Mail that in fact only one election was controlled by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. Every other election had always been at the whim or the prerogative of the Prime Minister when the House was dissolved. However, in comparing previous with future general elections, we must consider the changes in volume that the Royal Mail is handling.

I mentioned rural areas. I am still awaiting the delivery of election address 2; I am sure that I had exciting words to say, but it never came through my letterbox. Last week, a wonderful bundle of 12 pieces of mail was delivered in the one-delivery-a-week service that my part of North Dorset is currently experiencing.

There will not be a Member of Parliament, urban or rural—though this applies particularly to rural areas—who has not had constituents contacting them after the general election to say that they did not receive their postal vote in time or could not get it back in time. That takes me to a point that requires possibly secondary legislation and certainly some thought: the cut-off point between the close of nominations and everything going to the printer, and everything getting bundled up in the postal vote packs at the same time as people are trying to update the register, check that polling stations are available, recruit polling clerks and so on. It is all incredibly tight. It was incredibly tight this year, but the system just about coped. I am anxious to future-proof, given the increased demand that I mentioned at the start of my remarks.

The Government could go back to the old system, thus putting the postal vote genie back in the bottle, with the tight criteria that used to prevail. I do not believe that that will happen, and I do not think it would be desirable. We could introduce digital voting for overseas voters, but that has the potential for fraud and hacking. It also opens up the Pandora's box of digital voting for everyone in the United Kingdom.

There is no easy solution. There is the tightness of the timetables and the capacity of the Royal Mail—not its good will; the Royal Mail is honoured and delighted to have the contract that the Government give it. David Gold and his team were conscious of the pivotal role that their organisation played in delivering the general election, and always prepared to say so up front.

The Electoral Commission noted, in a briefing that I received today in advance of the debate, for which I am grateful, that several people experienced problems in voting by post, such as delays in receiving their postal ballot. Its research shows that the vast majority of postal votes were delivered promptly, and that there were no widespread or systemic issues. However, there were voters in the UK and abroad who could not vote because of the late arrival of postal votes. Problems were prevalent in Scotland, which gave us a lot of concern because the election coincided with the school holidays there and in Northern Ireland, which created additional pressure for the postal voting system. I look forward, as I am sure that the Minister does, to the Electoral Commission's report on postal voting, which will be published next month.

Something needs to be done to give us all confidence that the result of the general election in 2029—probably—will have the same legitimacy as those held in 2024, 2019 and previously. There will be some challenges. Although our constituents are not forced to vote, they have a legitimate expectation, as part of their contract with the state, that their vote will be counted if it has been cast.

I do not have the answers for the Minister. That is her job, not mine. She knows that the system needs to be reliable, robust, easy, seamless and trusted, because all of us, irrespective of party or geography, are united in being motivated by one guiding principle: the result, whatever it may be, has to command authority through

the electorate's trust in it. If it does not—if people can cry foul, say that the system is loaded against them, or that it is too creaky and analogue for a digital age—then faith in our democratic system erodes. When faith erodes, participation is likely to decline; that is when extremes always flourish, and I know that His Majesty's Government and the Minister will not want that. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. For what it is worth, having been the Minister over the election period, I would be happy to do anything I can with her—through conversations, et cetera—to ensure that we get this right.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an interesting and powerful speech. He referred to the number of items delivered by Royal Mail, and said that it is going through a period of change. Do we need to look for alternatives to Royal Mail because of the major changes that are taking place?

Simon Hoare: If my hon. Friend means alternatives to feet on the pavements, then very possibly. The benefit of using the Royal Mail is that culturally it is aware of the seriousness of the task it is asked to discharge, and it has a very good heritage of doing so. I would not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I sympathise with the Royal Mail because, in essence, it is given five weeks to recruit hundreds of people across the country to learn the rounds and deliver stuff. Those people also have to be vetted to ensure that they are not politically partial, so that my leaflets do not end up in a hedge while everybody else's end up delivered through people's letterboxes. Those are important issues.

There is a tendency to rush off into the commercial sector, but I would not do that. Of course, there are ways to ensure vetting, but the authority and imprimatur of Royal Mail puts it at a distinct advantage. I know that it wants to continue to undertake the task, not just because the contract it has with the Minister and the Department is commercially attractive, but because it sees itself as being part of the democratic fabric and network that sustains the elections.

I could have waited until 2027 to raise these issues, but then the Minister could have said, "The hon. Member for North Dorset makes some very valid points, but he will know that there is no time in the legislative timetable to address them. We will just have to try and muddle through." The Minister has at least a few years to talk to the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Cabinet Committee, her Whip and the Leader of the House, and assess whether tweaks and changes need to be made to election cut-off dates and timetables. I will not labour the point any further, but the electoral process needs to be robust and the outcomes must be trusted by all our citizens, irrespective of whether they voted or how they voted.

5.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I thank the former Minister, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for securing the debate and bringing the very important topic of elections to the attention of the House. I particularly welcome the expertise and experience he brings to the discussion, which is helpfully taking place at the beginning of the Parliament. As he pointed out, in the previous Government he was Minister for elections.

The effective running of our electoral processes is the foundation of our democracy, and it is right that we carefully monitor and review all aspects of delivery to identify emerging issues and areas for improvement. Like the hon. Gentleman, I express my gratitude to all those who worked tirelessly to deliver the recent general election, including returning officers, electoral registration officers and their teams across the country. This is an important debate in the context of an election that was delivered effectively, and in which voters could exercise their rights freely. The country has collective confidence in the result. Although there will always be lessons to be identified and improvements to be made, the success of the polls should not be taken for granted or go unacknowledged. I also thank the wider sector that supported the system—the printers, the suppliers, the Royal Mail, the police, the Electoral Commission and, of course, the hon. Gentleman for his tireless work. He deserves great credit for effectively marshalling Government resources to aid the delivery of this complex operation.

The Government are aware of the reports that arose in the media of postal voting delays at the recent general election and the points that the hon. Member has made. Although the vast majority of postal votes were delivered successfully, it is perhaps not surprising in an operation of this scale and complexity that a proportion of postal votes should encounter delay. Those delays happened despite the work done by the Minister and others ahead of the general election. That was the case in previous elections, too. Officials worked closely with the Royal Mail and returning officers to support the resolution of the issues as quickly and effectively as possible.

None the less, any instance of an elector being unable to vote due to delays or errors in the system is deeply regrettable, and we need to take steps to address the root causes. Postal voting, as the hon. Member pointed out, has become increasingly popular; there is a general trend towards more of the electorate choosing this voting option. At the 2019 general election, more than 8 million postal votes were issued, and reports suggest that the figure for 2024 was significantly higher. That puts printing and delivery systems under strain, especially when national polls and elections are called at short notice. The issues arising in 2024 also have to be seen against the backdrop of boundary changes.

We recognise that no system will be perfect at all times, but it is clear from the volume of incidents, and from feedback from the election sector and electors themselves, that there are major strains on the system, and improvements will need to be made. We will carefully assess the postal voting process in our wider review of electoral conduct and registration processes, which the Government have already begun. We will work closely with stakeholders across the sector to gather their feedback, analysis and ideas. I am very grateful to the former Minister for his offer of assistance. This is an incredibly important matter, and I am very keen to make sure that we draw on his expertise and work. The Electoral Commission will publish its final report on the general election later this year, and we will carefully consider its findings and recommendations.

Simon Hoare: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, not just for what she is saying about the issues, but for her very kind words. She has made a former Minister blush.

[Simon Hoare]

In her conversations with the sector—she knows that those are vital conversations—will she overlay the projected figure for electors in the next election, or will she use the 2024 figures? Clearly, if the changes that the Government are suggesting are delivered, the franchise will be larger. That is an important point on which I would like clarity. I guess I probably know the answer.

Rushanara Ali: We will look at these issues in the round. The hon. Member has made important points about the growth in the sector, and I shall come on to that. As I have said, we will look at the findings of the Electoral Commission report when they arrive. Once we have completed our review, we will bring forward firm proposals for improvements to our electoral system, and I look forward to discussing them with Members in due course.

The hon. Gentleman expressed other concerns. We recognise the important work that Royal Mail has carried out. We will need to look at that in the context of Royal Mail's parent company and a potential takeover, and consider any wider implications, to make sure that the system is robust and that there is appropriate support, not only so that Royal Mail can learn for future elections, and improve on what was done in recent elections, but so that resources are in place and we continue to maintain confidence in the system. The hon. Gentleman made an important point about rural areas as well. Those factors need to be considered, along with other points he made.

The hon. Gentleman made important points about an ageing population and demographic changes, as well as younger voters and the increasing popularity of some

ways of voting. Work needs to take into account changes in behaviour and voting patterns. As I said, I look forward to working with him on those important issues.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about Northern Ireland and making checks. The Northern Ireland Office has heard of GPs not signing off postal votes, but that has never been backed by specific evidence. We will, however, take that issue into account and look into it, along with any other barriers facing those who need or wish to vote with a postal ballot.

Let me say, in the spirit of consensus in which the hon. Member for North Dorset introduced the debate and made his speech, that I look forward to working closely with him. I thank him for securing this important debate, and other Members for their interventions, and for contributing their insights and expertise. The Government consider the effective running of elections to be of paramount importance. It is fundamental to trust and confidence in our democracy. As we announced earlier this month, we are reviewing carefully electoral conduct and registration processes. Once the review is complete, we will bring forward firm proposals for changes where they are necessary. I very much look forward to sharing those proposals with Members, and to working with the hon. Member for North Dorset.

Question put and agreed to.

5.13 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 22 October 2024

[*VALERIE VAZ in the Chair*]

Pub and Hospitality Sector

9.30 am

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for pubs and the hospitality sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I apologise for my hoarse voice; I can assure hon. Members that it is not as a result of the overuse of pubs and similar venues in my constituency over the weekend.

Over recent months, I have had the privilege of visiting several hospitality venues in my constituency. I think particularly of the Curzon Arms in Woodhouse Eaves, which I reopened over the summer recess; the Forge Inn in Glenfield; the Stamford Arms in Groby; and the Coach and Horses in Markfield, which I have got to know over many years as the local councillor. I thank the many hon. Members who have turned up this morning; the debate is clearly of great interest.

The pub and hospitality sector has long been at the heart of the British economy. From the small countryside pub to big inner-city restaurants, the sector provides countless social and economic benefits for the United Kingdom. It is essential that we understand the challenges faced by the industry and do our utmost to support it to flourish.

The sector provides countless economic benefits to the UK as a whole. It contributes £140 billion in economic activity and provides £54 billion in tax receipts to the Exchequer. In fact, pubs and breweries contribute a whopping £18 billion in taxes to the UK economy.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Bedford: If the hon. Gentleman could give me a few moments, I will carry on. The success of UK plc is intrinsically linked to the success of the leisure and hospitality sector. The hospitality sector is a key employer throughout the UK, employing 3.5 million people, many with flexible working arrangements. It is vital for our younger people. As of this year, 51% of 16 to 24-year-olds are employed in the sector, and that plays a crucial role in developing their careers.

In my maiden speech, I stated that social mobility, particularly through apprenticeships, is key to creating a fairer and more just society. Many businesses in this sector offer apprenticeship schemes. Is it not great that someone can start as a trainee, a pot washer, and end up running an entire business? I think that should be applauded.

The sector also provides many social benefits. Hospitality businesses play a crucial role in encouraging socialising. In a country where many, particularly the elderly, often

feel isolated and alone, community pubs often provide a place for people to come and feel part of broader society.

I have spoken with local independent brewers in Leicestershire, in particular Everards, and we should also recognise the significant charitable contributions of community pubs. In Leicestershire, 153 independently-run pubs raise more than £1.5 million locally for local charities, which is reinvested in local communities to make them even greater places to live and work. That is invariably why 72% of British adults believe that pubs have a positive impact on the communities that they serve. I take the opportunity to celebrate the positive impact that the hospitality sector has in my constituency. In Mid Leicestershire, our 41 pubs cumulatively support more than 2,000 jobs and contribute £19 million to the Treasury.

However, as we are all aware, the industry has faced many challenges over recent years. What makes the sector so successful is its incredible resilience. There have been many challenges: the covid-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine and various geopolitical challenges have sent input costs spiralling high. The pandemic saw the hospitality industry suffer the biggest economic decline of all sectors. Economic output in the sector between 2019 and 2020 decreased by 42%, and we lost 10% of hospitality businesses during the pandemic. However, industry experts recognise the support that the last Conservative Government offered the industry through the eat out to help out scheme, a temporary cut to VAT and furloughing more than 2.1 million jobs, which limited the impact of the pandemic.

There have also been significant global challenges. The sector's resilience has been displayed throughout the ongoing cost of living crisis brought on by world events.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The hon. Gentleman talked about the war in Ukraine and the cost of living. Dean Banks, who runs the Haar restaurant in St Andrews, told me that energy costs are a challenge. One of the problems is that energy companies use direct debits to keep hold of companies' money, so they cannot manage their cash flow. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a real issue?

Mr Bedford: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. That applies to domestic consumers and to businesses that have to manage their cash flow, so I absolutely support her comments on energy providers.

The war on Ukraine, which brought about the increase in energy prices, has caused hospitality profit margins to continue to decline. Office for National Statistics data shows that hospitality businesses are more likely to shut their doors for at least two days a week than any other industry. However, once again the industry has expressed its gratitude to the previous Government for their support, particularly through the retail, hospitality and leisure business rates relief scheme, which saved the average hospitality business £12,000 and prevented many small and medium-sized businesses from going bust. The sector is not immune from the effects of over-regulation, which of course stifles creativity and businesses' ability to grow.

So where are we heading? I will move on to what may happen under the new Government's plans. With the Budget just around the corner, I implore the Chancellor to do all she can to support, not hinder, the hospitality sector. The sector is clear that it desperately needs a

[Mr Bedford]

continued reduction in business rates. Many in the sector have stated that they face a cliff edge on 1 April next year if the Government do not extend business rate relief to them. Two pubs shut every day in the UK, and that number will only increase if the relief is not extended.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The point about closures is significant. In Scotland, the Government have imposed minimum unit pricing, which was introduced at 50p per unit of alcohol and has recently risen to 65p. It was intended to reduce alcohol-related deaths—a laudable aim—but unfortunately they rose to 1,277 in 2023, which is an absolute tragedy. The rate of hospitality business closures in Scotland is twice that of England, so does my hon. Friend agree that minimum unit pricing appears to be a blunt instrument that is not helping at all?

Mr Bedford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: minimum unit pricing in Scotland has had adverse consequences and has not benefited his constituents.

The Budget could not only include an increase in business rates for the sector; it is looking more and more likely that the Government are reviewing employers' national insurance contributions. UKHospitality is clear that an increase in national insurance would be particularly damaging for the sector—that tax on jobs could finish off many businesses that are already on the edge.

The previous Government supported hospitality businesses by freezing alcohol duty for three years and introducing the Brexit pub guarantee. But with the “nightmare before Halloween” Budget on its way, it looks as though the new Government are looking to increase alcohol duty, and that would not be good news.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point about taxes on alcohol. Many pubs are shifting away from being wet pubs and are becoming dry pubs. David Lee, who runs the Holly Bush in Frensham, told me that he wants to be able to serve good quality fresh food, but the VAT on it is really hitting his margins. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Chancellor should look at reducing VAT on fresh food for the hospitality industry?

Mr Bedford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we should do all we can to support the industry as it recovers from the pandemic, and I hope the Chancellor takes on board his sensible suggestion.

For the hospitality sector, the most concerning part of the Employment Rights Bill, which had its Second Reading yesterday, relates to so-called equality laws, which are being updated to make employers liable for staff being “offended” by third parties. That would in effect turn hospitality managers into banter cops, who will feel duty-bound to step in every time someone makes an off-colour remark or joke. How on earth can we be entering a world in which someone can be deplatformed in their local pub? It is absolute madness.

I move on to another piece of Orwellian legislation. The ban on smoking in beer gardens and outdoor spaces is frankly ludicrous. The nanny state is causing outright economic harm to the industry, and I implore the Government to rethink their proposals.

Finally, I shall mention gambling regulation. There have been reports that taxes on the gambling sector will rise in line with the recommendations of the Institute for Public Policy Research commission on health and prosperity. The increase, worth £46 million, will wipe out the profit of the bingo industry and is likely to cost 8,000 jobs across our local communities. The bingo industry has made it clear that if speculation around the Budget comes to fruition, it will be even more damaging than covid and the energy crisis.

What could we do instead? We could look at cutting beer duty or bringing in 20% draught relief. The UK has one of the highest alcohol duties in Europe. Duty on a pint of 5% beer is 54p, compared with 5p in Germany. A pint of beer is four or five times more expensive in a pub than purchased in a supermarket. The brewery industry is the most taxed sector in the UK, at 40% of its turnover. That is a regressive tax and hits people on the lowest incomes the hardest.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech, covering all aspects of the hospitality sector. An extra benefit of draught beer relief is that 97% of the input into draught beer is made in the UK. That has a big knock-on effect across our agricultural sector. It is a win-win for UK farmers, the UK Exchequer and the hospitality sector. I urge him to continue to press the Government to push for greater relief in that space.

Mr Bedford: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. More specifically to help the hospitality business, the draught relief of 20% that has been mentioned—a campaign led by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith)—could see an extra 20 million pints sold a year and create 2,500 jobs, with a boost to the economy of more than £70 million.

We could protect hospitality businesses from the business rate relief changes. Pubs are taxed in a different way from most businesses—not on rateable value based on their rent, but as a calculation of their expected turnover. The ending of the retail hospitality relief would be deeply damaging for the sector, with businesses seeing a quadrupling of their business rates. I agree with the representations made by the British Beer and Pub Association that the relief should be kept until a new business rates framework is introduced.

We could also allow reform in the planning and licensing space. UKHospitality has advocated a more mainstream approach to the application of the planning and licensing framework. That would put pubs at the heart of the village and town centre. Kate Nicholls, CEO of UKHospitality, says:

“Too many hospitality businesses with ambitions to expand and grow are held back and frustrated by the current system.”

I also support the idea that there should be more flexibility for businesses to open later for special occasions, such as the women's football World cup, to allow punters more time to enjoy the festivities. We could cut national insurance contributions for lower-paid earners and promote apprenticeships more.

The potential increase in employer national insurance contributions will have a massive impact on the UK hospitality sector. Industry experts have strongly criticised any move to make such an increase. They believe there

should not be an increase—indeed, that there should be a lower level for lower-paid earners. Furthermore, the apprenticeship system is failing around the country. There needs to be a rethink in reforming the apprenticeship levy to incentivise businesses, particularly in this sector, to invest more and be more agile in how they offer apprenticeships.

In conclusion, I hope the Government take note of today's debate and introduce measures that will enable our pub and hospitality sector to thrive and grow for the future.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Right hon. and hon. Members will notice that a lot of Members want to speak and it looks like it is standing room only. I am going to impose an informal two-minute time limit. That does not stop hon. Members from intervening. I call Kim Johnson.

9.44 am

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing the debate. Pubs and hospitality are vital to the economy of my constituency. Every year, the hospitality sector in Liverpool Riverside alone has a turnover of £1.7 billion, employing more than 31,000 people.

I could be biased, but I believe that Liverpool is the best city in the world. Our city centre is home to so many world-famous music venues, bars, pubs and other hospitality venues—from The Cavern on Mathew Street to The Casa on Hope Street and The Jacaranda on Slater Street—and to groups from The Beatles to The Real Thing, recently honoured as the first black group to achieve a No. 1. We are a UNESCO city of music; we have dominated the music charts for years, with 56 No. 1 singles, and we were nominated European capital of culture in 2008. We are a city of clubs and bars and of parties. Most recently, the unforgettable Taylor Swift concerts and Eurovision brought hundreds of thousands of people together and generated millions for our region's economy. The great events and the people who worked so hard to put them on brought over £80 million to the city.

However, years of unprecedented challenges—including the pandemic, the cost of living crisis and soaring food and energy bills—risk suffocating these cultural institutions and this vibrant sector, placing thousands of businesses and jobs at risk across the country. There are unprecedented levels of closures, with an estimated net loss of 300,000 hospitality venues in 2023, leading to thousands of job losses. More than half of Liverpool's business rates come from the hospitality sector, with small businesses contributing significantly compared with far larger companies in far more profiteering sectors. High taxes on alcohol make it impossible for pubs to compete with cheap supermarket alcohol, driving consumers out of the safe settings of community pubs that help to promote responsible and sociable drinking.

I know I am short of time, so lastly, we must recognise the immense value of our heritage. Liverpool's pubs are more than just places to drink—they are historical venues, cultural landmarks and community spaces. They

must be protected and we must take action to ensure they are not swept away by planning loopholes and profiteering.

9.47 am

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for raising this important debate. We can see from the number of people here how much this touches every single one of us. In my constituency, local venues, pubs and restaurants are seeing a triple whammy of pressure with increased wage costs, increased energy costs and the significant rise in business rates as rates relief comes to an end. That is having a massive impact. Nationally, these venues are closing at a rate of 50 a month.

I am reminded of work by the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee earlier this year looking at grassroots music venues, because of course many pubs and restaurants are live music venues as well. They are also the R&D department of our globally successful music industry—they are vital to it—and they are closing at the rate of two a week. Two things the Committee advocated in our report were, first, a levy to go between the big arenas to the small, independent venues and, secondly, a time-limited and very targeted VAT cut. I would like to make the argument for such a cut for small independent hospitality venues.

I do not want to take the argument purely into numbers, because these venues are so important in the way they make us feel—they can regenerate communities and can address social isolation and loneliness—but they are vital for our local economy and for jobs. In the Gosport constituency alone, these venues employ 2,000 people across 146 venues. They are vital. The knock-on effect of venue closure can be devastating. A time-limited and very targeted VAT cut could be a lifeline for some of the venues that are struggling and still have not got back up to speed and back to pre-pandemic opening hours.

9.49 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Madam Chair. Back in early 2019, I was contacted by the beautiful Glen Mhor hotel on the shores of the Loch Ness, which wanted me to raise at Prime Minister's questions that its Polish workers, who are vital to the business, were all going back. We all know why that was. Unfortunately, at Prime Minister's questions, I stood up and invited the then Prime Minister Theresa May to accompany me to the Glen Mhor hotel. I did not get much further than that question because it sounded like an improper suggestion and the House collapsed in laughter. I should add that some weeks later I asked Theresa May another question about space launch in the highlands and she responded that she was very disappointed that I had not once again asked her to accompany me to a hotel.

The point is a serious one. The eastern European workers have been the lifeline and the mainstay of the hospitality business in the highlands, an area where we have depopulation and an ageing population. Very often the hotels, restaurants and pubs struggle to find the people they desperately need to change sheets, wash up,

[Jamie Stone]

work as kitchen porters and scrub the pans and pots, as we have just heard—I myself was a KP at one point. My point is very simple: I urge the Government to make it as easy as possible for businesses to offer the work that people desperately want and make it as easy as possible for them to come to the United Kingdom and contribute to our hospitality economy.

9.50 am

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing this important debate.

Pubs and the hospitality sector play an important part in Stockport and across Britain. In Stockport we have 65 pubs and five breweries supporting 1,590 jobs, creating £29 million in tax and contributing £57 million to the economy. We have several iconic businesses related to the sector, including Robinsons Brewery, which is still family-owned, the award-winning Stockport Gin—it continues to be stocked in the Strangers bar, and I invite Members to check it out—and also iconic pubs including the Magnet and the Sir Robert Peel. The sector has been struggling. The hon. Gentleman made the point that several pubs have closed. I believe in the first half of 2024, 50 pubs closed each month. So far in 2024 there has been a net loss of 94 small independent breweries.

I want to highlight the record of the previous Government—the last 14 years of Conservative Government, including the coalition years—and its impact on our hospitality sector. I am hopeful that the new Government and our capable Minister will deliver for the sector. Maintaining the 75% business rates relief for the retail, hospitality and leisure sector is very important. On business rates, pubs are taxed in a different way from most businesses. Large breweries, often run by multinational firms, are classified as specialist brewery sites for business rates. Small breweries have normal commercial premises for business rates purposes. That means that small breweries can pay 40 times as much per pint in business rates as a global brewer does, so that needs to be looked at to support the sector.

I thank the Campaign for Real Ale, the Society of Independent Brewers and the British Beer and Pub Association for all that they do for the sector, and of course Robinsons, particularly William Robinson, who continue to lobby me.

9.52 am

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) on securing this debate. As time is tight, I will focus my comments on my constituency.

In Tatton there are 89 pubs and three breweries that support 2,350 jobs, generating £29 million in tax and contributing £60 million to the economy. Recently I wrote to every one of those pubs in Tatton, following the Government's announcement that an outdoor smoking ban was being considered, to seek their views on that as well as the wider issues facing the hospitality sector. The answers revealed common concerns: business rates,

beer duty, employer's national insurance rises and Labour's Employment Rights Bill, which is on the front pages of most of the papers today because that will cost businesses £4.5 billion a year. On top of that is Labour's outdoor smoking ban, which would particularly affect pubs that rely partly or fully on wet-side sales, suggesting the ban would cause a drop in footfall of about 10% to 30%—enough to close more of them down.

It was clear from the responses that the Government should think again and drop the outdoor smoking ban. If they are determined to push ahead, they should at the very least consult the industry and do an impact assessment. I know that is something that this Government do not like and tend to shy away from, but that is what they need to do. Can the Minister inform me if he intends to drop this policy? At the very least, will he consult with the sector and do an impact assessment? I was going to touch on business rates, but I will not have time to do so. I will just say that the relief that the Conservative party brought in needs to be continued until a permanent solution is found.

9.55 am

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for bringing forward this fantastic and important debate. I will keep my comments to one issue: the importance of community pubs to villages in my area of Stoke-on-Trent South and surrounding north Staffordshire.

The village of Yarnfield has been fighting for—the Opposition will love this—the Labour in Vain pub. I have taken a photo outside it, which I know will be an internet meme. It is the village's one and only pub, and the village has been fighting to save it. I will not name and shame, but the owner of the pub is a large chain that has overvalued it, so when the village tried to exercise its right to buy it was delayed and its offer, which was a fair one from an independent valuer, was rejected. We believe, although we are not sure, that the owner is holding out because the land on which the pub sits has valuable planning possibilities. The village of Yarnfield is trying to save its pub for the community.

Hon. Members have talked about young people. The young people of the village are really keen to have the pub not just for their own sake and entertainment, but for the job opportunities that it offers. The village's right to buy ran out because of the delay by the company. The Government have committed to really supporting communities to have their right to buy, so I would like to know more about what we will do. Maybe we could extend the time and revisit those pubs and communities who have run out of time to get their pub and see how we can help the Labour in Vain.

In my last 10 seconds, I will say that community pubs are valuable. My local pub, the Plume of Feathers in Barlaston, is fantastic. We were delighted that it was allowed, despite restrictions, to have a guest beer named Einstein, which is the best beer in the country—I challenge hon. Members to pick another one.

9.57 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) on setting the scene so well.

I will speak very quickly in my one minute and 50 seconds. Ahead of this debate, the UK Spirits Alliance has stated that one in five pubs says it is at risk of closing. That is the issue before us all and before every constituency across this great United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland hospitality sector is Northern Ireland's fourth largest private sector employer, with a turnover of some £2 billion. With that in mind, the chief executive officer of Hospitality Ulster, Colin Neill, has done some incredible work to support and help to grow the industry, so we want to keep it growing and keep the initiative and opportunity for jobs and the economy.

The key issue in my council area is tourism, as along with tourism comes the hospitality sector, so it is really important to get this right. The Society of Independent Brewers and Associates says that there are some 1,721 small independent breweries in the UK, with some 10,000 full-time equivalents, which directly contribute some £270 million to GDP each year.

Small independent breweries face restrictions on growing their business. There is a difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff. I suggest to the Minister that the creation of the new immigration pathway to facilitate the introduction of new people to the skills of Northern Ireland and the UK has been a success. There is also the issue of business rates. Pubs are taxed in a different way from most businesses, not on a rateable value based on their rent, but on a calculation of their expected turnover. I once again ask the Minister to create a more level playing field. The Government's reforms of business rates should include a full review of the differential between a global and a small brewery.

In conclusion—keeping to your two-minute limit, Ms Vaz—there is so much that we can do or discuss to help to support the sustainability and future of our pubs and hospitality sector. I look to the Minister today for commitment and answers on what steps he will take to protect the industry, and I have hope that he will continue to communicate with representatives in Northern Ireland on these issues. I am exhausted from talking.

9.59 am

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. The south-west as a region has the highest number of pubs per capita in the UK, with 75 pubs per 100,000 people. As has already been rehearsed, they are community lifelines, social hubs and local landmarks where we form friendships, celebrate life's highs and find comfort in life's lows. Most contribute more than £100,000 annually to our local economy and support dozens of jobs, keeping many family businesses afloat. However, publicans in my area have been telling me about the razor-thin margins they are operating on and the difficulty they are having, as they burn through their remaining savings just to keep the refrigerators running.

I want to draw on the example of one pub in particular, the former George Inn in Chardstock, which was very much the hub of the community—the sort of place that was the living room of the village, where the local skittles team played and villagers met regularly. Owned by the Wellington Pub Company, it closed and the company was happy to just sit on the property as an asset—the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) spoke about that—and see its value inflate.

While the company did that, it did not want to do any work on the place and certainly did not want it to operate as a pub. The George Inn Continuity Group in Chardstock has done a fantastic job of bringing the villagers out to campaign to reopen the pub. However, we really need to see reform of the Localism Act 2011. It was a good starting point, but we now need enhanced powers over community assets to help local authorities to protect pubs.

10.1 am

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I am thrilled that the Labour Government value the role of pubs, cafés, restaurants and more in serving Bournemouth and Britain. When I speak with publicans and people involved in the hospitality sector, they tell me that they want Bournemouth to be seen not as a sleepy seaside town, but as a thriving and bustling place to invest, work and live.

Let us take as an example the stretch of Charminster Road between the Broadway pub and Creams. There are 17 different types of cuisine on offer, which are as diverse as the communities that call Charmy home. We have four pubs—the Richmond Arms, the Fiveways, the Broadway and The Dancing Jug—and more than 80% of vendors are independent.

If we move to Boscombe—I know that hon. Members would want to—we have Boscanova. Started by the team behind Bad Hand Coffee, it is a fantastic place that I visited recently and remains a bustling spot for great food made from ingredients sourced in Dorset and Hampshire, and some of the best coffee in Bournemouth. I cannot dwell on Boscombe without talking about Flamingo and Joy Cafe, and Cafe Riva and the Hush Club. The Hush Club almost stopped visiting Cafe Riva because of issues with the council and licensing complaints. I am pleased to have brought people together in recent weeks to keep that going.

If we move over to Southbourne, as again I know hon. Members would want to, there are fantastic places to visit, such as Wild & Ginger, Little Perth, Ludo Lounge, Brewhouse & Kitchen, The Wight Bear, Syd's Slaps, The Larder House, Dicky's, Harry's—I could go on. Moving quickly over to Moordown, if hon. Members fancy a good fish and chips on a Friday night, they might have to queue up, but I recommend they go to Malvern Road Fisheries. Lastly, in Muscliff and Strouden Park, perhaps the best kebab in the whole of Bournemouth East, if not the whole country, is found at Noor. I encourage any and all people to come, any day of the week.

I thank the business improvement districts for all they do to fuel economic growth and the people of Bournemouth East, who invest, set up businesses and help to fuel the hospitality economy, because they are making Bournemouth the amazing place that it is.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that I expect to begin the wind-ups at 10.28 am.

10.3 am

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing this important debate.

[Robbie Moore]

In my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley, pubs are a huge part of our local community. They are our meeting place, a place to socialise, and a place to wind down after a busy week or even a busy day, and can also provide a vital place to help to address loneliness, improve mental health and wellbeing, and address socialisation. I aim to recognise the great work of pubs through my own best pub award, drawing positive attention to some of the fantastic pubs from across my constituency.

Previous winners include the Craven Heifer in Addingham, which does a mighty meat pie; The Brown Cow in Keighley, where hon. Members will find one of the best-poured pints of Timothy Taylor's Landlord; the Goats Head in Steeton, one of the friendliest pubs embedded in the heart of the community; and of course the Haworth Steam Brewery, which always has a fantastic atmosphere and a great vibe, and which is home not only to its own beers but to Howarth gin.

One of the common themes in what all those pubs have told me is that small businesses across our hospitality sector constantly face that battle against Government red tape. That is why the last Government raised the VAT threshold to £90,000, which meant that over 28,000 businesses benefited from not needing to be VAT-registered. I would like a reassurance from the Minister that this Government will not look to reduce that threshold or implement a VAT cut.

I am also concerned by other measures that the Government are rumoured to be looking at, such as employer national insurance or business rates relief—I urge the Government to keep that business rates relief in place—as well as the measures in the Employment Rights Bill, which had its Second Reading yesterday. I cannot stress enough how concerned small businesses are about the challenges that will be created by that Bill. Also, given that the economic analysis was released so late, what are the real unintended consequences to small businesses right across the country?

10.5 am

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to today's debate about the vital support needed for our pubs and our broader hospitality sector, and I thank the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing it.

In South Devon, the hospitality industry is more than just a business; it is the lifeblood of our communities. Our area boasts over 700 pubs and restaurants, so there are far too many to name. I will not single any of them out, but they are all brilliant and they employ more than 12,000 people. This sector does not merely create jobs; it fuels our local economy, contributing over £500 million every year. However, we know that many of those venues are at breaking point.

I also want to raise the issue of business rates relief. One family-run hotel in my constituency has been in operation for over 127 years and faces an uncertain future. If the business rates relief cap is lifted, it will be forced to find an additional £110,000 a year just to keep its doors open. For a business that has served our community for generations, that is a real threat to its very survival, and that situation is not unique to South Devon. Across the country, pubs are closing at an alarming

rate. Covid presented a huge challenge to the industry, but the fallout from Brexit is still keenly felt. Disrupted supply chains and the increased costs of importing goods, as well as severe staff shortages due to the end of free movement, have all compounded the difficulties for our pubs and restaurants, many of which are now having to shut their doors a couple of days a week, which has a knock-on effect on local communities.

In response to all those mounting challenges, I have written to the Chancellor to urge the Government to extend rate relief for the hospitality sector. Temporary reliefs on business rates and alcohol duties are welcome but insufficient to address the long-term sustainability of the sector. We need bolder reforms that will give our hospitality venues the breathing room they need to invest in their people, their properties and their future. The Liberal Democrats are committed to real and lasting reform, including business rates relief and increasing the employment allowance for small businesses. Policies such as those are not just a lifeline for businesses but an investment in the future of our people, our economy and our communities.

10.7 am

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing this debate. This is a matter close to me because my background is in the hospitality sector. I spent 23 years running and owning bars, pubs, restaurants and festivals, and I provided consultancy services to the industry. In my role as the MP for Southend East and Rochford, I have spoken to a lot of businesses because they are particularly important to the regeneration of the town centre and the high street, and that is something that I have been keenly engaged with.

With all those industries, as some hon. Members have mentioned, it is quite important how they run, plan and make their business. The example that they have given me is the increasing costs from business rates, food, beverages and even wages, which make their businesses quite hard to run. They shoulder that burden, sometimes against the backdrop of increasing antisocial behaviour and decreasing footfall. Those are the challenges that, as I have mentioned before, I faced myself in running my business. I am sure many Members here, once upon a time, worked in pubs and bars as an entry-level job to get into the workplace. We should not underestimate the importance of the soft skills that this sector develops, such as responsibility, punctuality, problem solving and dealing with people from many cultures in different types of situations. Other businesses benefit from those as those individuals move further into the workplace.

It is also worth noting that many operators in this sector, including myself, in some circumstances put their life savings into their business as well. It is important that we support this industry. Pubs and bars provide a vibrant hospitality sector, and it is an industry that helps the next generation prepare for work. Service providers and operators in this sector should be championed for what they provide for our communities.

10.9 am

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Peter Bedford) on securing this important debate.

This topic has already been touched on, but I want to highlight the fact that 81% of British adults agree that pubs are important in bringing people together, while 73% feel that pubs help to combat loneliness in their area and 73% feel that the impact of pubs on their community life is positive. For those reasons alone, pubs should be supported in the current challenging environment. Some more statistics jump out: pubs in the UK contribute more than £34 billion in gross value to our economy and the sector supports more than a million jobs, an increase of more than 100,000 since before the pandemic. In my constituency of Bromsgrove, there are 73 pubs and two breweries, which together support 2,800 jobs, generate £30 million in tax revenue and contribute £95 million to the local economy. In short, those pubs are vital for keeping money within the Bromsgrove economy.

I would like to raise some points about Labour's proposals, including the lack of clarity about future support, the employment law reform, and the outdoor smoking ban. The Bell and Cross pub in Clent wrote to me to highlight the difficulties that it continues to face in the current operating environment, under the most extreme trading conditions that it has ever seen. Like so many pubs, it wants the Government to commit to extending the business rates relief until the outdated business rates system is fully reformed and VAT on all sales in pubs is reduced. That would allow pubs to thrive as essential and unique venues in towns, high streets and villages across the UK. The Bell and Cross is also concerned about the obligations that the Employment Rights Bill will place upon it, and how the Bill could deter employment into the sector.

I want to put on record my concern about the effects of a potential ban on smoking in outdoor spaces, including pub gardens. That will be contrary to the spirit of liberty and will displace smoking to other locations.

10.12 am

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): I thank the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for bringing this debate about a very valid and appreciated topic.

It is fortunate that the specifics have already been set out today, because that allows me to keep things at a high level. I would like to ask the Minister to hear the kind of rallying cries that I am hearing from my constituents, which are: "Save the local pub" and "Save the family breweries".

There are two things I would like to ask the Minister to focus on. One is to avoid the pitfalls that come with the counter-intuitiveness of the situation he is in and to recognise that, by increasing tax burdens even further, he would actually end up generating less revenue for the Treasury.

In my constituency of South Basildon and East Thurrock, we only have 23 pubs remaining. We have already touched on the alarming rates at which pubs are closing. One example in my constituency, very close to where I grew up, was The Barge, a 200-year-old pub. It is now gone and it will not come back. Those 23 pubs are raising more than £33 million in revenue for the economy, £10 million of which is going in tax. If the Government keeps burdening them, those pubs will close and the Treasury will receive less money.

Furthermore, people who do want to drink and do want to smoke will continue to do so. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) touched on minimum pricing, but what we are seeing is actually a decrease in people's health. I would like the Minister to be conscious of the dangers of accidentally worsening the situation in terms of both tax and people's health. People will drink if they want to and they will smoke if they want to, but in places where they are not regulated, where it is less safe and where no tax will be generated. We must be mindful of that. I will finish by thanking everyone and saying: save our local pubs.

10.14 am

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. May I also add my thanks to the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for bringing this debate?

As the Member for Carlisle, I can make a unique claim in this debate: the pubs and breweries of Carlisle were, for a period of 50 years, nationalised. What people drank, where they drank it, and when they drank it were determined just up the road from here, in Whitehall. Understanding that rather unusual state of affairs means returning to 1916: war is raging in Europe and just across the border, in Gretna, lies Europe's largest munitions factory. Meanwhile, down the road in Carlisle lies one of the finest collections of pubs and breweries. Sadly, the bounteous supply of both beer and ordnance was not a match made in heaven, and the Government nationalised the pubs in 1916, and so that remained until 1973.

The reason that is relevant today is that when those pubs were privatised, they were sold off in large job lots, which means that, even to this day, the majority of our pubs in Carlisle remain in the ownership of the large breweries. What that means for the independent breweries, such as Great Corby, the Carlisle Brewing Company, West Walls Brewing Co. and the Old Vicarage in Walton, is that getting their product into our pubs is difficult. I therefore urge the Minister to raise with his colleagues the application of the pubs code, so that we can ensure that more of our independent breweries have access to the customers in pubs in all our constituencies.

The final point I would like to make, again, to support our wonderful independent breweries, is that we should consider increasing draft beer relief to 20%, which the Society of Independent Brewers and others estimate would be a huge boost not just to our local businesses but to the whole economy.

10.16 am

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) on obtaining this important debate. We could talk about the economic contribution of our pubs—the £54 billion of tax revenue, the 3.5 million people employed—but ultimately, as many Members have outlined, their main contribution is the community benefits that our pubs bring to all our communities and constituencies. I have 79 pubs in my constituency, not just in our two towns of Grantham and Bourne, but across our postcard-picture villages, such as the Green Man in Ropsley, the Wishing Well in Dyke and very many others that I could go on to mention—possibly to my benefit when I write to them after this speech.

[Gareth Davies]

Those pubs are concerned about the environment that will ensue after the Halloween Budget. They are concerned about the potential national insurance increase, which will break not just Labour's manifesto commitment but many of our pubs. They are concerned about last night's Employment Rights Bill and the increased burdens it will place on them, and they are very concerned about the implications of the outdoor smoking ban. In government, we sought to support pubs as best we could with 75% rates relief. We increased the VAT threshold and did many things, such as the Brexit pubs guarantee, that changed the dynamic of alcohol duty to ensure that the pint in the pub always pays less duty than the can of beer in the supermarket.

The Minister will not be able to speculate on what is in the Halloween Budget, but he should know that we are united in this room today on the need to support our pub sector, not just for the economy but for the communities in our constituencies.

10.18 am

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I represent the city centre of Edinburgh, so it is impossible to overstate the critical contribution of the hospitality sector, not just to the economy of my constituency but to Scotland and the UK as a whole. For example, the Scottish whisky industry produces £7.2 billion for the UK economy every year and, collectively, visits to distilleries in Scotland are the biggest single-ticketed venue in the UK, and those include Holyrood distillery in the centre of my constituency.

The pub sector in Scotland is absolutely critical, generating £2.3 billion in gross value added contributions in Scotland alone and employing 45,000 workers. Tragically, pubs in Scotland are closing at twice the rate of pubs in England. I want to reassure the House that my Scottish Labour colleagues and I are ensuring that the needs and opportunities presented by the whisky and pub sectors in Scotland are being heard right at the heart of this new Government.

I want to touch on a couple of the contributions made by the pub and hospitality sector beyond the economic. The first is tackling loneliness. Loneliness is as big a killer in this country as cancer, and pubs are critical to tackling it in the community. The second is providing career paths, particularly for the young. The contribution that these jobs make to developing the soft skills that we desperately need in the economy is vastly underestimated. I began my career by working for two years in the restaurant of the Hilton hotel in Glasgow, and that taught me a lot of critical life lessons that I use in this place, so it is important that we get the policy dynamics of this right. That includes tax and incentives, but it also includes the obligations we put on the sector.

We must learn from the Scottish experience of the disastrous deposit return scheme, which has been a real challenge for the sector, and the business rates uncertainty created by the SNP Government in Holyrood.

10.20 am

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing this debate on

pubs and the hospitality industry. In my rural constituency of South Northamptonshire, we have 95 pubs and four breweries; they support 1,950 jobs, generate £26 million in tax and contribute £48 million to the local economy. But pubs contribute so much more than that—and I do not just mean the Towcester Mill Brewery in my constituency providing the Strangers Bar with the famous Bell Ringer beer, well known for its zesty orange marmalade notes and earthy, spicy aftertaste.

I was invited to visit The White Hart in Hackleton in my constituency at the end of September to hear at first hand what it is like to run a pub in 2024. Aside from alcohol duty, VAT and business rates, one of the most striking points from the conversation was what it would actually mean for local people, should the pubs be forced to close. We cannot underestimate the power of the community that is created and fostered in rural areas around the local pub. With the lack of bus services and the wider transport issues, pubs are a crucial source of truly local employment for some villages. I was told of one pub that had taken on a local girl with Down's syndrome, who would otherwise have struggled to access employment outside the village due to the lack of transport. For her it was a real lifeline, and she developed not only her resumé but her professional and social skills.

My ask for the sector is that we cut VAT, continue the freeze on alcohol duty and extend the current 75% business rate relief for hospitality businesses. Like me, many hon. Members may enjoy settling down of an evening to watch one of our great British soaps, be it "EastEnders", "Coronation Street" or even "Emmerdale". And what is at the heart of those? The pub. We must make sure that the scriptwriters do not have to change their scenes because we have destroyed this industry.

10.22 am

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I commend you for your chairing of this debate, Ms Vaz, and I commend the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing this debate. I follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), who spoke about the role of the community pub, and the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool), who spoke about the importance of the industry, the challenges it faces and the fact that, when hospitality businesses close, the heart of a community is ripped out. The more rural a community is, the bigger the hole that is left.

When the local pub in my constituency was threatened with closure after its lease was up, the PUB stepped in—People United for Banton, not the bar. The village had already lost its post office and its shop and, with the pub about to be turned into residential accommodation, the community stepped in. It formed a management committee, secured community funding and shareholding, and reopened The Swan, fully renovated, in the middle of the pandemic. It is not just a pub; it is the centre and social hub of the community. It is warm and friendly, and last month I was proud to attend the Macmillan coffee morning in the village, along with local councillors. Nearly £2,000 was raised, which isn't bad for a village of just over 350 people.

We can surely agree that we need a good-quality steak pie—that is really important in my part of the world—good coffee, a nice wee gin, and somewhere to watch the football or dry off after a dog walk. Our pubs are vital.

10.24 am

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing this important debate.

Pubs and hospitality are at the heart of communities such as mine in Mid Bedfordshire, which is home to 157 hospitality businesses that support 2,229 local jobs and contribute £66 million to our local economy. That includes everything from big chains such as Center Parcs to the Woburn Safari Park and the local pubs, of which there are many to choose from, such as The White Hart in Ampthill; The Chequers in Westoning; The Musgrave Arms in Shillington, affectionately known as the Muzzy; or the award-winning Woolpack inn—the Wooly—in Wilstead.

One of the best ways we can encourage people to visit Mid Bedfordshire and boost our local pubs and hospitality is for the Government to do everything they possibly can to support the inward investment by Universal Studios in my constituency. Universal would be a £50 billion gamechanger to our local economy, and the biggest single boost to turbocharge hospitality in Mid Bedfordshire. But beyond Universal, in the short term, our hospitality businesses need support. They need the Government to protect them by maintaining their manifesto commitment not to raise national insurance, recognising that job-creating small business owners in places like Mid Bedfordshire are working people too, and that employers' national insurance is a tax on them. Our pubs and hospitality businesses also need the Government to extend the small business rates relief, ensuring that it is viable for them to continue to serve our communities, and our village pubs need the Chancellor to extend the freeze on alcohol duty.

I will conclude by urging the Government to consider the role of pubs and hospitality in making a place in our communities. Wherever houses are built, hospitality must follow; otherwise we risk building expensive dormitories, rather than places people can be proud to call home.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Last but not least, we have two speakers, so if you could each take a minute and a half, we can get the wind-ups in.

10.26 am

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Chair; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and I thank the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing a very important debate. My constituency of Hexham is home to 116 pubs and nine breweries, spanning 2,200 local jobs, with about 580 of those being worked by people aged between 18 and 24.

I want to start by paying tribute to a lot of those pubs, including The Tannery in Hexham, where I bought my first pint; The Angel of Corbridge, where I went for lunch on Saturday after I went door-knocking; my local, The Crown in Humshaugh; as well as The Falcon in Prudhoe and—particularly—The Samson in Gilsland, which is due to reopen this weekend, having been bought by the community after a longstanding campaign by local people to get their pub back. There are a lot of other pubs I could name, such as The Dipton Mill, Travellers Rest, and The Engine in Walbottle.

Ultimately, these pubs are essential to my local economy. They are essential to so many people and communities in the small towns and villages that dot across the Tyne valley. They are also incredibly important in supporting our tourism sector. Northumberland—as I am sure many hon. Members will be incredibly aware—is probably the most beautiful county in England. We have Hadrian's wall, one of the most iconic sites of these islands, and somewhere that brings people from all around the world to walk. The advantage of having pubs along the length of Hadrian's wall is of course that you can find somewhere to stop after a long and often rain-sodden walk along it.

Ultimately, however, they are the route into employment for so many people in my constituency. They are where people learn to cut their teeth and pick up those soft skills that end up serving us so well in later life and in future professions. It is where people learn their responsibilities, and even how to turn up on time.

I would also like to pay tribute to a lot of the pubs that are sadly no longer open in my constituency. They have left a void in their communities. Ahead of the Minister's remarks, I look forward to hearing what we can do to help communities in future reopen pubs that they have lost.

10.28 am

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Ms Vaz. It is a pleasure and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship. I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing this important debate—important because, like many people who have come before me, I have a constituency with a rich tradition in the world of food and drink. I will save everybody the verbal tour of my constituency and all the pubs, bars and clubs we have all frequented there, but I will say that in the east of England the hospitality and pub scene supports about 250,000 jobs, creates about £2.5 billion of economic value and pays £1.2 billion to the Exchequer every year. It is not just important in terms of economic value and taxes—it supports our critical tourism industry, and within that 11,000 full-time jobs and £700 million in economic value. But there is social value as well—let us not forget the many old people who do not have people to go to at home, who use the pub to speak and have a natter with people in their local community. It also provides an opportunity for young people to get jobs—their first chance to get on the job ladder.

So, why oh why would we take the opportunity to hammer an industry that has been so badly impacted by covid-19, the smoking ban, rates relief, VAT, national insurance contributions, and inhibitive employment rules and regulations, all of which are mad and bad?

In preparing for this speech I came across a quote from Sally, the manager of The Duke in Ipswich, who said:

“All the landlords and ladies I know are in the business to make a living, not a killing!”

So, please let's not push more of them over the edge.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call the Lib Dem spokesperson, Sarah Gibson, to speak.

10.30 am

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz.

I thank the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for securing this important debate and I share his concerns about the issues that the hospitality sector faces. Having a background in architecture and construction, I find myself agreeing with him about the need to reform planning and licensing.

I also share the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) expressed about local village pubs. The land they are located on is so valuable for development that there needs to be stronger legislation to secure community assets.

I thank the hon. Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba) for noting the importance of this sector in creating entry-level jobs. It is clear from the range of constituencies represented here that pubs and hospitality are important from the top of Scotland down to the south coast of England, and of course to Strangford.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) mentioned, we all seem to recognise the challenges that this industry faces, from rising energy costs to supply chain issues to a shortage of staff. Despite the support for the industry across the House, we seem to continue to uphold a broken business rates system that is crippling our local pubs. According to the Campaign for Real Ale, our pubs are overpaying on their rate bills by approximately £500 million a year. Therefore, the Liberal Democrats urge this new Government to boost small businesses in the hospitality industry, such as our locally owned pubs, by abolishing business rates and replacing them with a commercial landowner levy.

The previous Conservative Government promised in their 2019 manifesto to review the business rates system and to ease that tax burden. However, on 17 October 2022, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), told the House that that commitment was:

“Another of the promises I now vainly wish I had not made”.
—[*Official Report*, 17 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 430.]

Businesses are tired of being treated with such cynicism, and I truly hope that this new Labour Government will not treat businesses like that. After all, reforming the rates system is not just about boosting businesses; it is also about saving our local pubs from disappearing completely. In the last three years, 45 pubs in Wiltshire have stopped trading, which is devastating for the economies of small rural communities, such as those in my constituency.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call the Opposition spokesperson, Mike Wood.

10.33 am

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Thank you, Ms Vaz, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to respond to this important debate on behalf of His Majesty's Official Opposition, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) on securing it at such a crucial time for the industry.

Pubs and hospitality are a force for good. They are good for the economy, contributing more than £120 billion nationally and delivering £54 billion in tax receipts to the Treasury, which I am sure the Chancellor will be grateful for next week. They are good for jobs, employing 3.5 million people across every age band, from teenagers to pensioners, and with an even gender balance. They are also good for our communities; our pubs, cafés and restaurants are the heart of local life, bringing people together. Indeed, for many villages the pub or café is the last service surviving in the village, offering a community hub that covers everything from jobs clubs and parents and toddler groups through to serving as the village shop, and even—as I saw at one Pub is The Hub initiative in Cornwall—the hairdressers.

Pubs are a force for good socially, helping to tackle the scourge of loneliness and isolation. Few people could have failed to be moved by the advert for Charlie's Bar last Christmas. It shows an elderly man walking from his house to his wife's grave, raising his cap to passers-by, only to be blanked, but he finds comfort and companionship in his local in Fermanagh.

Less well celebrated are the hundreds of initiatives up and down the country, such as the Go To Place at Love & Liquor in Codsall in my constituency, which brings 60 or more people together each Wednesday morning for a coffee, a chat and a bit of breakfast. Although we are all too familiar with the dangers of excess drinking, well-regulated and well-run pubs and bars are forces for good for our mental health. The work done by Professor Dunbar at Oxford university shows that people who have a local where they drink regularly in moderation are likely to be happier and more content than those who do not. Their physical and mental health is likely to be better than that of people who do not. They are likely to have more friends on whom they can depend and feel more engaged in their community than people who do not.

Pubs and hospitality venues have, of course, faced a range of pressures over the past few decades, some of which have been referred to. Some are the results of changing consumer demands, preferences and social habits, but others have been exacerbated by policy decisions made here in Westminster and Whitehall, such as the smoking ban, high business rate bills, and alcohol duty rates that are significantly higher than most western European countries.

The previous Government took a range of actions to help to alleviate some of those pressures. They abandoned Labour's hated duty escalator, which had meant above-inflation rises in duty every single year. They cut beer duty for the first time in half a century, and introduced multiple freezes in duty, which means that beer duty on a pint in a pub is now significantly lower in real terms than it was in 2010. They introduced a reduced rate of duty for draught beer and cider, taking advantage of the freedoms after Brexit. They helped to reduce the huge disparity in the costs that pubs and bars face, compared with supermarkets and off-licences.

The link between duty rates and alcohol consumption is tenuous, but we know that higher taxes on alcohol lead people to switch their drinking from well-regulated licensed premises to drinking at home, and from drinking lower strength beers and ciders to higher alcohol by volume wines and spirits.

Crucially, hospitality and retail business rate relief has meant that small and independent hospitality venues have received 75% off their business rates. That has made the difference for many between being able to continue and being forced to shut their doors for good.

The new Government made a lot of promises before the election, some of which they now seem to be trying to row back from, but pubs and hospitality need them to deliver now, starting with next week's Budget. The Chancellor needs to start with a cut to alcohol duty. A return to the previous Labour Government's approach of continuous duty rises would be devastating for many pubs and breweries. That could be done by widening the draught beer duty differential, cutting the cost of draught beers and ciders in pubs, bars and restaurants, and targeting support where it is desperately needed. Above all, the Chancellor needs to finally publish her replacement for business rates with a new system that is fair for the hospitality sector, which pays a disproportionate share of business rate receipts—

Jamie Stone: The hon. Gentleman mentions business rates. As the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) said, pubs are closing twice as fast in parts of Scotland than they are on this side of the border. Sir Tim Martin, the boss of Wetherspoons, has in recent days strongly criticised the Scottish Government for their deeply unhelpful attitude to rating. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the finger should be pointed north of the border too, and that something should be done before more pubs close?

Mike Wood: I certainly agree that, although in England the hospitality sector has long had a number of challenges, the picture north of the border is even worse because of decisions made by the Scottish Government.

It is essential that the Chancellor publishes the replacement for business rates. She announced three years ago that she would scrap them, but the sector is still no clearer about what she will bring in instead. It needs clarity next week. If for some reason, even after three years, the Chancellor still cannot say with what she is replacing business rates, she must commit to extending the 75% relief, and not just until next March or the March after but right up until a new system is in place.

Hospitality businesses are particularly impacted by high energy costs. The Government need to make good on the promises to help that they made before the election. The Prime Minister promised to take £53 billion off business energy bills by 2030. I ask the Minister a simple question: how much can hospitality businesses expect their energy bills to fall by next year?

Pubs and hospitality also need the Government to recognise the impact of regulation, no matter how well intentioned, on small hospitality businesses in particular. It was disappointing that neither the Deputy Prime Minister nor the Business Secretary seemed to acknowledge the warnings in their own impact assessment about the harms that could be caused to small businesses in sectors like hospitality by their employment legislation. Those fears are only made worse by reports the Government are considering further regulation, banning smoking in outdoor beer gardens and outside nightclubs. That change would have minimal, if any, health benefits while causing huge damage to venues. It could even

have the perverse effect of shifting people from drinking outside in beer gardens to drinking and smoking more inside their homes.

Finally, as has been said, for the many pubs and hospitality venues that are just about getting by, the reported rise in employer's national insurance contributions could tip many over the edge, making the difference between continuing and closing. If the Chancellor insists on going ahead with this highly damaging jobs tax, then it is even more important that the Government do more to support pubs and hospitality.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire for bringing this debate, because pubs and hospitality are a force for good. They need and deserve our support.

10.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): In the usual way, let me take the opportunity to congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) on securing this debate and celebrating the contribution of pubs to life in his constituency. He rightly talked about the contribution that pubs make to social mobility and the journey all the way up to manager that those who start out as pot washers can potentially make. I noted in particular his praise for the Curzon Arms and I can assure him we will consider that as the campaign stop for when we visit his constituency at the next election to try to increase our majority in this House. He, and I hope the whole House, will understand if I briefly praise pubs in my own constituency—the great Horseshoe, where I have been privileged to watch one or two great victories by the Welsh rugby union team, and the Trinity pub where we have celebrated one or two election successes in recent times.

I will not be able to do justice in the time available to me to the richness of the contributions that we have had, for which I apologise to hon. Members across the House. Notwithstanding, let me try to make one or two points and to pick up some of the specific questions that people have outlined. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) celebrated her constituency's many pubs and venues, some of which I have had the privilege to visit during what seems like Labour's annual trip to her great city. Perhaps she might like to buy me a round when I next have to visit one of those pubs—[HON. MEMBERS: "Freebies!"] [*Laughter.*] Perhaps not, then.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) referenced the Labour in Vain pub in her constituency. I am happy to sit down with her and talk about what else might be possible for that pub. She is right to celebrate community-owned pubs; I suspect that she, like me, comes from the Co-operative tradition in our ranks. The Co-operative party has championed the ambitions of many of our communities to own their own pub.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), in his inimitable way, championed the contribution of pubs to the life of his constituents. I hope I will have the opportunity at some point to come up and take advantage of the hospitality there. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) rightly praised the contribution of business improvement districts

[Gareth Thomas]

to supporting the environment around pubs. The business improvement district in my constituency does a particularly important job working with the police to tackle antisocial behaviour, and I know that work is replicated in business improvement districts across the country. He made an ambitious claim that the best kebab in the country is found in his constituency—I wonder whether others might have a slightly different perspective.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), who is unfortunately not in his place, rightly championed the soft skills learned by those who work in the pub trade. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) made an interesting speech—I was not sure quite where it was going to end with the reference to nationalisation, but I look forward to having the opportunity to find out a bit more about the unique history of the pubs in her constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray) underlined the role of pubs in his constituency and the crucial contribution that Scotch whisky makes not only to the Scottish economy, but to the UK economy as a whole. He will know of the work my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security is seeking to do to reduce some of the tariffs that Scotch whisky still faces around the world. If I heard him right, I think my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) promised to visit all 116 pubs in his constituency before the next election.

The hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) referenced previous work she had done with the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and I will reflect on her contribution and the Committee's work outside this House, if I may. I hope to touch on the contributions of one or two other hon. Members as I make my way through some of the broader points, where appropriate.

This debate is important because our pubs and the wider hospitality sector are crucial to the UK economy, employing around 2.2 million people across 154,000 businesses and generating revenues of around £52 billion per annum.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He is making some important points about the employment generated by the sector. Does he agree that in areas such as North Norfolk, with a huge hospitality industry, greater training opportunities are vital to allow people to have full and flourishing careers in the hospitality sector? Are the Government supportive of extending that franchise?

Gareth Thomas: I congratulate the hon. Member on getting his constituency's pubs into the debate. I look forward to having the opportunity to visit one or two of those in his constituency again. I will come back to the significant point about training, on which I hope we will have some good news for the pubs in his constituency and more generally.

Pubs and hospitality venues are important to local economies. They help to create vibrant towns and cities that we all want to visit, to study, work, live and invest. Pubs help us to celebrate the very essence of life and friendship, to socialise with family and friends, to enjoy

music and great sport, and to celebrate the important points in life's journey. They are crucial to supporting wider social objectives: providing accessible jobs, as other Members have already touched on, helping to support community cohesion and providing welcoming spaces for those who feel isolated and alone to enjoy the company of others.

In short, hospitality is the backbone of our high streets and the lifeblood of so many of our communities. We all know that hospitality businesses are still struggling. At the weekend, the *Yorkshire Post* published a survey suggesting some 500 pubs had closed in Yorkshire since 2019, which is just one indication of the challenges facing the pub and hospitality industry.

Jamie Stone: I value the Minister's words. Does he accept my earlier point that those businesses could do with getting the eastern European and foreign workers they used to have?

Gareth Thomas: I heard the point the hon. Gentleman made, and I want to come to the issue of access to talent to work in pubs and hospitality venues. While we always need to consider issues around visas and the right to work, we can do more to help people in our country to get access to jobs in the pubs and hospitality industry. The point I intend to make in relation to the intervention by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) is pertinent to that.

As I said, we all know that hospitality businesses are struggling to recover from the pandemic, where closures and customer restrictions decimated cash reserves and drove up levels of debt. I say this gently with so many Conservative Members present, but the subsequent cost of living crisis, which was driven in part by the incompetence of previous Governments, has compounded the challenge for hospitality businesses and increased costs, and it has caused real difficulties and challenges for businesses in repaying some of those debts. One thinks in particular of the contribution Liz Truss made to those issues.

Robbie Moore: I am sure the Minister will get to it, but I am really keen to understand some of the specifics of what he is doing in his role as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade. What is the nature of his conversations with the Chancellor and the Treasury, specifically around business rates relief, VAT threshold, VAT duty, beer duty and the concerns raised by the likes of UK Hospitality with the Employment Rights Bill? I am sure he is getting there, but this side of the House is keen to understand what he is doing in his role in the conversations with the Chancellor on the forthcoming Budget.

Gareth Thomas: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the prompt to get on to the issues around the Budget next week. He will understand, as one or two of his colleagues alluded to earlier, that I will not speculate on what will or will not be included in the Chancellor's Budget. However, I can say that we recognise the very important role that hospitality businesses play in supporting local economies and communities, and we understand the pressures facing those businesses. When we were in Opposition, one of the biggest complaints we heard from high street businesses was the unfairness of the antiquated system of business rates. I apologise to him—I appreciate it is difficult to hear—but I think

one of the reasons his party lost the confidence of the business community was because it had made multiple promises to abolish or reform the business rates system, but never actually got to that issue.

Business rates are particularly unfair for hospitality, leisure and tourism businesses which, as others have alluded to, create 5% of the UK's GDP but pay 15% of all business rates. Not only is the current system of business rates unfair, but we know that it disincentivises investment, creates uncertainty and places an undue burden on our highstreets, and in the context of this debate, on pubs and hospitality and venues. That is why we included in our manifesto a commitment to reform business rates, and it is why the Chancellor has continued to commit to setting out next steps on that at the next Budget.

Esther McVey: I would like to take away some comfort and be able to speak with my pub owners and pub landlords. Will the Minister commit today to speaking to the Chancellor about business rates before the Budget next week? I want him just to confirm that he will be making the representations from today's debate to the Chancellor before the Budget.

Gareth Thomas: I am happy to confirm to the right hon. Lady and the whole House that I will ensure that the Treasury and the Chancellor are aware of the comments made in this debate. She will understand that crucial to the future of pubs and the hospitality industry is getting growth going in our country—in particular, getting more disposable income into the pockets of potential customers of pubs and other hospitality venues.

That is one reason the Prime Minister has made growth the number one mission of the Government. It is why we have already taken a series of steps to underline the significance of growth, from publishing a Green Paper on industrial strategy through to the success of the investment summit last week. It is also why we have introduced the package of measures to make work pay, including the Employment Rights Bill, which the House debated yesterday.

I want to pick up one or two specific points hon. Members made, in particular the reference by the hon. Member for North Norfolk to training. He may know that there has been much frustration across the business community, including from pubs and hospitality businesses, about how the apprenticeship levy works. We have committed to reforming that levy and to giving more focus to the skills needs of businesses.

That is one reason we have already established Skills England, which will have a new partnership with employers at its heart and will transform the existing apprenticeship

levy into a more flexible growth and skills levy, to support business and boost opportunities for those living and working in the UK—something the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) will be pleased to hear.

Interventions from the hon. Gentleman, my hon. Friends the Members for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) and for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh and the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) provide me with an opportunity to suggest gently that the Scottish Government might want to think again about their decision not to pass on the business rate relief to pubs that the Treasury in London sends them—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. Could the Minister start winding up his remarks?

Gareth Thomas: Lastly, Ms Vaz, Ofgem has announced a series of measures to protect non-domestic energy customers from poor behaviour by energy suppliers, which I hope will address some of the concerns that we heard on that issue.

Mike Wood: On a point of order, Ms Vaz. I should have drawn attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests before I spoke. I hope you will help me to get that on the record.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Yes, thank you. I call Peter Bedford to wind up.

10.58 am

Mr Bedford: I thank the many hon. Members who contributed to today's debate. We certainly had lots of recommendations for pubs and hospitality venues across the United Kingdom.

Members who have heard the Minister's response may be a little frustrated that we have not quite got the answers we wanted, particularly in respect of reforms to business rate relief, VAT, the apprenticeship levy, planning and licensing, or a commitment on national insurance and beer duty. I hope the Minister will make representations to the Chancellor and the Treasury to ensure that that vital aspect of support is implemented by the Government. In closing, I ask that the Chancellor, in her upcoming Budget, implements policies that will not hinder the sector, but enable it to flourish and grow.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for pubs and the hospitality sector.

Renewable Energy: Cornwall

11 am

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I will call Jayne Kirkham to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for a 30-minute debate.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the development of renewable energy in Cornwall.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. To achieve net zero by 2030, Britain needs Cornwall. If I get anything across in the next 15 minutes, I want everyone in this room to leave with full knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, the vast and unique scale of the opportunity in Cornwall for a large-scale, thriving renewable energy sector that creates skilled jobs, brings social value to local people and generates clean energy, helping us to meet that 2030 target. It is a challenge that will require both hands to grasp, but that does not faze the people of Cornwall, who have known a rich industrial past and do not need convincing of the positives of a new industrial future.

Our riches are plentiful and unique. They are buried under our rock, under the waves that surround our 400 miles of coast, in our harsh, whistling south-westerly winds and from our come-and-go solar rays. Harnessing those riches has not always been easy, but if industrialism literally runs through the Cornish landscape, in the tin-rich veins that pass through our granite, resourcefulness runs through the blood of the Cornish. Our geography and landscape are unique and fundamental to our potential. We are surrounded on three sides by the sea, in particular the Celtic sea, which has a great water depth—Falmouth is the third deepest harbour in the world. We are sitting on globally significant mineral deposits, and our granite holds the heat of geothermal energy.

Around 37% of Cornwall's electricity is currently generated from renewable sources, and the renewable sector already exists here: it is cutting-edge, thriving and leads the way nationally and internationally. But it is nowhere near the scale that we need to make the most of the opportunities that exist.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. As she has outlined, it is clear that we need Cornwall to achieve net zero. But it is also worth remembering that the Secretary of State said in the Chamber that this is an object for every part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Many other constituencies need to contribute as well. The hon. Lady puts forward Cornwall; will she also remember other parts of the United Kingdom?

Jayne Kirkham: The hon. Gentleman is quite correct. My point is that Cornwall has some catching up to do with other parts of the country, but I am aware that other parts of the UK are in the same situation.

The Secretaries of State for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and for the Department for Business and Trade visited my constituency and that of

my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon), earlier this year, and met businesses with solutions in the marine, geo, tidal and wind spheres. The breadth of the innovation in Cornwall is huge. However, the sector needs investment along with the ambition and determination, and a long-term strategy from Government to make that vision a reality.

Under the previous Government, there was a de facto ban on onshore wind. Of planning applications for onshore wind turbines over 150 kW in Cornwall since January 2015, only one was successful in planning and has since become operational. I am very pleased that one of the first things this Government did was to end that ban on onshore wind. Community energy projects did not receive much support from the previous Government either. The rural community energy fund was only open from 2019 to 2022, and there were no new funding sources for urban community energy projects after that, except from local government.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way and for the case she is making today. I fully endorse everything she has said. She mentioned the previous Government's effective ban on onshore wind: does she agree that the Conservative Government also scrapped sustainable homes regulations and other regulations, setting us back many years? We have a lot of time to make up. In Cornwall especially, there is significant enthusiasm to accelerate the pace so that we can become the green peninsula and be recognised for that throughout the UK.

Jayne Kirkham: I thank the hon. Member. That is true particularly around standards on homes, where our local solutions for ground source heating could have been made more of in the past and have obviously now been delayed for that reason.

The feed-in tariffs introduced by the previous Labour Government were reduced several times by the last Government and then finally ended in 2019. Despite that, the community energy sector is resilient and has continued to grow. In my constituency, Ladock won the low carbon communities challenge, and Low Carbon Ladock was given £500,000 under one of the last Governments, which it invested in solar panels on homes, biomass boilers, and ground-source and air-source heat systems. It has been able to put the profits into things for the community, such as safer school crossings, playing fields and more renewables.

The current state of play in Cornwall is that there are 104 wind turbines, 88 solar projects and two operational geothermal sites. Twenty-two projects have been granted planning permission in 2023-24 to date, including one geothermal, one onshore wind, eight battery and 12 solar photovoltaic projects. A further 22 projects have submitted planning applications in 2023-24, three of which are geothermal, four onshore wind, six battery and nine solar.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the time to act in Cornwall is right now? We have the US State Department, which is very interested in our renewable opportunities, and representatives from France coming to Cornwall. It would be a crying shame if our Government did not use the advantages available to make Cornwall a renewable energies cluster.

Jayne Kirkham: I agree that the opportunities are vast. We have all heard incredible enthusiasm from the Secretary of State for DESNZ in particular about grasping those opportunities for Cornwall with both hands. I am pleased that that will hopefully happen.

We already know and recognise the potential for wind and solar in Cornwall. The Duchy benefits from regular south-westerly winds, which would complement those in other parts of the country. Solar has its place as well. Much of it in my constituency at present is comprised of large solar farms that cluster around the spot where the power supply is broken down into smaller distribution networks. That is only halfway down Cornwall at Indian Queens. The community benefits of those schemes are mixed, and developers have tended to focus on agricultural land that has previously been used for crops—grade 3b land, which is used for potatoes, cauliflowers and daffodils among other things.

We have geothermal solutions as well, both grid-connected with contracts for difference in place and planning permissions, such as for Geothermal Engineering Ltd, and offgrid, such as Kensa heat pumps, which I mentioned earlier. At present, there are two deep geothermal wells with the potential for three more on council farms. Geothermal is a base source producing energy day and night, and whichever way the wind blows, and the 190° water that comes out of the wells has a great scope to heat homes.

It is worth noting that there is significant Cornish capability for developing tidal streams in the UK, Europe and beyond, such as Inyanga Marine Energy Group in my constituency. There is rising demand for clean energy from critical industries such as the tech metals industry and from new communities in my constituency, such as the build of Langarth garden village.

Cornwall is blessed to have resources of tin, lithium and geothermal heat that are simply not available anywhere else. Tin is used in the manufacture of virtually every single electrical device that we use, and it is crucial to our transition to a fossil-free economy. Demand for tin over the past decade or so has driven prices even higher—so much so that is now commercially viable to reopen some of our historical mines. Investment is already coming into Cornwall, most demonstrably at South Crofty mine, where pumping out water from the flooded mine chamber is already well underway, and that of course uses an awful lot of energy.

Lithium, which is a vital component of electric vehicle batteries, is another critical mineral that we have in abundance in Cornwall. We currently import 100% of our lithium, and yet Cornwall has the largest lithium deposits in Europe. We have enough to extract 50,000 tonnes per year. Those critical minerals are currently imported from east Asia and Latin America, where they are mined in a hugely damaging way. The process in Cornwall is completely different. There is a great story to tell here: we have a way to feed the new battery factory in Somerset and to give a shot in the arm to our automotive industry without being reliant on foreign imports in a more dangerous geopolitical environment.

Floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea is the next frontier in the UK's clean energy transition. We are positioned to unlock up to 4 GW of power by 2035, which is enough to power 4 million homes. There are huge opportunities here for Cornwall, as the Celtic sea is all around us. The ambition to put floating offshore

wind in the Celtic sea, where it would complement other offshore arrays, and the opportunities that would arise from it for Cornwall to expand supply chains, the economy and the number of good, skilled jobs are vast.

However, to be brutal, ambition is so far all that it is. Test and demonstration models are planned and ready to go—smaller, non-commercial pilot projects that prove the technology works to give confidence to investors—but the most ready is stalled by too low a price from previous contracts for difference rounds, while others are stalled by planning issues.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): We know the Cornish economy to be more dependent on small and medium-sized enterprises than elsewhere in the UK; the same is true of the supply chain for our great, burgeoning renewable energy industry. Does my hon. Friend agree that the organs of industrial strategy must be attuned to the need for building a supply chain based on those SMEs and the very specific needs of those growth businesses?

Jayne Kirkham: Absolutely—scaling up and providing the skills that are required need to be done extremely quickly. It is a race against time to remove the barriers and kick-start those projects; then, the Crown Estate, the Government and GB Energy must work together to provide a feasible timeline of contracts for difference and leasing rounds, as well as doing the groundwork by investing in the surveys and the infrastructure, such as cabling and the grid, so that investors will come on board.

Our Cornish ports and harbours, such as Falmouth, are well placed to support floating offshore wind, with well-established marine engineering solutions, servicing, assembly and maintenance. They also have a huge role to play in decarbonising shipping and defence.

This Government have already ended the de facto ban on onshore wind, and have plans for doubling onshore wind, trebling solar and quadrupling offshore wind, as well as reforming the planning system. With Cornish Lithium's Hard Rock plant recently designated a nationally significant site of strategic infrastructure, planning could be streamlined and fast-tracked. GB Energy has been working with the Crown Estate to invest in the infrastructure that will make floating offshore wind happen and provide the certainty to draw in investment. Our new local power plan will provide £3.3 billion for grants and loans for those local energy projects—the biggest expansion in community-owned energy in history. This will enable communities to own—in the real sense—the energy they rely on and allow local authorities, such as Cornwall, to exploit the energy sources on our doorstep, like the geothermal assets on council land that could be heating homes.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech in which she is once again standing up for her communities and clean power. Does she agree that the cost of living crisis—the worst in a generation, driven by the energy shock—will cast a long shadow for as long as we remain exposed to fossil fuels, and that we must embrace British-based nuclear and Cornwall renewables? The faster we go, the more secure we become. On the point about ground source heat pumps, can she say a little about Kensa, which

[Tom Hayes]

manufactures heat pumps in Cornwall? I was privileged to see its heat pumps last week at the Sutton Dwellings in Chelsea. They are an amazing technology.

Jayne Kirkham: Yes, of course. I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to that business, which is on the edge of my constituency. I agree that we have to embrace all sorts of energy sources—the urgency is definitely there. Kensa is one of the largest manufacturers of ground source heat pumps in Europe, but it is currently stymied by regulation and the future homes standard. Hopefully it will be able to grow in the future.

Big challenges still remain. We need to get ready for floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea; there is a risk of places such as Cornwall losing out if we are not prepared. The grid network unites renewables businesses in Cornwall because of the capacity of the distribution network, which is a key barrier and constraint to growth. There is a lack of capacity and a slow speed, and the main grid stops at Indian Queens, which is only half-way into Cornwall. We need to upgrade those transmission and distribution networks. There are significant delays to accessing grid connections for projects such as onshore charging, the energy required by the potential new Kensa factory, and tin and lithium mining.

The National Energy System Operator is newly nationalised. There will be a connections action plan to decrease the time it takes to get connected to the grid. We will need to front-load the work, do the surveys, and lay the cables to plug in all those power sources. There is currently no strategic national plan for that infrastructure.

Vital plans to lay floating offshore wind cables, and the previous Government's miserly £160 million FLOWMIS—the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme—fund for ports, were awarded with no national strategy in place. The current Government has a £1.8 billion ports fund, which is welcome. However, the French Government have just put €900 million into the port of Brest—that is the equivalent of half our entire national ports fund for the next ten years invested in just one French port. We need a coherent plan for our ports.

One of the test and demonstration models is being held up by planning, as are other projects. We need to look at planning, as well as at the huge number of skilled workers who are needed but lacking for renewables in the energy sector and to retrofit for the warm homes plan.

The Crown Estate has partnered with Falmouth marine school to pay for children aged 14 to 16 from Helston community college to receive level 2 engineering training in the sphere of offshore wind. That is a pilot; there is no ongoing funding. It is great, but it will not address the massive skills gap. We need a huge scale-up. We have great local further education providers—Truro and Penwith college and Cornwall college—but they need the ability to scale up in conjunction with the industry.

There is no national oversight of the map around the country of floating offshore wind for the future, no timescale for “test and demos”, and no pipeline of contracts with the Crown Estate to build the Celtic sea out so that the investors have certainty. We can use contractual tie-ins with the lease, and we can use

procurement, but national coordinated action is needed now. We also need new domestic production targets for critical minerals.

We are ready to be the multi-renewable power production capital of the UK. It is a vision of vast scale, which is not without challenges, but it shows that Cornwall is crucial because of what we offer, rather than what we need. It is time for us to step up and become the multi-renewable power production capital of the UK.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) for securing this debate and the other Members for their contributions. It is good to see a clean sweep of new MPs in Cornwall, although my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) is a familiar face from days gone by. The passion of hon. Members for the region shines through, and all six MPs are brilliant advocates for Cornwall's sheer potential.

I want to note the recent letter from the four Labour MPs in Cornwall to the Minister for Industry, the hon. Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones), concerning the need for investment in the county. As the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth mentioned, the Minister for Industry and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade have visited the region recently. I know that both are aware of the county's incredible potential for economic and industrial growth. I understand that the four MPs will be meeting my colleague, the Minister for Industry, very soon to discuss the issues raised in the letter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth will be aware that one of the Prime Minister's five missions for national renewal is making Britain a clean energy superpower, including delivering clean power by 2030 and accelerating to net zero. As has been mentioned, we have wasted no time in getting started. Within our first 100 days in government, we lifted the onshore wind ban in England, consented to more nationally significant solar projects than had been consented to in the past 14 years, and delivered the most successful renewables auction in British history. Now we are busy setting up Great British Energy, which will drive clean energy deployment, creating jobs, boosting energy independence and ensuring that UK taxpayers, bill payers and communities reap the benefits of clean, secure, home-grown energy. As we heard, Cornwall has a vital role to play in that clean energy mission, and indeed our mission to secure economic growth.

Cornwall may be primarily known as a tourist destination these days, but it has a proud industrial past. It was once known as the mining capital of the world, with tin mining and clay, and was where Richard Trevithick invented the high-pressured steam engine. As much as tourism is welcomed in Cornwall, we know that it puts pressure on the local infrastructure and economy, particularly the housing supply, which then has a knock-on effect on public services in the area.

From meeting local businesses in Cornwall when I went down with the now Chief Secretary to the Treasury last year, I know that there is excitement about the opportunities offered by Cornwall's huge industrial potential from wind, geothermal, lithium and more.

Great work is already being done through the continuing development of a local area energy plan in Cornwall and Isles of Scilly, and the Government are doing what they can to support the region too. Last September, three geothermal projects, all located in Cornwall, were successful in our contracts for difference auction for the first time, with contracts totalling 12 MW of generation. As part of my visit to Cornwall last year, I also went to see some of the exciting work that the Eden Project is doing on geothermal.

Critical minerals have been mentioned as an important area for future industrial development. Cornwall has some of the largest critical mineral deposits, with research showing that the county alone could meet more than half the UK's 2030 demand for lithium, which is an essential part of the electric vehicle battery supply chain. As we transition to a renewables-based economy, the demand for critical minerals will only grow, and I note the concerns that have been raised about current sourcing and the need to diversify supply. Indeed, Cornwall is home to at least three of the 18 critical minerals, and I hope that local MPs, in the meeting with my hon. Friend the Minister for Industry, can further discuss how we can take advantage of all that Cornwall has to offer on that front.

The county is perfectly placed to take advantage because of its strong mining heritage—I was interested to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth said about the potential for reopening tin mines—as well as a growing supply chain, skilled workforce and supportive local government. It has the support of national Government too. In 2023, the UK Infrastructure Bank's first equity deal was an equity investment of approximately £24 million to support Cornish Lithium in the development of the UK's critical minerals supply chain.

One of the most exciting areas with huge potential is the floating offshore wind that my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth talked about, which would enable turbines to be set up where the seabed is too deep for traditional fixed-bottom turbines. A new report from the floating offshore wind taskforce says that the UK's floating wind industry will be able to support 97,000 jobs by 2050, contributing £47 billion to our economy, and we want Cornwall to have a proper stake in that via the Celtic sea.

I reassure Members present that we want to do all we can to support floating wind infrastructure and supply chains to develop the Celtic sea, to ensure that we get the floating wind pipeline built and bring jobs and growth to the area. As part of leasing round 5, the Crown Estate has launched a £10 million supply chain accelerator fund, focused on capturing some of the economic opportunities identified by the Celtic sea blueprint. A further £40 million has been earmarked, which could be deployed on further opportunities nationally.

More broadly speaking, Members present will know that last week, the Chancellor announced that the UK Infrastructure Bank is becoming the national wealth fund. Capitalised with £27.8 billion, it will have additional financial capacity and an enhanced risk budget, as well as an expanded remit beyond infrastructure in support of the Government's industrial strategy. At least £5.8 billion of the national wealth fund's capital will focus on priority sectors, including ports infrastructure, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth will be pleased to hear.

Also last week, we published in a Green Paper our vision for a modern industrial strategy—Invest 2035. That is a credible 10-year plan to deliver the certainty and stability that businesses need to invest in high-growth sectors. It will help us create a pro-business environment and support high-potential clusters across the country. It will channel support to eight growth-driving sectors, including clean energy industries, and it will support those sectors to create high-quality, well paid jobs across the country, backed by employment rights fit for a modern economy.

If the plan is to be a success, it needs to be designed and implemented in lockstep with local and regional leaders. That is particularly important in places such as Cornwall, where we are looking at reindustrialisation to an extent, rather than building on current industrial clusters. We will explore how to build on existing place-based initiatives, how to create the best pro-business environment possible in city regions and high-potential clusters, and how to identify, select and intervene in industrial sites to make them magnets for globally mobile investment.

As I said, unlocking Cornwall's potential is slightly different from going into other areas. That is absolutely key. Planning was mentioned; we must undo some of the blockages in the planning system. In relation to the grid, I very much remember, from when I visited, the knock-on impact of the fact that the transmission line goes only as far as Indian Queens. Until we create the grid infrastructure to cover the right areas and provide sufficient capacity, we cannot deliver on Cornwall's potential. I think that one of the things holding the Eden Project back with its geothermal work was that it could not get that broader grid connection. The former chief executive of the Climate Change Committee, Chris Stark, has been put in charge of the mission board, and one of his key tasks is to bring in a more strategic approach to grid planning, speed it up and stop those blockages that mean that projects just do not get off the ground because they are stuck in that system.

Skills are also a very important issue, on which I hope we can have continued engagement. I think I am due to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth next week to follow up on some of these issues. I want to reassure her and colleagues that our doors are always open, in terms of discussing these things, and I will return to my original point that I share the excitement that Cornwall has huge potential. I think we want a more balanced economy—

Perran Moon: Looking at Cornwall, we have mentioned floating offshore wind, onshore wind, geothermal, tidal, solar, lithium, tin and manganese. Can the Minister name anywhere else in the UK where there is such a distillation of critical minerals and renewable energy opportunities? I am very excited by what she said about the cluster concept. Would not Cornwall be an ideal place to be an official cluster for renewables and critical minerals?

Kerry McCarthy: I am not sure that we quite have an official badge of cluster; we just have clusters, but yes, I think Cornwall is different in terms of the geography and the current use of the land and we have to approach it in a sensitive way, and one in which we might not have to approach areas that currently are perhaps transitioning from traditional fossil fuel industries to the clean industries

[Kerry McCarthy]

of the future. This area is bringing something that, to an extent, is genuinely buried in the land—the industrial heritage there. It has so much potential. The question is how we can work across Departments, starting with my own, DESNZ, but also bringing in other Departments that can unlock that potential. I am sure that the brilliant advocates that there are in the region will all be pushing, and I really hope that we can see swift progress, because clean power by 2030 is such an important part of the Government's mission and I do not think we can do it without Cornwall playing its part.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Whistleblowing Protections

[SIR MARK HENDRICK *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered protections for whistleblowing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for today's debate, Sir Mark. This week is Whistleblower Awareness Week, so it is a very timely debate, and one that is long overdue. For as long as there has been misconduct in public activity, there have been brave individuals willing to put their head above the parapet and highlight a problem. There have been brave individuals who have sought to shine a light on the dark recesses of corruption, and those who have said, "Up with this I will not put."

We would normally think of those people as whistleblowers. We would think of them as being protected in some way, because we talk about protection for whistleblowers as if it is some sort of universal activity. It has, however, been shown to me, as somebody who is relatively new to the world of whistleblowing, that depending on how someone blows the whistle, on their relationship with the organisation about which they are highlighting a problem, and on the way in which they disclose that information, they could or could not be a whistleblower. I shall focus on that today. I shall also talk about the positive steps that the new Government have already committed to, and where I think there is an opportunity for further development of protections for whistleblowing. I will talk about a solution to some of the problems, which I know that people who are interested in the subject are particularly concerned about.

Over the last couple of decades, we have witnessed many problems, challenges and scandals. Those that are timely and pertinent today include the Horizon Post Office scandal, the infected blood scandal, the tragedy of Grenfell, and the scandal of personal protective equipment NHS contracts and public waste. We often talk about whistleblowing after the event, after somebody has said, "This is a problem and we should do something about it." The problem that leaves is that the damage is already done. We then have to say to those people that although they are doing the right thing, it could come at considerable personal cost and detriment to their character and standing. Ultimately, because of the way in which the current law is written, it could be boiled down to a dispute that ends up in an employment tribunal focusing on the relationship between the whistleblower and the organisation they are highlighting concern about, rather than the act that they were raising concern about in the first place. That leaves a whole series of problems that we need to address. I think there is a way of doing that through new laws, which I will talk about slightly later on in my remarks.

Like many of my colleagues here this afternoon, I come from a trade union background. Too often, whistleblowers end up in a situation akin to the blacklisting of trade union officials. People are willing to stand up and say the right thing, but then find themselves penalised within their sector and get labelled as the bad apple, the troublemaker or the person who has all too often tried to agitate and cause concern, when they are simply seeking to highlight something that is bad and wrong.

That puts them at great risk, because the question then becomes, “Do I speak up?” Do they speak up about the bad thing that they see happening? Do they draw attention to misconduct or dereliction of public duty, or do they quietly get along with their job and life and keep their head down? The existing protections for whistleblowers do not give people the confidence to stand up and make that declaration, because of fear for their livelihood, job prospects, career and family. It is often a case of David versus Goliath, where an individual has bravely put their head above the parapet and said, “This is a problem.” Suddenly, the entire resources of large organisations are brought to bear against them.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) on obtaining this important debate on whistleblowing, under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I know from speaking recently to a couple of constituents who are whistleblowers that part of the fear of speaking up, which my hon. Friend rightly highlights, is the imbalance of power between public institutions and the individual whistleblower.

The costs, as my hon. Friend said, are heavy on the individual. They can obviously be emotional, due to the stress of these processes. They can also be financial, when the individual tries to maintain their reputation against the full force of public institutions defending themselves and taking the matter through the courts. Those institutions have full access to public funds, which costs the taxpayer a lot.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister’s promise of a duty of candour could be a step forward in changing that imbalance of power between public institutions and whistleblowers? Hopefully, in time, if the public sector takes that duty of candour seriously, we can reduce the need for whistleblowers to call things out.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I remind Members that interventions are supposed to be brief.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) is absolutely right. We will not mention individual cases today, but we all know of individuals who have struggled doughtily against the huge available resources of large international corporations—public sector bodies in some cases—that have sought to use the weight and resource available to them, through their lawyers and HR departments, issuing threats and intimidation, to prevent people pursuing things they have seen and done that they know to be wrong. The organisations would rather spend that energy, time, money and effort on dismissing the whistleblower’s concern than put that resource into remedying the situation. The way my hon. Friend explained that was first class.

I want to talk about something that I found out relatively recently, as part of my work with WhistleblowersUK. I did not know that to be a whistleblower, the person has to be engaged in an employment role. I genuinely believed that the whistleblowing policies of organisations that someone had an attachment to would protect them if they saw something going wrong. I thought that if someone saw something they believed was bad—such as corruption, malfeasance, misconduct—and did the right thing by standing up and calling it out, as we all say we should, they would be protected, but they are not.

If a patient in hospital sees something, they are not protected. If a parent sees something wrong with a school, college, university or one of the many organisations their children might interact with, they are not protected. If someone is a school governor, although they have various requirements under safeguarding legislation, they are actually exposed in a way they might not be if they were employed. The contractual arrangements for contractors on site, who see the way that organisations work, would not provide protection. That is a glaring, gaping hole in protections, which we need to tackle.

That means that, when somebody does have the fortitude to stand up and say, “This is wrong,” it often ends up in an employment tribunal. The focus then is on the process by which the whistleblower raised the complaint and the detriment that individual may have incurred; it does not deal with the issue about which they were raising a flag. Again, that allows organisations to shift the emphasis and the attention of their own internal processes to that relationship rather than focusing on the issue that was raised. I think the Minister would agree that that needs to change.

The Minister knows that the new Government have made commitments, particularly through the Duty of Candour Bill, to make sure that individuals who have responsibilities in certain organisations and areas have a duty—a clear duty—to stand up and say, “This is wrong.” There also needs to be protection for that individual, so that when they comply with their new duty of candour responsibilities they can also be protected from detriment, regardless of the way in which they make that declaration to somebody who they believe can do something about it. At the moment, they are horribly exposed, which means there is a disincentive for them to do the right thing. It also means that we end up with people who, for a quiet life, would rather dismiss what they see than stand up.

It was only last night, when we were debating the Employment Rights Bill, that the Deputy Prime Minister said, in relation to the new sexual harassment arrangements for whistleblowers in the Bill:

“If they do the right thing and speak up about sexual harassment, the law will protect them.” —[*Official Report*, 21 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 53.]

I believe that should apply to anybody who is speaking up to highlight any problem, and not just to those who are employees where they see sexual harassment.

I welcome the fact that the Government have started a conversation about this issue and that they have taken steps, through the Employment Rights Bill, to remedy some of the deficiencies in our employment legislation. However, I return to my point: this needs to be about more than employment. It needs to be about the way we treat anyone who is willing to stand up, have their say and point out wrongdoing.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade was also quite clear last night when he summed up the debate on the Employment Rights Bill, saying:

“Protection for whistleblowers is a day one right.” —[*Official Report*, 21 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 140.]

I am glad that we are putting that into legislation, but I say again that it only applies to those people who are whistleblowing in an employment-related context. We need

[Gareth Snell]

to make sure that that “day one right” of protection applies to anyone who blows the whistle anywhere in the UK.

Obviously, there has been progression. The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 made some progress. However, I think it is fair to say that, in and of itself, its time has probably passed, and that there is a need to reconsider seriously how to improve the opportunities for whistleblowers to make declarations in a way that they are comfortable with and that protects them, so that people who see wrongdoing have the confidence to stand up and point it out as a preventive measure, as much as a curative measure after the event.

From my trade union days, I know that my hon. Friend the Minister did admirable work on this issue before he came to this place. Where someone has the confidence that they can speak truth to power, they can stop bad things from happening in the first place. When someone has the confidence that they will be listened to and protected, that encourages people to come forward and highlight problems before there is that horrible accident at work or that social tragedy, or before an act of misconduct costs the state hundreds, thousands and in some cases millions of pounds, which is obviously money that we can ill afford to lose after the inheritance we received from the previous Government.

How can we make the situation better? I ask that question because I genuinely believe that if we are to have this kind of debate, we should talk not only about what the problems are but about how we can make things better. Later in this Parliament I hope to introduce a new version of the Protection for Whistleblowing Bill—a Bill that will comprehensively rewrite the current rules and regulations around whistleblowing. First of all, it will comprehensively define what a whistleblower is, because at the moment that is a point of debate, and because it is a point of debate we end up in litigation and arbitration, with individuals finding that they have to justify why they made a disclosure in the first place rather than everyone focusing on what the disclosure was. We absolutely need to find a way of moving away from that situation.

Such a Bill would also create a statutory power to protect whistleblowers from detriment. I say, again with my trade union hat on, that we all know that financial recompense for suffering a detriment is the only way we can remedy such detriment, but that person has still suffered a detriment; they have still had a loss as a result of their whistleblowing. So, we need to find a way to prevent the loss in the first place.

The Bill would be able to look at how we do compensation and would have a statutory power to investigate and award penalties. Importantly, it would create the office of the whistleblower. The idea of such an office is neat and clear and something that my party has previously committed to in other debates and votes. The office would be able to put that comforting arm around people who blow the whistle, regardless of where or how they blow it. It would allow parity between those large organisations, or the state, with their HR departments, lawyers and resources, and an organisation and office that acts as a friend, support and neutral crutch on which the whistleblower could lean. All too often being a whistleblower takes its toll on that person's

family, and it can be lonely and scary. An office of the whistleblower would allow that burden to be shared with an organisation, an entity, an office that has an understanding of what the whistleblower is doing and hoping to achieve. It would also be able to look across organisations and spot the patterns. All too often, whistleblowers stand up and make a declaration about something over here, and somebody else will make a declaration over there, but nobody is looking at the patterns and asking, “Is there some underlying issue that we need to address?”

The office of the whistleblower would be responsible for identifying those patterns and generating reports saying whether something untoward might be happening in that organisation, part of the state or public sector body. That would be an important way of bringing that preventive measure to bear so that we can crack down on the waste, corruption and malfeasance. We can ensure that those individuals seeking to corrupt the way they work for their own personal benefit can be highlighted and brought to bear.

Creating the office would require the Government to act. It would require primary legislation as well as the political will to say that we need to catch up with some of our European counterparts who have already moved into this space of having an office of the whistleblower. Crucially, the Minister will be aware that only 18 months ago my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), when she was shadowing the brief that the Minister now holds, clearly committed the Labour party to supporting an office of the whistleblower. The Labour party supported an amendment to the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 that would have created an office of the whistleblower. I appreciate that the Minister cannot make a commitment from his position today because of the way that Government works, but I hope he will take away from the debate the commitments made in the past and the way in which the Labour party—now in government—understood the necessity of such an office, and how that has not changed. I ask whether he and his Department could review what the likelihood would be of taking that forward.

There have been reviews of the way that whistleblowing works over time. I understand that the review of the whistleblowing framework by the previous Government was completed in January. That report has not yet been published. Again, will the Minister undertake to go back to his Department, find that report and potentially publish it? If the report is deficient in some way and the review of the framework has not been undertaken in as comprehensive a way as we would all like, would he commit to refreshing it? Even if we cannot move as fast as I would like towards the outcome that I would like, would he look at reviewing the framework so that people at work, or not at work, who witness corruption, malfeasance or acts that endanger public safety have the confidence to say, “This is wrong”? If they can have the knowledge that somebody somewhere is standing with them, and that they have the support of a Government who take this seriously, we could move quickly towards a country where the scandals I mentioned at the beginning—with the devastating events that took place—could be prevented and we could all live happier, safer and better lives.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called.

2.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) for setting the scene. I have said it to him before, but it really is a pleasure to see him back in the House and in his place. We had a friendship when he was here before, and it is good to see him back and working energetically on behalf of his constituents. I also thank him and the other members of the all-party parliamentary group for whistleblowing for their continued interest in this important subject.

I said to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central that I wanted to give an example of someone who was a whistleblower—a good friend of mine—and explain how it affected him. The hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) referred to the effect that whistleblowing can have on health. My friend is dead and gone now, and anything I say will be complimentary to him and his family. It is important that, as his friend, I recall his commitment to whistleblowing and the fact that it was traumatic for him in every way.

As I say, my first experience of whistleblowing came with my childhood friend. I call him the late, great Brian Little, because he was. He and I went to school together; we grew up in Ballywalter village back in Northern Ireland. As often happens, we went to school, left school and did not see each other for 20-odd years, then all of a sudden we came together again and our friendship was renewed and reinvigorated. We caught up as our families grew up and other things happened.

I should have said before that it is nice to see the Minister in his place—I wish him well in his role—and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon).

Brian was a giant in battling for the underdog, and I miss him greatly to this day. As someone who has always taken for granted the ability to speak the truth and get respect for that, it was a great shock for me to see my friend brought so low for simply doing the right thing. That is what happened to him. He was a whistleblower. I will not go into the details of what it was or the company involved—that would be inappropriate—but the doing the right thing had such an effect on him, and he felt constrained that he had to do it. He lost almost everything, but he worked hard to get it back. He suffered from anxiety and depression, which, as the hon. Member for Shipley mentioned, is how whistleblowing affects people sometimes. He was physically broken by it, when all he did was highlight something that was incorrect in a big company. He did his job, and all of a sudden he suffered for that.

I supported Brian in his fight, and he supported me in the House with his expertise in financial matters. I have to be honest: his expertise fed into any speeches on financial issues that I made a few years ago. He had incredible knowledge of banking issues, the regulation of markets and financial matters. I miss his wise counsel greatly. He died quite suddenly on a Thursday in his daughter's home. I perhaps had not realised just how many things he had done. He had helped so many people from all over this great United Kingdom—from Scotland, Wales, England and all across Northern Ireland—with their financial issues. The sympathy letters and emails that came in to express shock at his passing were testament to his ability to understand people and

help them. He spent the latter years of his life in this world doing right, and literally hundreds of people owe him so much, as I do.

The experience of Brian and all that his family, particularly his wife Jacqui, who is still living, went through in his battle for justice highlighted to me that we certainly do not have it right in our battle for protection of whistleblowers. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central is right to bring forward this debate, because the issue is key to many people across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I recall with fondness those who dared to stand up and be counted, and that is why I am here to support this debate. I am sure others will give similar examples.

The issue is clear, as a cursory glance at the number of whistleblowing cases ongoing in Northern Ireland shows. As you know, Mr Chairman, I always give the Northern Ireland perspective. I want to give that perspective to this debate and ultimately enable the Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), to help with the questions that are being asked and how we can protect whistleblowers better.

We have had complaints in Northern Ireland on issues from covid information to Northern Ireland Water paying millions to contractors for work that had not been carried out, and on a host of issues in between. In each of these cases, it is clear that the current whistleblowing legislation is not robust enough to allow the little man or little woman to take on the big corporations. I think this is what the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central is seeking to have. I am looking to the Minister because I am pretty sure, if he does not mind me saying so, that he will be able to give us some reassurance on this issue.

While I welcome the steps proposed in the Employment Rights Bill on enhanced protections from harassment in the workplace, I feel—and I mean this gently, and honestly, and in a constructive fashion—that more could be done in the Bill to enhance protections and to ensure there is support for those who dare to speak truth to power. Truth is incredibly powerful, but it is how that truth can be expressed and how that whistleblower can get the answers, and be protected, and not be sanctioned or picked on because he or she had the guts to get up and do it.

We are all aware there are whistleblowing cases that amount to perhaps no more than a grudge against an employer, but those cases should not strip protection and support from those who are putting their necks on the line to protect the public interest and what we need to know. If something is wrong in a big company or a big corporation, it takes a lot of courage and a lot of guts to take that stand. It is my opinion that greater support should be available financially for those who determine to take those steps.

In relation to Northern Ireland I am very keen that, when summing up, the Minister gives some idea of how we can build upon this debate in a constructive fashion working with the Minister who has responsibility for this at the NI Assembly and, moving forward, how we exchange ideas on this with the regions. I look to the Minister—he is an honourable man—and ask what enhanced support we can provide for those genuine whistleblowers who are doing the public a service and who have no house to remortgage to pay legal fees, because current policies simply do not cut it.

[Jim Shannon]

My friend Brian had to self-fund his battle; that battle for rights, that battle for justice, that battle against the wrongdoing that he had the courage to highlight, and he was penalised for that. He ended up selling the family home to pay the legal fees. It was a quite extensive family farm. I knew his mum and dad and the family, as one comes to over the years, and it had been an ancestral home, in the family for generations, but it had to go to pay the bill. He was on the right side, but to prove he was right he had to stick fast and it cost him. I think it is true to say that he never fully got over that loss. However, Brian was a Christian and I know that his faith in God was one of the things that kept him going, even though financially, physically and emotionally, he was perhaps not the same person that I went to school with many years ago. Too many people simply do not have those kinds of money-raising facilities and also do not have the David versus Goliath mentality that Brian had. He knew that he could take on the giant because he was not alone. He finally won his case, but the effects on him were dramatic. I believe the message from this Chamber today needs to be clear: you are not alone when you do the right thing.

2.59 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) on bringing this really important debate to the House. I was reflecting on the number of different Departments involved in trying to tackle the issue, so I do not envy the Minister, but I hope that he will take the messages back to the other Departments that are connected, because I want to focus particularly on the NHS.

We know that the courageous people we have heard about, who blow the whistle, protect us and our communities, yet we do not offer them the same protection—that is the nub of the problem. As I said, I want to focus particularly on the NHS, because we have seen many examples—I will not go through them all—where someone in the NHS whistleblows and their career is in effect over, or very badly damaged, as a result. I want to raise that alarm to the House, and I hope the Minister will ensure that these messages are relayed to the Department of Health and Social Care.

In too many cases, whistleblowers face sanctions at work or threats, and the toll that takes on people's mental health is enormous, as we heard described eloquently by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Before this Parliament, I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee for a total of 13 years, including nine years as Chair, and back in 2014, when I was a member of the Committee, we looked into whistleblowing and found that there had been failure

“to protect some whistleblowers from being victimised.”

That puts it mildly. We recommended then that where the identity of whistleblowers is known, steps must be taken to

“ensure that they are protected, supported and have their welfare monitored.”

We said that that should include providing whistleblowers with

“support and advice, such as access to legal and counselling services.”

We also highlighted the fact that too often whistleblowers were “unclear” about who to raise their concerns with, and we recommended “a route map” that showed different “internal and external reporting routes.”

The Government at the time agreed with the recommendations about a route map, but they deferred further action on whistleblowing policies across the NHS, as they were being considered separately through Sir Robert Francis's Freedom to Speak Up review. That was a reasonable response from the Government at the time. But then I became Chair of the Public Accounts Committee and we revisited the issue of whistleblowing—and guess what? We were disappointed at the slow progress. If I had been paid £10 for every time I had to use that phrase in that role, I would probably not be here now but sunning myself in the Caribbean, because “too slow progress” is often the mantra.

We now have a new Government, with a new Employment Rights Bill, and I hope we will see further progress. We were not really convinced that change had happened on the ground and we were also very clear that whistleblowing is a sign of complete failure of the system. We should not have to have whistleblowing policies, because modern institutions that work well should have routes whereby complaints, concerns and issues are raised as a matter of routine. I will come to some good work in other sectors in a moment, but we found generally that there was not enough focus on whistleblowing in the wider public sector. The Francis review of the health sector highlighted the need for effective whistleblowing policies not just in the health sector, but more widely.

Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee revisited whistleblowing again—it seems to be a bit of a theme—and still we stressed the need to embed a “Speak up” environment. We were looking particularly at whistleblowing in the civil service at that point, but the lessons read across, sadly. The National Audit Office found earlier this year that just 52% of people in the civil service

“think it is safe to challenge the way things are done”.

That was from a review of the responses to the 2022 civil service people survey—that is a bit of a mouthful. The National Audit Office also highlighted the number in the NHS with the same concern—61.5%. That was in 2024, so this year. Less than two thirds of NHS workers think it is safe to challenge the way things are done; lots of work needs to be done to improve that.

There are institutions that do this quite well. Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee visited NASA, in Washington. As a result of the tragedies with the Columbia and Challenger space shuttles, the people there have a very open approach to raising concerns. However junior someone is, they are expected to raise a concern up their chain of command in their specialist area, and if they are still concerned, they can take that to another party within the organisation—a whole other set-up—to make sure that they are challenging the approach taken on risk. That is expected. It is embedded in the training that people look at the risk and make sure that they are calling things out. Nothing is too small, and no one is too junior.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend probably has unparalleled experience in this House, through her important scrutiny work as both a member of and Chair of the Public

Accounts Committee; I was happy to work with her on many inquiries when I was a member of that Committee too. Could I tempt her to tell us how many millions on public procurement projects we might have saved had the system that she has just described been in place in this country? How many hours of time might have been spared? It sounds like an incredible system, and one that this country should seek to emulate.

Dame Meg Hillier: As ever, my hon. Friend manages to cut through to a really important issue. It is not only about the whistleblower; in the whole public sector and parts of the private sector, it is time-consuming and cumbersome to deal with whistleblowing on both sides, and it is very mentally draining, particularly for the whistleblower. It is costly when a mistake happens and is not caught early. A stitch in time saves nine, as they say. That is very much the bread and butter of what the Public Accounts Committee does; it looks at where problems have arisen that could have been predicted and prevented.

The Chancellor is to launch her Budget next week and we need to save money, but—I am not being flippant—in the long term we need to see a change in culture. Aviation is another example of where things happen well. In that sector, it is expected that people call things out. Things do still go wrong, but staff get praised, rather than penalised, for calling out what might happen in safety terms.

This debate has come at an important time for my constituent, Sarah McMahon, who has agreed that I may share with hon. Members her sad experience as a whistleblower. Sarah is a consultant orthopaedic and limb reconstruction surgeon at Great Ormond Street hospital for children. In the summer of 2021, she was asked to look after some patients of her colleague, Yaser Jabbar, after he had an accident. Overseeing those patients, she found things that made her so alarmed that she blew the whistle in the autumn of that year. I am sure many Members will have heard about that case in the media; in short, Mr Jabbar was accused of inappropriate and unnecessary surgeries that led to life-changing injuries for children in his care.

Sarah McMahon wrote to suggest an external review, but nothing was done to address her concerns and Mr Jabbar was allowed to continue operating on children. She tells me:

“I was effectively told to keep quiet and concentrate on my own patients.”

Despite that, Ms McMahon bravely continued to raise concerns about Mr Jabbar and the harm caused to children in his care, and in February 2023—some 18 months after she first raised her concerns—an investigation by the Royal College of Surgeons began. That investigation concluded in spring this year and the outcome is now well known. When the investigation was launched, Sarah learnt that Mr Jabbar had raised counter-allegations against her. It was only last week that Sarah was given any information about those counter-allegations, which Great Ormond Street hospital has now confirmed were completely unfounded.

How terrible it must be for a surgeon doing their very best, working alongside a colleague with no animosity, and then discovering that there were problems. Sarah had to raise her concerns; it was absolutely the right

thing to do, professionally and for the patients. She wrote to me about her experience of raising the alarm, saying:

“I have since been threatened with disciplinary action without proper basis. I feel sidelined and excluded in my work and I am exhausted. The impact of this stressful process on my health, family, reputation, and career has been profound. I feel greatly let down by the way I have been treated as a whistleblower.”

Three years into this ordeal, it is clear that hospitals cannot mark their own homework when it comes to whistleblowing concerns.

I want to raise with the Minister some points, not all of which are directly related to his portfolio. I hope that he and his civil service officials will take them back to the relevant Departments, as I ask him directly for a detailed response. An amendment is proposed to the Employment Rights Bill that would give further protection to whistleblowers; I hope it will be considered sympathetically or, if necessary, rewritten by the Government to make it work and deliver on that intention. I also hope that the Cabinet Office works hard to improve the situation across Whitehall. Its representatives appeared before us when I chaired the Public Accounts Committee, so we know that there are some bits of good practice, but a lot more needs to be done. I hope that the Government commit to making that a high priority.

I will not repeat the points that were made very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central about the importance of the duty of candour, but I will say that we need that to be embedded in the system if we are to change the way these things work. I endorse the points made about the office for the whistleblower. Crucially, I hope that the Minister will talk to the Department of Health and NHS England. If we want to modernise our health service and ensure that patients are safe, we need to support brave people—like Sarah McMahon—who have had to go through the mill to raise concerns that have been proven to be very well-founded.

I will end with Sarah's own words:

“Unless the safety system is radically reformed my advice to future colleagues facing this problem would be: ‘raise it, because you must, but do not expect to survive what follows.’”

What a terrible indictment of the system so far. I hope the Minister takes that message back to the relevant Departments.

3.10 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank all those who have spoken before me in such an informative manner and to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) for securing the debate.

I have advised numerous whistleblowers throughout my career. Some themes emerge from the experience that speak directly to the points raised by a couple of previous speakers about the impact on whistleblowers when they realise there is something seriously wrong in their organisation and they speak up about it. I have found, particularly in the NHS, that there is an institutional reluctance—and I think I can understand it. I think it is psychologically extremely difficult for people to accept that their department might be systematically failing or sometimes actively damaging patients, and the result is that they tend to turn on the person blowing the whistle

[Mrs Sarah Russell]

and to ostracise them. What follows is an investigation into that person's behaviour or conduct as relationships deteriorate, and often then a dismissal under the term "some other substantial reason".

There are five potentially lawful reasons for dismissal, including misconduct, incapability and so forth. One is "some other substantial reason" for dismissal. That phrase is really a catchall for, "There is some sort of decent reason for sacking this person", but the case law has developed in such a way that "some other substantial reason" for dismissal can just be an absolute breakdown of relationships between people who work together—and that is almost always the case where there is a whistleblower. The result is that we have a massive gap in our law, whereby people who have blown the whistle are systematically being dismissed for "some other substantial reason".

One of the most effective things we could do within the scope of the current system would be to outlaw the use of "some other substantial reason" dismissals in a whistleblowing framework, so that if someone has blown the whistle, there cannot be a "some other substantial reason" dismissal. There would still be the ability to dismiss for misconduct if there has genuinely been misconduct, but in the situations I have seen, that has usually not been the case; it is just that people have fallen out.

I think there is scope to improve whistleblowing protections in the current system. We could do it through amendments to the Employment Rights Bill, which is making its way through the House. In the longer term—I appreciate that this is not currently fiscally viable—but we could look at extending legal aid to whistleblowers. We could extend to whistleblowers the legal aid protection available to people on low incomes for discrimination claims; that would be in the public interest and would nicely back up the duty of candour that we have been talking about introducing. We could also look at whether the suggestions being made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central could be linked to the fair work agency, and whether we could in due course extend the powers of that agency to examine this issue.

It is a terrible thing to advise whistleblowers, because they are so distressed—certainly one of the most distressed client groups I have ever come across. Whistleblowing is typically completely career-ending for them, and the results for many are terrible. We should look at whether our unfair dismissal legislation is well placed to handle such matters. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central for raising this topic for debate.

3.14 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Thank you for chairing this debate, Sir Mark. I have learned a valuable lesson this afternoon: get in there early, because if you do not, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) and for Congleton (Mrs Russell) will make all the points that you had planned to far more eloquently. I have cut some of my notes so my speech will be brief, but I reaffirm many of the recommendations that they made.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) for securing this debate and for his chairmanship of the all-party group for whistleblowing. This is the right week to have this conversation, and I am glad that other Members have joined us. As someone who, in a previous life, was a councillor and represented a family affected by Hillsborough, I know all too well the damage that the lack of candour there sometimes is in public life can inflict on a family. I saw that family destroyed while fighting for justice. I now have the honour of representing a family deeply impacted by the Horizon scandal, and I have seen the damage that it has done to them.

When whistleblowers speak out, it is so often the nature of organisations and institutions to look internally to protect themselves, instead of looking for the root cause of the problem. One of the problems I have noticed too often is the lack of confidence whistleblowers have about speaking out. My inbox is currently full of people—whether they are in the NHS or other public institutions—writing to put forward concerns about the level of services being provided to members of the public, but all too concerned about what will happen to their job prospects and their families if they do not have the protections to speak out. Too often, whistleblowers are our last line of defence when processes and institutions fail. Too many brave men and women, in seeking to protect the public, have been badly failed by the laws in place in this country.

I share the confidence of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central in the Government's commitment to addressing that imbalance and making sure that people feel that they have the protections to speak out. I hope that the Minister, in his response, will be able to reassure us that the Government remain committed to those pre-election pledges to ensure that people who are prepared to risk everything to protect the public and the public interest will have the confidence to do so, not just because it is the right thing to do, but because—as we have so often learned, including during our brief time in this Parliament—it costs us an awful lot of money as a country to redress those problems when we fail. I apologise for the slightly short nature of my speech, but I thank you for the opportunity to speak today, Sir Mark.

3.17 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Sir Mark, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) on securing the debate. The existing Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 is simply not good enough; it is woefully inadequate in keeping pace with the modern workplace. For example, it does not cover all types of workers, such as members of the armed forces, volunteers and self-employed individuals. It forces whistleblowers to prove that they made a "protected disclosure" and that any retaliation they suffered was directly linked to their whistleblowing. That burden of proof can be very difficult to meet, as employers may mask retaliatory action as unrelated. Protection often requires whistleblowers to go through stressful employment tribunals, with limited remedies beyond compensation.

The inadequacies do not end there. The Act requires disclosures to be "in the public interest", but that term is vague and has been subject to differing interpretations

in the courts, creating uncertainty about whether specific whistleblowing cases are protected. There are insufficient provisions in the Act for emotional, financial or legal support for whistleblowers, leaving them vulnerable as they often face significant personal and professional risks after disclosing information.

That list of flaws within the existing law feels endless, so the Liberal Democrats are championing the need for reform. We support passing a comprehensive anti-SLAPP—strategic lawsuits against public participation—law to provide robust protection for free speech, whistleblowers and media scrutiny against lawsuits that seek to intimidate and silence criticism. We want to ensure that there is justice for the victims of scandals and prevent them happening in the future. We want the Government to establish a new office of the whistleblower, creating a new set of legal protections and promoting greater awareness of their rights. The Labour party did some positive work on that while in Opposition, so I would be grateful for the Minister's views on the Liberal Democrat proposals and whether the Government will prioritise similar reforms.

I would also like to remind the Minister of the ask from my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) during an Opposition day debate last week. Please can he give an assurance that, if the people at the Department for Work and Pensions have information about maladministration of the service that they have witnessed, and they wish to come forward with that information, they will be protected as whistleblowers?

3.21 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) on securing this debate. I thank the hon. Members for Wokingham (Clive Jones), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), for Congleton (Mrs Russell) and for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for their contributions this afternoon.

I welcome the fact that so many Members recognise how valuable it is that whistleblowers are prepared to shine a light on wrongdoing and believe that they should be able to do so without recrimination. Whistleblowers do absolutely crucial work to expose wrongdoing and ensure accountability. Forty-three per cent of economic crimes are highlighted by whistleblowers, and workers are often the first people to witness any type of wrongdoing within an organisation. Information that workers may uncover could prevent wrongdoing that may damage an organisation's reputation or performance, and in extreme circumstances, even save people from harm or death.

For authorities tackling corruption, fraud and other forms of crime, whistleblowing is a crucial source of evidence, as those activities and their perpetrators can often be exposed only by insiders. That was keenly felt during the height of the covid-19 pandemic when the Care Quality Commission and the Health and Safety Executive recorded sharp increases in the number of whistleblowing disclosures that they received; and during the Horizon scandal, when a whistleblower was featured in a BBC "Panorama" documentary in 2015, as has been mentioned, which helped to expose the truth, contributing to the successful postmasters' legal case in 2019.

The UK's whistleblowing framework was introduced through the Public Interest Disclosure Act. It was intended to build openness and trust in workplaces by ensuring that workers can hold their employers to account and then be treated fairly. It provides a route for workers to make disclosures of wrongdoing, including criminal offences, the endangerment of health and safety, causing damage to the environment, a miscarriage of justice or a breach of any legal obligation.

The previous Government recognised that there was weakness in that framework and made numerous attempts to improve it. In 2013, the Government published a wide-ranging call for evidence on the effectiveness of the framework, and in 2014, set out a plan of legislative and non-legislative means to improve it. That plan included extending protections to student nurses and midwives, regularly updating the list of prescribed persons and introduced a requirement of prescribed persons to produce an annual report on whistleblowing disclosures that they receive.

Moreover, under the guidance of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), the previous Government launched a review in March 2023 of the whistleblowing framework. That review examined the effectiveness of the framework in meeting its intended objectives, which are to enable workers to come forward and speak up about wrongdoing and to protect those who do so against detriment and dismissal. The initial fact-finding element of that work was completed by Grant Thornton in January this year, as I think the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central mentioned in his opening speech. The Government response and the recommendations were awaited, and that work was yet to be completed before the election was called.

We on the Opposition Benches welcome the Government's decision to strengthen protections for whistleblowers, including by updating protection for women who report sexual harassment at work. We will support the related measures in the forthcoming Employment Rights Bill. As Protect set out, this will

"send a clear signal that anyone who has been sexually harassed, or witnessed it, can raise their concerns through whistleblowing channels and will be protected from being victimised or dismissed if they do so."

The Government have not yet published a response to the review of the whistleblowing framework. The review would provide an up-to-date evidence base on whistleblowing, allowing the House to effectively scrutinise the Government's proposals. Will the Minister commit to publishing that review and, if so, when?

3.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Sir Mark. I start by offering my triple congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell): first, congratulations on returning to this place—it is good to see him back—secondly, congratulations on securing the debate; and thirdly, congratulations on being appointed chair of the all-party group for whistleblowing, which I am sure he will lead with distinction. We have heard a number of very important and passionate contributions today. I will do my best to sum them up, but it is fair to say that we are looking forward to working with all Members across the board on this very important topic.

[Justin Madders]

Before addressing some of those points, I will start by discussing the current whistleblowing framework. As Members have said, it is essentially about employment protection, and that is the reason why I am here, as the Minister for Employment Rights, to respond on the Government's behalf. The protections were introduced by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, which amended the Employment Rights Act 1996.

The legislation was intended to provide a route for workers to make disclosures of information that they reasonably believed were in the public interest and tended to show a relevant failure or someone covering up a relevant failure. Those relevant failures could include criminal offences, the endangerment of health and safety, causing damage to the environment, a miscarriage of justice or a breach of any legal obligation.

Disclosures need to be made in line with the requirements of the legislation, usually to a worker's employer or lawyer, or a prescribed person. As Members may know, there are more than 90 different prescribed persons under the legislation to whom relevant failures can be reported. They are usually regulators, such as the Equalities and Human Rights Commission and the Financial Conduct Authority. I will not go through every single prescribed person today, but most have a statutory obligation to report on the disclosures that they receive and to publish the reports annually.

Since the reporting requirements came into effect, there has been an increase in the number of disclosures that are made to prescribed persons. The volume of disclosures is around 50,000 a year and, as we can probably tell from the contributions today, they are highly concentrated in the health, public administration and financial and insurance sectors. The reports summarise the actions that a prescribed person has taken, but there is variation in how that information is protected. As we have discussed, workers have, under the law, a right not to be dismissed or subjected to a detriment as a result of making a protected disclosure, and there is recourse to an employment tribunal. The number of employment tribunal complaints under the jurisdiction for protected disclosure in each year since 2017-18 has increased, reaching 3,128 in 2020-21. That is the latest year for which a full dataset is available.

But enough of the overview. We need to talk about some of the important contributions that we have heard from Members. This debate is really about how whistleblowing affects individuals. We know that it can fundamentally and irrevocably damage, indeed end, that relationship with the employer. We know there are reasons why people will not speak up: some are in senior positions and fear for their career or their reputation, some may be at the other end of the spectrum and fear insecurity and power imbalances that may make it difficult to speak up, and some may have a link to the organisation but may not be covered under the legislation.

I would like to make a few comments about the contributions in this debate. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for contributing. I am sure if he had come in earlier, his speech would have covered many of the points that had already been made, but that is the lottery of Westminster

Hall, and I am sure there will be many opportunities for him to speak earlier in other debates. He referenced a number of Members' speeches.

It was particularly pleasing to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Sarah Russell), who brought her professional experience to bear today. She made an interesting suggestion about the use of "some other substantial reason" as a potentially fair reason for dismissing someone in whistleblowing cases. We probably need to look at the use of "some other substantial reason", as it is likely that it gets overused. However, as she will be aware, the current Employment Rights Bill has enough in it for us to be getting on with. She made an interesting suggestion in respect of the potential use of the Fair Work Agency here, and that is something we will bear in mind.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), highlighted some of the legal issues under the current legislation, including the question whether someone is within scope, the hurdles that they have to overcome to qualify for protection and the public interest test. Those are all things that we want to look at in a broader sense, if we get around to a review of the legislation. I take his point about officials in the Department for Work and Pensions, but I hope that this Administration would want to be an exemplar of best practice, and we would want people to feel confident that they can speak out if they see a wrong or an injustice.

It was a pleasure, as always, to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), in his customary place—I may have swapped positions, but he remains a permanent fixture over there. He spoke very movingly about his friend Brian and the great personal cost of his efforts to expose wrongdoing. Brian's resilience came through in the hon. Member's description of his fight. As he said, it was about doing the right thing, and his message was that,

"you are not alone when you do the right thing."

We should be sending that message to anyone who thinks about blowing the whistle. Of course, the matter is devolved to Northern Ireland, but that message should ring out across the whole of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) raised some specific issues about the Department of Health and Social Care and her constituent Sarah McMahon. I am sorry to hear of the three years of personal difficulties Sarah McMahon has suffered as a result of doing the right thing. Unfortunately, too many organisations make it very difficult for individuals who blow the whistle. I understand that the Department for Health and Social Care has concluded a review of the statutory duty of candour, and it has issued a call for evidence, which I think is ongoing. I take her message of frustration about the length of time that these things take, and I will pass that message back to the Department.

However, my hon. Friend made the important point that some organisations have got it right and encourage people to speak up when they see a wrong. There are some very good examples, including the aviation industry, which is a particular exemplar of that. It is the standard that we should be aiming for.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, who opened the debate, said that the law looks at how things happen after the disclosure, and always through the prism of an employment relationship. That was a good analysis of where we are and perhaps why there are shortcomings in some of the legislation. I agree that this is about the law giving people the confidence to speak up. I am sure we will return to some of the things we hope to do on that.

Gareth Snell: I ask the Minister and his colleagues across Government to look at the way we fund and support our regulatory bodies. Often, the failure reported by a whistleblower would have been prevented from happening in the first place by a properly funded and resourced regulator. As much as anybody else, he will know that times are tough and budgets are tight, but investment in the regulatory framework early doors could help to save money and lives, and prevent people from having to put their own homes on the line to do the right thing.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point. I suspect that a week ahead of the Budget we will not get the kind of investment he would like to see. He talked about the legislation, focusing on existing employment relationships and the broader ambit of employment. The legislation was probably framed in that way in the first place because that is where the biggest power imbalance lies: between an employer and their employee.

We can consider how we would broaden this out, but we will bring in particular measures with our Employment Rights Bill. Hon. Members will be aware that Second Reading took place last night, when we made some specific announcements on our overall package. The Bill is the biggest upgrade in workers' rights in a generation, and in it we will address specific issues about whistleblowing on sexual harassment. The Trades Union Congress states that 58% of women have been sexually harassed at work. That is a staggering, appalling figure that must be tackled, and it is one of the reasons why we want to improve people's ability to ring the alarm bell when sexual harassment occurs.

The Bill will require employers to create and maintain workplaces and working conditions free from harassment, including by third parties. It will strengthen the legal duty of employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment before it starts, and it will enable regulations to specify steps that an employer must take to protect their employees from sexual harassment to ensure that effective steps are taken. It also includes protections for whistleblowers and will make clear that sexual harassment can be the basis for a protected disclosure, which is one of the most important steps we can take to make workplaces safer. Workers who make a protected disclosure will then have legal recourse if their employer subjects them to a detriment for speaking up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central mentioned, as did several other Members, the possibility of an office for the whistleblower. There were a number of suggestions about the potential remit and role that it could have. Clearly, the cost and precise functions and powers of that would need careful consideration, particularly in how it would relate to current regulators. The point he made about the resources of regulators is

relevant to that. There would also have to be some consideration given to how it would exist as an independent body from Government. I must disappoint my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton by saying that the pledge to create the office did not make it into our final manifesto, but that is not to say we are ruling it out forever and a day. We will consider it as we look at a broader review of the whistleblowing framework.

On that point, I will address the remarks made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington, about the review initiated by the previous Government, which was intended to assess the effectiveness of the whistleblowing framework against its original objectives. As he rightly pointed out, that review was not released before the general election. It certainly does not seem appropriate for us to let that work go to waste; I will talk to my officials about how and when we can release that information, but I see no reason why we should not do so. It will be a starting point for further work in this area.

The number of issues raised today shows that the appetite for reform in this area is much broader than the review commissioned under the previous Government recognised. Of course, other measures are due to be enacted in the next 12 months, but we can do more to ensure people feel confident when they speak out.

As several Members said, the King's Speech made clear that we will deliver on our manifesto commitment to implement a Hillsborough law to introduce a legal duty of candour on public servants and authorities. The Prime Minister made clear that that Bill will enter Parliament before the next anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster. We believe it will be a catalyst for a change of culture in the public sector by improving transparency and accountability where public services have failed. It will help to address the unacceptable defensive culture that is prevalent across too much of the public sector. It has been said several times that the NHS is one of the worst examples of that; certainly, from my experience, there is a hard focus on trying to justify actions, rather than get to the root of the complaint.

Bishop James Jones's report made it clear that those things have to change, not just in the NHS, but across the whole public sector. That Bill will be an important starting point in changing the culture both in the public sector and across the country. We all want it to improve so that whistleblowers have the confidence to speak out and have the assurance that, if something happens to them as a result, they will be protected and supported.

3.41 pm

Gareth Snell: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for his summation. I will make a couple of final points. I absolutely understand that the office of the whistleblower did not make its way into our manifesto, but I say to the Minister that the circumstances that led us in opposition to support to such a suggestion have not changed. Although I appreciate that we have had an election and Governments have changed, even an undertaking to meet those of us who think this proposal is part of the solution, to discuss it and go through it, would be welcome—

Justin Madders *indicated assent.*

Gareth Snell: The Minister is nodding. I hope *Hansard* will record that fact for the purpose of my follow-up letters.

The Minister is right: I have no doubt that the Government will take seriously the protections that whistleblowers need, and that will require development and the evolution of our current protections under PIDA. That needs to be looked at. The opportunity to make the case would be welcomed, not just by me, but by those who have been campaigning on this issue for many years.

We could have spent many hours debating this subject. Members from all parties have cases in their inboxes involving individuals speaking out and coming to them with concerns about organisations, actions and activities that they have seen and are worried about. People can come to Members of Parliament; we are defined in legislation as people such issues can be reported to, and we have a duty to understand our own responsibilities and what we can do to help to foster and bring about the changes that are being raised by individuals who are brave enough to put their head above the parapet.

We have had only 90 minutes today. The contributions have been excellent, but I am sure that lurking in our inboxes will be cases of individuals who are just looking for help. One thing we should take away from this debate, which is timely as it is Whistleblowing Awareness Week, is that Members of all parties have a genuine desire to make it easier for whistleblowers to blow the whistle, and to make it better for those who come forward so that they do not suffer detriment and are not penalised for having done the right thing.

As my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly pointed out, we must send the message to those people that they are not alone, and that if they speak up, stand up and do the right thing, there are people in this place and around the country who will have their back, ensure they get the justice that they deserve and prevent the harm that could be done. I thank all Members for taking the time to participate in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered protections for whistleblowing.

3.45 pm

Sitting suspended.

Pie and Mash: Traditional Speciality Guaranteed Status

4 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I will call Mr Richard Holden to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond to the debate. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention normally for 30-minute debates. However, we have one or two other Members present who may wish to intervene. It is obviously down to Mr Holden to determine who may or may not intervene on him, if he has not been given prior notice.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of providing traditional speciality guaranteed status to pie and mash.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark, in this debate. What is this debate all about? Well, there is a big picture and a little picture, and I will start off small. In my constituency of Basildon and Billericay, there are two fantastic pie and mash shops: Robins Pie & Mash in the town square; and Stacey's pie and mash shop on Timberlog Lane. Both of them provide fantastic local produce and they are absolute hubs of the local community. And it has been really interesting to see the feedback that I have already received from local people about this campaign to give protected status to this traditional British product.

What is pie and mash and why is it a traditional British product? It is a staple of cockney cuisine, moving out to places such as the east of England and Kent as the cockney diaspora moved post-war. That is why there are pie and mash shops in Basildon today. We seek recognition to safeguard the heritage of pie and mash, and to promote pie and mash, both here in the UK and internationally.

Back in the 1840s, pie and mash became an iconic food, closely associated with cockney culture and the social identity of non-posh Londoners. Over the years, more than a hundred pie and mash shops, typically family-owned, spread out from the inner London heartlands of Southwark and Tower Hamlets right across the areas across the country where the cockney diaspora had spread to.

Traditional pie and mash is an artisan food. The pie and mash and liquors are freshly made, using authentic family-owned recipes that have been passed down through generations like precious heirlooms. They are something that in Italy or France, let us say, would be instantly recognised as being worth celebrating and preserving, and I will say more on that broader point a little later.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward. I was speaking to him beforehand and told him about what I have been able to do in the past. The Comber Early is a special potato back home. I applied to the EU for special designation status for it, which the EU granted. Does he hope to pursue something outside the EU—now that the United Kingdom is out of it—for pie and mash that is similar to what we have done in the past?

Mr Holden: That is exactly what I am attempting to do and I commend the hon. Gentleman for his work in this space. Actually, there are not enough British products that we have talked up for their local credentials and their special place in our country's heritage, national cuisine and national heart.

France has over 800 products that have similar protected status and Italy has just under that number; the number for the UK is under a hundred. Given our culinary heritage, and particularly the culinary heritage of London as a global centre of cuisine, and given the great and diverse range of products and foodstuffs that we have across the country, we should be doing more in this area to talk up Britain and British food, to boost both food exports and our tourism.

Having more of these marks of protected status, whether that is the protected designation of origin or the geographic indication, would be a good start, but I am also thinking today of the third category, which is the traditional status guaranteed. That is not specifically geographically limited but is about the way that a product is produced. Pie and mash would be another brilliant food to do that for.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. He picks up on a very important point. In Staffordshire we have the famous Staffordshire oatcakes, which are enjoyed across the world. Does he agree that we need to focus on bringing regional cuisine to the forefront so that it can be exported more around the world and across the country?

Mr Holden: I could not agree with my right hon. Friend more. We should be doing everything we can to talk up regional cuisine from all parts of our country. I cannot think of anything better to come out of this debate than to ensure that regional food products such as pie and mash or Staffordshire oatcakes find their way on to the House of Commons menu in one of our regular regional food events. I hope that the catering team are listening, so that we can get these products promoted further.

Traditional speciality guarantee does not rely on a geographical connection but the way that a product is produced. I am sure that the Modern Cockney group I have been working on this with, and their founder Andy, and Ben who has been working with them from Loadstone, will be more than willing to get into the nitty-gritty details of what is required with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs over the coming months. This is just a small step in what we should be doing for more of our food products from across the country.

Traditional speciality guarantee is needed because there is a well-trodden media narrative that pie and mash is in decline. We are in an age of global fast food brands, yet pie and mash has shown a stubborn refusal to die. It has been really good to see it thriving in the shops I have visited. I have been multiple times over the last few months, particularly to the ones in Basildon. I have seen families going there, with fathers taking their daughters out. It is important that that continues, because it is great to see it thriving on a local level.

Right across the country, we have seen changes in demographics and taste. This has perhaps seen the movement of traditional pie and mash shops from their

heartland in London out to places like Basildon and the new towns of the east of England. Cornish pasties and Bramley apple pies have traditional speciality guarantee, but we now want to see that for pie and mash. Pie and mash made by artisans is the next step in that direction. It is too often looked down on, and we need to start thinking about how we can celebrate it better.

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this subject. Does he agree that we can be guilty at times of taking our heritage for granted? I would like to commend you for raising this, because you have made me realise just how fortunate we are to be a part of this. Would you agree with me that—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. You speak through the Chair.

James McMurdock: Forgive me. Would the Chair please pass my message on that as with the Cornish pasty and the Bramley apple pie, this is something we should be very proud of, and we as a people should recognise that we have a lot to be proud of?

Mr Holden: I cannot possibly agree with the hon. Member any more. Many of his constituents wander across the road to get to the pie and mash shops in my constituency, and I encourage them to do so even more in the future. He raises an important point about us as a country not recognising some of the great food heritage that we have and what an asset it is to our country.

I had an email from a constituent today—a chef working in a Michelin-starred restaurant in London—who had read about the debate being proposed in Parliament. He and his son agreed that we need to talk up what we have traditionally produced. He said that they love the original pie and mash and that he wishes us every success in the campaign. I thought that was a really good sign. Yes, there is obviously high-end cuisine that we want to celebrate at a national level, and I am sure that is exactly what the Government and DEFRA want to do too, but traditional speciality foods need to be looked at in the broader context and celebrated too.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am grateful to my Essex neighbour for giving way. My pie and mash journey began when I was a child in north London. I then moved to Basildon, and have eaten pie and mash in the Robins Pie & Mash shop many times. I now have two good ones in my constituency: Rayleigh Lanes Café and the Turkish café on the high street, both of which do very good pie and mash, which shows what a cosmopolitan food it has become. Does my right hon. Friend agree that pie and mash is a great British food? I want to do everything I can to endorse his campaign and give it the recognition it deserves.

Mr Holden: I thank my right hon. Friend and neighbour for raising that. I cannot wait to come down to Rayleigh and Wickford. Maybe we could do an Essex pie and mash championship and get an awards scheme going—maybe that is the next step for this campaign. But my right hon. Friend also makes an important point. Everybody starts somewhere on their journey with pie and mash. Mine started as a 19-year-old when I moved to east London

[Mr Holden]

and came across pie and mash for the first time. If we gave pie and mash a little bit of a status boost with traditional speciality guaranteed status, it would perhaps be opened up to more people, and more people might want to think about it. It would also provide a boost to that sector, particularly as our broader hospitality sector, as hon. Members know, has suffered since the covid pandemic and we are hoping to get it back on its feet.

So what are we after? We are after traditional speciality guaranteed status. We are not after a geographical designation, but we are after something that recognises the important traditional heritage of pie and mash. When do we want it to happen? Well, as soon as possible. I hope the Minister will look forward to working with the Modern Cockneys and pie and mash shops to bring it to fruition.

This debate points to something wider about British culinary heritage, about how we view food in Britain, and perhaps a little bit about how we view our own food in this country. That is something we need to look at again. We need to look at how we can celebrate it more. I hope that, as hon. and right hon. Members have mentioned, other parts of the country will look at how we can champion their local food produce—yes, in order for it to be recognised locally, which is a nice thing, but also for the broader economic narrative, whether that is exports or tourism.

I thank my pie and mash shops in Basildon and Billericay for putting up with me invading them over the last few weeks, particularly Robins, which has had the national media with it over the last couple of days. To everyone, I say: get out there—try that pie and mash. To the Minister, I say: I hope we will be able to get this status. I hope that at the end of this process, we can say to him, “Yes, Pie Minister.”

4.13 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Mark. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) on securing this debate on the potential for traditional speciality guaranteed status for pie and mash. I was delighted to hear him say that he will start small, because I can guarantee him that this Government will go big on food and regional food in general. I am so pleased to see that Opposition Members now have time on their hands to tour the very best hosteleries in their constituencies. The right hon. Gentleman can rest assured that we are absolutely determined to celebrate our great British food.

I will start by talking about pie and mash. As a hearty meal with roots in the docks of London, pie and mash has long been cherished as a working-class staple, part of the rich culinary heritage of our capital city. Of course, it is not alone in being a recognised feature of London’s food landscape. London cure smoked salmon, produced in east London for over a century, is already recognised with a protected geographical indication. Products such as those show how local traditions can thrive and how we can celebrate them for their authenticity and tradition, which has been developed over a long time.

Let me say a little about the policy background to the debate. Geographical indications, or GIs, are an internationally recognised mark of quality and authenticity. They help to protect and promote the heritage, tradition and production methods of our most iconic food and drink products. They provide consumers with the confidence that they are purchasing genuine, high-quality products. Each one of the UK’s 93 protected products is the result of a unique combination of geography, history and know-how. Products such as Welsh lamb, Scottish salmon, Lough Neagh eels and Sussex wine showcase the diversity of our cuisine and highlight how GI schemes promote a range of traditional products.

Those designations can also play a role in enhancing tourism, attracting visitors eager to experience authentic local flavours. Many places proudly promote the GI status of their cherished foods in marketing campaigns to highlight the visitor offer. Through national recognition, local producers are celebrated and their industry sustained for future generations, creating new jobs and opportunities.

One example of using protected status to celebrate place and tradition is the Cornish pasty story, which was mentioned. That is underpinned by its protection as a PGI, but there are many others. Other products have become the focus of events, such as the Melton Mowbray food festival celebrating the region’s renowned pork pie, and the “Taste of Scotland” initiative championing Scotch whisky and beef. The Government are keen to see those fantastic products and events continue to grow in strength and reputation in future.

GI products represent around 25% of the UK’s food and drink exports by value. There is strong demand for British products around the world, with GIs indicating quality and providing a means of unlocking international markets for our producers. The protection of GIs through free trade agreements offers a platform for exemplary UK produce and supports their export growth while broadening market access opportunities.

Those agreements safeguard the principle of the UK’s GI system and maintain its high standards of protection. My colleague the Business and Trade Secretary announced in July that the Government would restart trade talks with a range of countries, such as India, South Korea and Turkey. We will seek protection for our world-class GIs through those negotiations. GI protection in trade agreements will not only support our rural communities and traditional industries, but help us to build the UK’s global reputation for excellence in food and drink production.

The Government want to see GIs grow in stature as part of our national food culture. Our GI conference held on 3 September was a key step in that effort, bringing together stakeholders from across the sector to discuss how we can best promote our GI products. By sharing the stories behind our GIs and highlighting the passion and craftsmanship that go into making them we can help to ensure that more consumers both here and internationally are aware of and appreciate the value of these products.

Mr Francois: I thank the Minister for giving way. Perhaps through him I could take up the gauntlet that my neighbour and right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) threw down in a friendly manner. Although Robins Pie & Mash will be

difficult to beat, I will pitch my pie and mash shops against his, perhaps for charity, and we will see who the winner will be.

Daniel Zeichner: Although I am grateful for that intervention, I certainly would not want to stand in the way or promote rivalry between the two right hon. Gentlemen. I am sure they can sort it out between them, achieving a satisfactory outcome for all.

In conclusion, the Government are committed to celebrating the UK's GIs and will continue to promote them at home and abroad, working to ensure that the benefits are felt across the country. Although due process prevents me from commenting today on whether pie and mash would qualify for TSG status, I would warmly welcome a formal application. I am pleased that my officials are working closely with the proposer.

Question put and agreed to.

4.19 pm

Sitting suspended.

Large-scale Energy Projects and Food Security

4.30 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered large scale energy projects and food security.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. Today is an opportunity to highlight the importance of food security in the face of the climate crisis, which is the biggest threat to food security. I believe that we must tackle climate change in a smart way that works best for our economy and communities. That is particularly true of areas where agriculture plays an important part in the economy and sustainability of our communities.

My constituency of Ynys Môn has been known as Môn Mam Cymru, or the mother of Wales, as the island's fertile lands were used to grow food for all of Wales during the middle ages. Farming and agriculture are an important part of the island's heritage and economy.

Ynys Môn is also known as energy island. We have a vital and developing tidal sector, onshore wind farms and two solar farms, with another one approved. We also have the nuclear site at Wylfa. I urge the UK Government to commit to a new nuclear power station at what is the best site in the UK.

Food and energy production are two strands that run throughout our island's history, in balance with one another, not in opposition. However, I fear that recent developments will upset that balance. There are proposals for two large-scale solar farms on the north of Ynys Môn, covering 3,700 acres, around 2% of the island. The biggest of the two proposals—Maen Hir energy—is five times the size of the UK's largest active solar farm. It will have a generating capacity of 360 MW and be considered a nationally significant infrastructure project, requiring development consent from the UK Secretary of State. Maen Hir will take up 3,173 acres of land to host solar panels and the associated infrastructure. The developer, Lightsource bp, says that the land predominantly consists of agricultural fields.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. This is an incredibly important issue—it was important in the last Parliament, and it certainly is in this one. Does she agree that we must continue with the previous Government's intent to ensure that the best agricultural land is used as such, and not for solar farms? The improving farm productivity grant allowed rooftop solar panels to receive grants, and is an essential tool in helping farmers to farm and to do so in a sustainable and somewhat better and more profitable manner.

Llinos Medi: I totally agree and will go on to explain more on that.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. We are going to go very close to the time limit in this debate. I ask Members who want to speak to resist intervening. Members will only get three minutes each, in order to accommodate the wind-up speeches from the Front Benches.

Llinos Medi: Thank you, Sir Mark.

The developer has also said that the project will maintain the land's agricultural use, such as livestock raising and wildflower planting, enriching the local environment. However, the development presents a clear risk to the future of many farms on the island. Many farms rent the land rather than own it themselves. They will not feel the benefit of any lease fees being paid out to the landowners and their loss of income will likely result in many farms folding. Campaigners have pointed out that the land proposed for Maen Hir and Alaw Môn could see land equivalent to 31 farms being lost to solar panels. That would be devastating for the communities and the economy of Ynys Môn.

We know that the agricultural land in Wales is valuable. The Farmers Union of Wales says that the gross value added per hectare of agricultural land in Wales is £568.28. Applying that figure to the Maen Hir development would result in agricultural land with a GVA of over £558,000 being developed on. Removing that agricultural land from use would clearly damage the economy of Ynys Môn. Maen Hir will have an operational life of up to 60 years. During that time it will create only 12 full-time jobs. The local corner shop will offer more jobs.

It is estimated that both projects could create billions of pounds of profits for the companies involved. However, the Maen Hir project alone will result in a loss of £33 million in GVA for Ynys Môn. Clearly, the financial benefits will not be kept within Ynys Môn. At the same time as extracting profits, the developer for Maen Hir has threatened landowners with compulsory purchase orders if the application is approved. I am extremely concerned about our farmers' mental wellbeing as they risk seeing their livelihoods destroyed by a large corporation extracting profits from our natural resources.

In Wales, we have the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, a law designed to ensure that the world we leave our children is better than the one we inherited. Food security and ensuring the supply of high quality, locally grown food is so important for the future of our young people. As the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales says,

"Wales needs a resilient, long-term plan that shifts agricultural impact towards having a positive outcome on climate and nature restoration, ensuring safe, affordable, healthy diets for people, especially children. Rural and farming communities are a big part of the solution—they are integral to feeding Wales, protecting nature and are part of our vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language."

What discussions has the Minister had with the Future Generations Commissioner regarding the Maen Hir energy project and its implications for the well-being of future generations in Ynys Môn?

A recent news report has shown that only 6% of vegetables used in school dinners in Wales are grown in Wales. As the climate crisis continues we should grow more locally, not decreasing the amount of food we grow on our land. I note that the UK Government have established a solar taskforce and have a target for delivering 70 GW of solar energy by 2035—more than quadrupling the current capacity of 15.5 GW. The development of solar farms is an issue that will be of great importance going forward. It is crucial that our energy security plans are co-ordinated with food security plans. That means thinking carefully about where the projects go and how they affect our economy, food security and community resilience.

It should be Government policy to safeguard good quality agricultural land when considering development of large-scale energy projects. Will the Minister explain what importance the new Labour Government will give to food security in the process of deciding on new energy projects? There are alternatives to large-scale solar farms, such as the use of rooftop solar on buildings and car parks.

The countryside charity Campaign to Protect Rural England estimates that all suitable roof space and car parks in the UK could generate a staggering 117 GW, substantially more than the Government's total target of 70 GW by 2035.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In Huntingdon we have a new solar farm proposed that is going through the planning application at present. It will be 1,900 acres in size. East Park Energy covers a vast range of farmland, all of which is grade 2 or grade 3a. Does the hon. Member agree with me that until we fully explore the opportunity to put solar panels on rooftops, we should not be pursuing putting solar power on good quality farmland?

Llinos Medi: I totally agree; I think that solar on good agricultural land is a very lazy way of producing green energy. I will move on to tidal energy.

I ask the Minister what can be done to ramp up smaller scale solar developments. There are other clean technologies that can be deployed. I call on the UK Government to commit to new nuclear on the Wylfa site, considering its huge potential to generate local jobs and clean energy.

Wales also has huge potential when it comes to wind and sea power. By 2050, the National Energy System Operator predicts that Wales will be using 42 TWh of energy, around three times more than today. However, we will be generating 71 TWh of energy, making Wales a major electricity exporter to the rest of Great Britain.

Ynys Môn has a growing tidal sector, with the pioneering Morlais project off its coast. That could be developed further by giving certainty to investors to develop tidal stream technology by seeing clear targets from the UK Government. Can the Minister set out what the Government are doing to maximise Wales's huge energy potential, given the recent disappointment with the latest contract for difference auction—and will he listen to the calls to set a 1 GW deployment target for tidal stream by 2035?

I urge the Government to listen to my community. We need a smarter approach to large-scale solar farms that works with the needs of our communities and to safeguard food security. I am open to working with the Government to ensure that the transition to net zero is fast and fair to the people of Ynys Môn; will the Minister meet me to take that forward? There is a way where we harness our island's full potential and maintain our long tradition of producing abundant food and energy in harmony.

4.41 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Sir Mark. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) on securing this debate.

My perspective is informed by my work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on UK food security—which the hon. Member is welcome to join—and also my role as a member of the Labour Growth Group, which I suspect she may not be willing to join. I am also proud to be an MP who represents some fantastic rural communities.

In all of those roles, I have seen how renewable projects offer farmers crucial opportunities to diversify their income streams in an unpredictable economic climate. The notion that food security and renewable energy are somehow mutually exclusive is a non sequitur. It does not add up, neither logically nor practically. I can attest to this from my own constituency, where thriving farms producing everything from carrots to poultry co-exist alongside new solar schemes, like Hessay, and hopefully Elvington, too. But when a harsh season strikes—such as a devastating flood or drought—farmers face the real possibility of losing a significant portion of their harvest. In those scenarios, having additional income from solar energy can help.

A striking example of this comes from Australia, where sheep farmers have turned to solar farming as secondary income. They allow their sheep to graze among solar panels, keeping the grass short while the panels provide shelter from the sun. One farm even demonstrated an increase in wool production after the installation of their solar farm. It is that kind of innovation in agriculture that we should embrace. The notion that food security and renewable energy are at odds falls at the first inspection.

Currently, ground-mounted solar panels occupy just 0.1% of all land in the UK. Even with ambitious expansion, this is expected to rise to no more than 0.3%. To put that into perspective, that is less than the land currently used by golf courses, and solar farms provide essential services, be that clean energy or income. Finally, solar farms are often built with temporary permissions, and can be decommissioned, returning the land to its original state. Soil disturbance during installation is minimal, and solar farms can actually benefit soil health, helping it recover from a period of intensive agricultural use.

Let me be clear: climate change is itself a major driver of food insecurity. By supporting renewable energy projects, we are not only protecting our environment, but safeguarding the future of food production.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for his comments. He has rightly highlighted that solar farms can be combined with food production. There are studies showing that there are even ways in which crop yields can be increased. But would he therefore encourage the Government to be clearer in their national planning policy framework that if solar farm applications are being put forward, they should be combined with food growing as part of the application?

Mr Charters: What will really help is if we work towards a position of having a land management framework, so that we can have the clarity of addressing some of these challenges.

Let me continue. The argument that there has to be a trade-off between food security and renewable energy is misguided. If anything, our farmers' future depends on

our commitment to both. With a small slice of land, a forward-thinking approach and a commitment to combating climate change, we can ensure that our fields are productive for generations to come. The solution is clear: renewables should be seen not as an obstacle to food security, but as a powerful tool to help secure it. As I said, golf courses will take up more land than solar projects, so let's not get caught in the rough—we need to aim straight for the green.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob or to stand if they wish to speak. We are going to be very short of time and I will cut to the Front Benchers when appropriate, even if some Members have not spoken, so if you speak for too long, you are taking time off others.

4.46 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. In following the hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters), I will start by putting the other side of the argument that he was trying to develop about compatibility or incompatibility with solar installations. I use the word “installations” deliberately, because the word “farms” conjures up images of warm, cuddly, nice things that we all like to see in our countryside, rather than these brutalist fields of glass, metal and plastic that take away the natural landscape as well as food production. I have no issue with farmers who wish, on a very modest scale, to take 10, 20 or perhaps even 50 acres of totally unproductive land in order to diversify into an energy project, be that ground-mounted solar or a wind turbine, or whatever it might be, but the clue is in the debate title: this is about the large-scale solar installations that are being proposed.

Rosefield in my constituency started off as a 2,100-acre proposal; the developers are trying to trim the edges a bit, but there is still a reality that it will take away food-producing land. The National Farmers Union's own statistics show that we are losing land from cultivation at a rate of 100,000 acres per year. I understand that the proponents of ground-mounted solar want to talk about very low fractions of a percentage today, but if we look at the number of applications coming through in my constituency and, I dare say, in many other hon. Members' constituencies, the cumulative impact will be considerable. Take Rosefield alone: we have already seen two battery storage proposals on prime agricultural land right next door, as well as National Grid having to come along and say, “Ah! If all these proposals go ahead, we are going to have to rebuild East Claydon substation to take in the power that these facilities are allegedly going to be generating.” And guess what, Sir Mark? That is on yet another farm in that neighbourhood, taking away more food-producing land.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way, and the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) for securing the debate.

Cornwall, and South East Cornwall in particular, has the potential to lead the way in the renewable energy revolution and in relation to our food security, offering significant opportunities. Does the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) agree that it is essential to have a balanced approach that respects our farming and fishing communities, which play a vital

[Anna Gelderd]

role both locally and in national food security and in relation to the environment, on which they depend? We must seize this opportunity to address Cornwall's economic challenges and ensure that we do not damage ecosystems, as they play such an important role. A partnership approach would enable these essential areas across the UK, and Cornwall in particular, to succeed.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention and congratulate her on squeezing her speech into it. I would argue that, yes, a balanced approach is right and important, but this goes to the nub of the argument that ground-mounted solar is actually incredibly inefficient. When we have something in scarce supply—land, in this country—we need to go for the technologies that are going to deliver.

I have used these important statistics in Westminster Hall before and I will make my penultimate point with them today. We need 2,000 acres of solar panels to produce enough power for 50,000 homes on current usage; for a small modular reactor, we need the space of two football pitches and it will produce enough power for a million homes. A single wind turbine will produce enough power for 16,000 homes and probably needs only half the size of the room we are in right now.

This debate is about efficiency and proper land use. It is about getting to renewable energy production, but it is also about using technology that does not destroy our countryside and that does not fundamentally take away our other core source of national security, which is food production.

4.50 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) on securing this important debate. As she is a fellow MP representing a rural Welsh constituency, she will be more than aware that our agriculture and energy sectors play a huge role in the Welsh economy, and I welcome this opportunity to highlight the great work of our local farmers and energy projects. I salute my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) for saying that there is a symbiotic relationship between energy security and food security; we can deliver on both counts.

It is important to remember that consecutive Conservative failures have wreaked havoc on our energy security and allowed the skyrocketing of energy bills for every family and business in Britain. This badly impacted farmers' incomes when energy prices went up so high. The Conservatives' failure to invest in clean energy has left a legacy of high energy bills, energy insecurity and a lack of clean energy jobs. The new Labour Government have hit the ground running, with our actions to deliver on our clean power mission, including through the Great British Energy Bill.

There is certainly a need for further development of large-scale clean energy projects across Wales, and those projects need to be in the right places, such as floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea and the fantastic Morlais scheme, which has recently been instigated by the Crown Estate.

Just as energy security is now a priority under this new Government, we also understand the pivotal role that our farmers play in our nation's food security. That is why I am so proud to have stood on an election manifesto that committed to 50% of the food bought by the public sector being locally produced and sustainable. That is extremely important. It is important to me—as a smallholder in Monmouthshire, the proud daughter of a farmer and the representative of many farmers across Monmouthshire—that farmers' voices are heard, and they are given the respect and understanding lacking under the last Government.

Finally, I know that Ministers in Wales, Welsh MPs and Welsh farmers welcome the return of constructive intergovernmental relations to ensure that Welsh farmers get the fair funding they deserve where they are supplying public benefits for public goods.

4.53 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): It is a pleasure, Sir Mark, to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) for securing this debate.

As one of the very few farming MPs—I have 865 acres of arable land and grassland—I am perhaps as qualified as most people here to speak about food security. Let me be abundantly clear: farming in the UK is on the verge of a catastrophic decline, unless some crucial decisions are made to revive the industry.

Farming is a very capital-intensive business—requiring both extensive investment in machinery and long-term planning—which desperately needs certainty to achieve real and sustainable success. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs causes far more problems than it solves, through high staff turnover, a rapidly mutating rulebook and its disdain for farmers.

This harvest has been very poor for most. Input costs remain high, world prices remain low and the weather for autumn drilling has been the worst I have ever known. Desperation is spreading across British agriculture, with farmers feeling entirely ignored by everybody in these buildings.

The risk-reward of farming is now favouring uptake of schemes that do not produce food. This is complete madness. We will all be affected if logical, long-term guidelines are not implemented, promoting farming and the people who understand it, rather than an army of pen-pushing bureaucrats.

In my opinion, we need to do the following as a matter of urgency: use productive land for food production; get the public sector buying British, including in all Parliament buildings; launch a big, national buy British campaign; enforce clear labelling so that people know what they are buying; allow and encourage diversification by improving planning across the country; set up more farming apprenticeships to address the ageing workforce; slash red tape; review the power of the supermarket distribution oligopoly structures; respect country sports; let farmers farm; and—here's a mad one—listen to farmers.

Productive land must be used not for solar panels, not for rewilding, not for house building, but for farming. Always remember: no farmers means no food. We must ask ourselves: what happens then?

4.56 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi)—I hope I have pronounced the constituency name correctly—on securing this important debate, and Members from across the House, including my own colleagues, on their speeches. I support the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for York Outer (Mr Luke Charters) and for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes). I should also declare an interest: I have a number of family members, although somewhat distant, who are farmers.

My experience of solar, including from visiting solar farms near Reading, is entirely positive. I want to describe a visit I went on with the former Conservative Minister, the former Member for Hexham. We visited a large solar farm next to the M4 motorway that is on a reclaimed site—a site that had been landfill and before that gravel pits, but which has been re-adopted as grassland with ground-mounted solar. The benefits for the economy are clearly enormous. The landscape imposition of the site is minimal, as it is on reclaimed land next to a motorway.

I would like to hear more talk about how land that has been reclaimed, or has low landscape value, can be used. I understand that in much of the country there are large areas that fall into that category. Certainly, my own county of Berkshire has the M4 motorway running through it, and we have other areas of lower landscape value, as well as some of very high landscape value. I would like to see a sensible approach, protecting very valuable landscapes.

My visit to the solar farm was entirely positive. The site is financed by pension contributions; it provides a long-term source of energy, as well as a long-term source of income to pension savers, which is also important, and general benefits to the economy. It was a huge win-win for everybody. While I was there, the former Member for Hexham—who has a strong rural background—pointed out to me the ability of sites to be built in the UK so that livestock can graze under the solar panels. His own experience in the north-east of England was exactly that. I commend that point to the House.

I will add a few related points. The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) pointed out the pressure on farming incomes. It is worth remembering that many farmers are seeking to diversify. There is a strong tradition of farmers renting out disused barns and workshops to small enterprises. There is a place for farm diversity, and it is important to think about that aspect of farming. We should be commending farmers for their entrepreneurship and ability to be adaptable, as well as supporting them, as we do in many other ways.

It is also important to remember that there are large farm buildings in our landscapes that have had relatively light treatment in planning terms. I am thinking of the hon. Member for—I apologise, I cannot quite remember his constituency—

Greg Smith: Mid Buckinghamshire.

Matt Rodda: Mid Buckinghamshire—fantastic. He is obviously a Thames valley MP, like me. There are some large farm buildings in our part of the south-east that already—from the point of view of landscape—have a

very large visual impact. Some ground-mounted solar arrays are low; they can be screened if they are looked at from ground level. The site I visited had trees on one side—obviously not shading it—so that a passer-by on a footpath would not necessarily know it was there. We need to bear in mind the importance of balancing different issues while looking at this topic, of working together in a cross-party way, and of supporting the move to a sustainable future and a sustainable economy.

4.59 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Mark. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) on securing this important debate.

Farmers across the country are leading the UK's renewable energy charge, and already host about 70% of the UK's total solar generation capacity. Hosting renewable energy infrastructure can help British farmers at a time when they desperately need it, so the ability to diversify their business has been welcome for those who can do so. However, food security is paramount to national security. Energy security and food security go hand in hand, so we must secure the future of British farming.

Worryingly, recent research from Riverford Organic Farmers has found that 61% of farmers feel that they will have to give up their farms in the next 18 months due to financial pressures. British farmers have had to deal with significant challenges in the wake of Brexit, and the previous Conservative Government failed to give them the support they needed. They botched the transition from basic payments and negotiated damaging trade deals, all the while managing a staggering £358 million DEFRA underspend over the past three years. The Liberal Democrats know that we must support the nation's farmers, and that is why we need to boost the environmental land management budget by £1 billion. Reports that the new Government are considering stripping £130 million from the agriculture budget are hugely concerning. That would be a serious misstep at a time when the nation's food producers can least afford it.

In Glastonbury and Somerton, many farmers and landowners are taking the opportunity to host ground-mounted solar panels. Over the past few years, they have been installed in Cucklington, Milborne Port and Wincanton, to name just a few places, but it is important that solar farms are not developed on our best and most versatile land. The national planning policy framework states that poorer quality land should be used in preference.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Dyke: I will not, given the time.

Poorer quality land can still be productive, as sheep can graze underneath the solar panels, while the solar array provides a diversification opportunity for the farmer. It is important that the updated NPPF keeps that distinction so that poorer quality land with the ability to under-graze remains preferable to the best and most versatile.

We must make it easier for farmers to put solar panels on agricultural buildings. Solar arrays are space intensive, and can sometimes compete for land that

[Sarah Dyke]

would otherwise be used for other purposes. Putting solar panels on the roofs of farm buildings would avoid any land use conflict.

Rural communities such as Glastonbury and Somerton are leading the solar energy movement. My constituency is in the top 50 English parliamentary constituencies for domestic solar generation capacity. The Government should be looking to improve on the success of rural communities by enabling more solar panels on agricultural buildings, with affordable access to rural electricity grid connections. To ensure we are food secure, we must ensure that the future of British farming is safe. We must therefore give our farmers the support they need to feed the nation and protect our environment. To reach net zero by 2045, we must support the roll-out of renewables. Supporting farmers to host renewable infrastructure is common sense, but it must not be on our best, most versatile and most productive land. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. I call Ann Davies.

5.3 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Diolch, Sir Mark. It is a pleasure to take part in this debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi).

Land use is so important to this discussion. We all support green energy products. In fact, in Caerfyrddin many wind farms and energy park projects are already working their way through the planning system. Most people accept that if we want the lights kept on, this is the way forward. However, land is not infinite. Farmers like me—it is lovely to see a fellow farmer here—use it to produce food.

In a world in which there is more food insecurity than ever before, we need to ensure that any productive piece of land is used for that purpose. As my hon. Friend said, in Wales we produce only 6% of our publicly procured vegetables locally, and that needs to change. In Llanarthney, where I live, we have an exciting project in which we have taken over a council-owned farm to produce vegetables for the public plate. The Bremenda Isaf project has produced 5 tonnes of vegetables on 2 acres in this cold, wet year, due to the skill of the growing team of two and another two who help alongside the project.

Shared prosperity fund money was used to fund that innovation and the benefit to Ysgol Bro Dinefwr and to Awel Tywi residential home, to name just two beneficiaries, is immense. Nutritionally superior fresh vegetables are tasty; if they are tasty, the residents will eat more, and if they eat more, it results in better health outcomes. The carbon footprint is negligible and it is an excellent example of farm to fork.

We can learn from the Bremenda Isaf model and establish initiatives that not only look after our land, but feed the nation—or, in my case, feed the public plate in Carmarthenshire. That can work in harmony with energy production if we use our land in a sensible and targeted way. Land can be used for energy production, it can grow food, it can be used for infrastructure and homes, but we need an adult conversation on how it can be used and where large-scale energy parks need to

be placed. For example, we need to decide whether the mountains around my constituency produce lamb or beef or are solely used for energy parks—or whether, with thought and community consideration, the two can co-exist.

My ask of the UK and Welsh Governments is to listen to the points raised in this debate about the need for large-scale energy projects and infrastructure, and to help maximise the use of our valuable agricultural land for horticulture and food production.

5.6 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): My remarks will be very short. I want to speak in relation to Northern Ireland, which produces enough food to feed over 10 million people across this United Kingdom and right across the globe. We must ensure our food security is protected alongside our energy. The two can be done hand in hand, but it is important to put on record the need for protections against vast amounts of our prime agricultural land being used such that it is taken out of production, as many of these solar farms are doing. There have been massive strides around solar farms, with sheep and activities able to continue, but not enough. There needs to be more investment into making solar farms friendlier to production and agricultural use alongside them.

On the part of Northern Ireland, we cannot allow those large-scale solar farms to be placed right across our countryside, putting our food security in jeopardy. I believe it undermines our own food self-sufficiency and will result in us becoming more dependent on importing food, which is contrary to what we want to be doing.

5.8 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure, Sir Mark, to listen to this lively debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) on bringing it to the Chamber. There are clearly some different opinions, but I think the overall consensus does obviously emerge. Food security and energy security are equally important. Clearly we should not be displacing good productive farmland for any use that is not food production. As I understand it, the pressure comes mainly from landlords evicting active tenant farmers from their land. In that context, I first ask the Minister whether the Government will actually bring in the long-awaited tenant farming commissioner, who would look at these tensions between landlords and tenant farmers.

As we have already heard, the threat to UK food security comes not from renewable energy projects, but from a number of complex interrelated issues relating to how our food is produced, how it is subsidised, sold onto the middleman and supermarkets, and to a demand and supply mechanism that is broken.

At the heart of our food supply problems globally is climate change. Therefore, tackling climate change must be our top priority. Solar plays a major part in our efforts to get to net zero. More renewables also means less dependence on oil and gas and better security for our constituents when it comes to their energy bills. This year, England will produce 26% less wheat than in 2023. This comes after the wettest 18 months since records began. The loss of wheat in 2024 alone is over 5,000 times greater than the loss of food production caused by three new solar farms being approved in July. These are the figures we need to take into consideration.

When it comes to food supply and security, solar farms are a drop in the ocean compared with what we lose to the climate crisis. Meeting the UK Government's plans for increasing solar energy by 2035 would mean using about 0.3% of the UK's land—and we have already heard the comparison with golf courses. We need to look at how we sensibly use all our land. My constituency of Bath is served by solar energy from Lightsource BP, which is helping the UK to transition to net zero through solar projects. Projects like these need timely grid connection, and the Minister will know that that is currently the biggest barrier to farmers diversifying their income through renewable energy.

Even if all future ground-mounted solar was built on farmland, the impact on UK food production as a result of the change in land use would be very small. As solar technology develops, it will need less space in the future. An example is bifacial panels that capture solar light on both sides of the panel. There are also types of solar panels where crops can be grown below. Many farmers who are unlikely to volunteer their best land for solar power are positive about this technology. Many solar farms are home to grazing animals like sheep, which live alongside the panels. We do not have to choose one or the other. Many farmers find it useful to lease less productive land to energy companies for solar farms, providing much-needed additional income. If farmers must keep productive farms, they must also be profitable. It would be bad for food security to take away what could be an important income stream for farmers.

The National Farmers Union agrees on the importance of renewables and says that,

“solar projects often offer a good diversification option for farmers.”

We should not be prohibiting farmers from using their land how they best see fit. If crops can grow and livestock can graze while the same land accommodates solar panels, where is the issue?

We need to guarantee food security by implementing a national food strategy. The Liberal Democrats would boost the farming budget by £1 billion. We must support farmers to produce high-quality food to high standards while also improving our natural environment, and we must encourage people to buy local. It is so important that people understand the connection between locally produced food and high-quality food—and, yes, we occasionally have to pay a little bit more for it, but these are the important connections and arguments we need to make.

The Liberal Democrats have been calling for a proper visa and seasonal worker scheme. This would allow our farmers and fishers to access the workforce they need. We would also provide an extra £1 billion for the ELM scheme to support profitable, sustainable and nature-friendly farming across the UK. The Government also need to ensure effective regulation of UK food systems, agriculture and land use. We would seek to strengthen DEFRA, which is currently under-resourced and undervalued.

We should not have to choose between solar farms and food security. Farmers must be free to make their own choices and be supported to do so, and I hope the Government are listening to farmers.

5.14 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) on bringing forward this incredibly important debate. I visited her constituency once and a half on nuclear business—the half was due to me travelling on a rain-soaked day in May when events in London called me back somewhat earlier than planned. I completely agree with her points regarding Wylfa being the perfect site for a new nuclear power station, not only in the United Kingdom, but within Europe. I would urge the Minister to heed her words and move forward with what we had planned to do, which was to deliver a third gigawatt-scale reactor at Wylfa.

The last time this debate was heard in Westminster Hall—indeed the last time I was in Westminster Hall—I had the privilege of responding as a Minister to the debate brought by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith). With circumstances somewhat changed in the intervening months—the cast list has changed considerably—I now respond as the shadow Minister. When speaking for the previous Government on the subject, I guaranteed that, should we be returned, the Conservative Administration would not countenance the industrialisation of our green and pleasant land. I gave that guarantee from this very place, though standing on the Government side, only six months ago. We changed the planning guidance to ensure that food and energy security were equally important and that top graded agricultural land would be protected, and began the process of ensuring independent verification of soil samples to ascertain the quality of land on which building was proposed.

At that time, I do not think anybody knew how soon the political landscape would be transformed, but I do know that at the time of the debate, colleagues in government were acutely aware of how the Labour party—now the Government—might have been inclined to drastically transform the energy landscape. It was telling, however, that not a single Labour, Liberal Democrat or SNP Member was in attendance at the debate that day, apart from the official Opposition spokesperson.

Indeed, within the first few months of this Government we have seen Labour ride roughshod over our attempts to protect rural Britain from the over-development we had pledged to oppose, with the approval of three mammoth solar farms: in July, the 2,000 acre Mallard Pass, the Gate Burton energy park in Lincolnshire and the Sunnica energy farm in Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. More recently, we heard of the Corton solar farm.

The Government have committed to trebling solar capacity by the end of the decade. Speaking on his decision to approve those solar farms, the Secretary of State said:

“This is a Government in a hurry to deliver the change it promised.”

Our concern on the Opposition Benches is that the Government are in far too much of a hurry. That hurry leads the Government to ride roughshod over communities' views, to disregard their discontent, and to sign over agricultural land to industrial use. I am sorry to say that that is a mistake on a number of fronts.

When I spoke on the subject as Minister for Energy, I acknowledged the fundamental need to balance the competing priorities and needs of our finite resources.

[Andrew Bowie]

We believe in solar power, on homes and on brownfield and industrial sites. Under the previous Government, we saw a near 5,000% increase in the number of homes with solar panels, to 1.5 million homes. Solar will play its part in our renewable energy mix and, I might add, has the support of many farmers, as a vital component of their land use, which serves to buoy the financial viability of their arable or livestock ventures through providing secure income.

Farmers host around 70% of Britain's solar power capacity and many have integrated solar power to some extent, either through panels on outbuildings or by dedicating parts of their land to solar panels. However, we must acknowledge that the primary use for that land is and should remain agricultural. We must protect our domestic ability to feed Britain. Through the pandemic and the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the fragility of international supply chains has been illustrated. It is vital that we protect our domestic agricultural capacity.

We produce only 60% of our own supply currently, with every development of 2,000 acres chipping away at potentially productive farmland. The ambition to reduce our carbon footprint, to produce more clean, cheap energy to power our homes and businesses, is a cause that rightly unites us across the House; I hope I am correct in thinking so. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), likes to think that his side of the House has a monopoly on that mission, but I remind him that it was the previous Government who oversaw the first to the fifth largest offshore windfarms in the world being built off British shores. The previous Government achieved the fastest decarbonisation in the G20 while still growing the economy, halving emissions during our period in office.

The Minister has our support for the ambition to decarbonise our energy sector and supply cleaner energy for the UK, but I gently say to him that this headlong rush to 2030 is alienating people in rural communities up and down the country. They too often feel that they are shouldering the burden for keeping the lights on in cities far from them, and that the sheer scale of this infrastructure build is leaving many across our islands feeling under siege.

I speak as the MP for such a community, and know that only too well. I am sure that newly elected Labour MPs representing rural constituencies, in some cases for the first time, will see in their inboxes the fear and anger being generated by these plans. We are united in our desire across the House to reduce our carbon footprint and to conserve our planet for future generations. However, it is evident that on these Benches we have a very different idea of how to attain that ideal. Our path to a cleaner future would not ride roughshod over community consent and would not sacrifice prime agricultural land.

I ask the Minister please to listen to the concerns raised by hon. Members from Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives, the Reform party and the Green party, and from everybody who has spoken—bar from the Government Benches—in this debate. Please listen to them and ensure that food security has equal importance to energy security in the eyes of the Government.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I thank the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) for securing this important debate. We have been in a number of debates on topics like this over the past few weeks. It is great that her speech reflected that she is a champion of the renewable sector and the benefits that can bring to her constituency. She said that her constituency is now known as “energy island”, which is a true reflection of the powerhouse it has become in recent years. It has established technologies: solar, as she talked about, but also onshore wind and a number of other projects to come. It is also home to some of our newer technologies: tidal stream projects of around 38 MW are in the contracts for difference rounds, and we will be talking much more about that in the future.

I thank hon. Members for the tone of today's debate and for their contributions. Our starting point, which the Government have been very clear on from day one, is that we want to deliver clean power by 2030. We want to do that for a number of reasons: to protect people from the wild price spikes that they suffered because of the volatility of global fuel markets, to tackle climate change—a lot of the discussion today on the importance of agriculture misses the importance of tackling climate change, which is currently having an enormous impact on farms right across the country and, if we do not act faster now, will continue to have an even greater impact—and to deliver the energy security the country needs. That will involve a diverse range of projects and technologies.

We are not putting one technology forward as the answer to everything—this is about balance, as several hon. Members said today. Yes, ground-mounted solar plays a really important part, but so too does roof solar. We are not picking one or the other. Both are incredibly important, and there are huge opportunities for a rooftop solar revolution, which we will be seeing more about in the months ahead. But ground-mounted solar also has an important role to play. This is a question of balance.

Adrian Ramsay: The Minister always engages in a collegiate manner, which I welcome. On rooftop solar, I am sure, despite the disagreements today, that we would all agree that more solar on rooftops is crucial for tackling the climate crisis energy bills. Could he therefore confirm that the future homes standard will require all new homes to include solar panels as standard?

Michael Shanks: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for the collegiate way in which he engages in these debates. We will be saying more about the future homes standard in due course, so I will not announce that here, but his point has been heard.

I want to come back to the point about balance. It is key in a lot of the contributions made today, and indeed in other debates on this subject over the past few months. We have to find a way to balance the environment and our need to protect nature with supporting local communities to make sure that we can deliver cheaper, more secure energy in the future and tackle our climate change objectives. But new energy infrastructure is important in every single one of those points, so we have to build that infrastructure. The question is how to ensure we get that balance right. That is why we have

announced that we will have a land use plan—something the previous Government failed to do. But it is also why we need to plan a lot of that infrastructure much more carefully.

I reflect on the point made by the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) about the number of projects in particular areas, because we can take a lot from that about the cumulative impact of projects. That is why, just today, we commissioned the National Energy System Operator to carry out the first strategic spatial energy plan of the whole of Great Britain. Crucially, we recognise that if we plan new energy infrastructure much more strategically, we will avoid some of the questions that he raises. That is a really important point.

Nothing we have said rides roughshod over the planning system. The planning system in this country is extremely robust. People will continue to have opportunities to engage in that process and be consulted on. No matter the size of the energy project in question, it will be subject to a rigorous planning process, and the views and interests of the local community will be taken into account. On that point, I want to reflect on another Westminster Hall debate on community benefits, which are important here as well, and which the hon. Member for Ynys Môn mentioned in her opening speech. We need to do much more on community benefits, and solar is particularly important in that discussion. We have been very clear as a Government that we want to look at whether they should be mandatory rather than voluntary, and whether we should have a much clearer set of objectives for those funds so that there can be real community benefit. Ultimately, we want to do this with communities. Communities will have to host this infrastructure—there is no getting away from that—but it is important that they benefit from it in the process.

Finally, the Government recognise that food security is also national security, and we will champion British farming while protecting our natural environment. That is why we have already said that we will introduce a new deal for farmers to boost rural economic growth and strengthen Britain's food security.

I want to be clear: I do not believe for a second that the accelerated roll-out of clean energy infrastructure poses a threat to food security. There are, of course, huge competing demands on land use throughout the country, and they have to be balanced. However, taking solar as an example, even under the most ambitious plans in the country, less than 1% of the UK's agricultural land would be occupied by solar farms. I am afraid that the rhetoric does not meet the reality. That point has been backed up by the National Farmers Union, which believes that every farm is well positioned to deliver small-scale solar, wind or battery storage, which can be used on the farm but also provides benefits for local communities.

Food production is incredibly important, as is energy production. Those two are not mutually exclusive, and we can find a way for them to co-exist. I was interested

in the point made by my hon. Friends the Members for York Outer (Mr Charters) and for Reading Central (Matt Rodda). I recently visited Manor Farm solar farm, which is a good example of combining an agricultural strategy with a solar farm. It also contributes to the rewilding of areas and to the managed improvement in nature in the local community, which was not being done by the mismanaged agricultural land before, so we can get real benefits from it as well.

This is an important debate, and the balance is key. We have made no secret of this: we want to see the rapid development of energy infrastructure. It is important because people are paying far too much in their bills and we are exposed to volatile fossil fuel markets. For every year that we remain exposed to those markets, we remain vulnerable to the price spikes that our constituents are facing, so it is important to move at pace. I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) about the pace at which we are moving, and I am grateful for his recognition of that.

This is our clean power mission. Together, we can provide energy security, reduce costs to consumers, deliver on our environmental responsibilities and ensure that we have economic growth and responsible use of land right across the country. I will close by thanking all hon. Members for participating in the debate. I hope that we will have many more of these discussions. They are important debates to have, and together we can find the balance and deliver the infrastructure and food security that the country needs.

5.28 pm

Llinos Medi: I thank all Members for their contributions. Very quickly, I want to point out that there are not over 4,000 acres of golf courses on Ynys Môn, so the cumulative effect is something that we seriously need to consider. A UK-wide approach to numbers and figures will have a detrimental effect on Ynys Môn. Spatial planning is seriously needed, and both Governments have missed the fact that the energy and infrastructure strategies go hand in hand. Ynys Môn is seen as a place because of the grid capacity. On the impact on our rural economy, reclaimed land is totally different from good agricultural land that is creating livelihoods today.

I am glad that we have had the conversation. I want this debate to be a mature one where we balance the effects of the climate crisis and the crisis that we face in food production and the cost of producing that food.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered large scale energy projects and food security.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 22 October 2024

TREASURY

Support to Ukraine

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves):

The UK is committed, alongside our G7 allies, to supporting Ukraine for as long as it takes. Ensuring Ukraine's security is in the interest of our own national security and shared values. We and our G7 partners have also repeatedly underscored that Russia's obligations under international law are clear: Russia must pay for the damage it has caused to Ukraine.

The Government have today announced that the United Kingdom will contribute £2.26 billion—\$3 billion—to the G7 “Extraordinary Revenue Acceleration” (ERA) Loans to Ukraine scheme. The ERA was announced on 14 June 2024. The scheme will provide Ukraine with approximately \$50 billion of additional funding. This funding will be provided through budget support from the G7, repaid using the extraordinary profits generated on immobilised Russian sovereign assets primarily held in the EU.

This funding is additional to both the £3 billion per year of bilateral military support which the UK has committed to for as long as required, and UK Export Finance's overall £3.5 billion capacity for Ukraine, including support for defence requirements. The UK has also committed to up to \$5 billion in fiscal support through loan guarantees on World Bank lending to Ukraine since 2022.

The UK's contribution to Ukraine under the ERA scheme will be used for budgetary support earmarked for military procurement, bolstering Ukraine's capacity for self-defence in the face of Russia's illegal war, and providing vital equipment and support to the front line.

The Government will introduce primary legislation, when parliamentary time allows, seeking parliamentary spending authority to provide this financial assistance. Subject to achieving Royal Assent and concluding a bilateral agreement with Ukraine, the UK will be able to begin disbursing funds to Ukraine and receiving repayments via the EU's Ukraine Loan Co-operation Mechanism.

The Government intend to begin disbursals within this financial year.

[HCWS153]

DEFENCE

Council of Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations Annual Reports and Accounts

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of the Council of Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations (RFCA) annual reports and accounts 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23, in accordance with the RFCA Regulations 2014.

[HCWS151]

EDUCATION

Mainstream Free Schools: Review

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

Education is at the heart of the Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity and give every young person the best start in life, no matter their background. This Government are determined to drive high and rising education standards for children across the country. We can only achieve this by making sure Government funding is targeted where it is most needed.

Under the last Administration, substantial funds were allocated to the free schools programme, often resulting in surpluses in school capacity. The National Audit Office set out in 2017 that of the 113,500 new places in mainstream free schools due by 2021, an estimated 57,500 amounted to spare capacity in the new schools' local area. Not only is this poor value for money, the oversupply of places can be detrimental to the other, more established schools in that area—who might lose pupils, as well as teachers, to their new competitor.

Meanwhile, in the 14 years since the cancellation of the Building Schools for the Future programme, some of this funding could have been put to better use improving the deteriorating condition of our existing schools and colleges. We do not underestimate the scale of the challenge that we have inherited and this will not be a quick fix.

I have therefore asked officials to review the mainstream free schools planned by the last Government, that have not yet opened. We will look at whether they will meet a need for places in their local area and offer value for taxpayers' money. We will also take into account whether projects would provide a distinctive curriculum and any impact on existing local providers. Officials will work with local authorities and academy trusts to take this work forward over the autumn and will write to them now, setting out next steps in relation to individual projects. There are 44 centrally delivered, mainstream projects where we will engage with local authorities and trusts to review whether the school should open. More detail on schools in scope of the review will be provided in due course.

Our priority is to ensure children thrive in education, whatever type of school they are in—including free schools. Capacity varies from place to place, so we will continue to open new schools where they are needed. We also value the role of academy trusts within the school system. Strong trusts use their collaboration and leadership to deliver exceptional results for children and young people, including those in disadvantaged areas. Academy trusts will continue to have a crucial role in our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity.

We are setting this out now, so that we can work transparently and openly with trusts and local authorities as we undertake this important work.

The review announced today will only examine mainstream free school projects that were approved by central Government. It does not include those being delivered through competitions run by local authorities, which will continue as planned.

The Government are clear they want to make sure all children with special educational needs and disabilities receive the support they need to achieve and thrive. That is why the manifesto set out a clear ambition to improve inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, while ensuring that special schools cater for children with the most complex needs.

Work to deliver special and alternative provision free schools is continuing. As with all Government investment, special and alternative provision free school projects will be subject to value for money consideration through their development, in line with the Government's vision for the special educational needs system.

Access to high-quality school places that enable all children to achieve and thrive, including those who are disadvantaged and those with SEND, is fundamental in delivering our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity.

[HCWS150]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

EU Foreign Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): I attended the EU's Foreign Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 14 October. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha also attended via video conferencing.

This was the first time a UK Foreign Secretary has attended this meeting in over two years—and the first attendance at a regular FAC since Brexit. My visit, following that of the Prime Minister to Brussels on 2 October, marks a significant moment in our reset with Europe and has established a course towards a new UK-EU security partnership to address common threats and challenges.

Ahead of the Foreign Affairs Council meeting, I met with the EU High Representative to take stock of the shared challenges facing Europe, including Russia's war against Ukraine and the situation in the middle east. The High Representative and I agreed to establish a regular, six monthly strategic dialogue, with the first meeting in early 2025 to reaffirm the importance of the relationship between the UK and the EU and strengthen our co-operation in this difficult geopolitical context. In addition, we agreed to launch four new regular working groups on Russia/Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific, the western Balkans and hybrid threats.

At the Foreign Affairs Council itself, I described the common challenges facing our continent. I reiterated the UK's ironclad commitment to Ukraine, and pushed for bold action, including accelerated financial and military support, ratcheting economic pressure on Russia, and tackling third-country support to Russia's military industrial complex. I emphasised that investment in Ukraine's security today was critical to ensuring Europe's security for generations to come.

On the middle east, I called for an immediate ceasefire across the Israel-Lebanon border and stressed the UK's unwavering support for UNIFIL's role in South Lebanon, as mandated in UN resolution 1701. On Gaza, I called for the immediate release of hostages, unhindered access

for humanitarian aid and renewed focus on a two-state solution. I condemned recent attacks on Israel and Iran's ballistic missile supply to Russia, committing to sanctioning Iran's regime in response. In the margins of the Foreign Affairs Council meeting, I held a series of bilateral engagements with European counterparts from Germany, France, Romania, Spain, and Luxembourg.

This meeting marked a significant step forward in our reset of the UK's relationship with our European neighbours and friends, in which we will deepen ties, grow our economies, and enhance our shared security against shared challenges. Together with my ministerial colleagues, this Government will continue to progress this work.

[HCWS154]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Point of Care Medicines Manufacture Regulations

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I am pleased to announce that the draft Human Medicines (Amendment) (Modular Manufacture and Point of Care) Regulations 2024 were laid before Parliament yesterday. When approved by Parliament, this instrument will create a new regulatory framework for innovative manufacturing methods for medicines that must be made near the patient, innovative medicines manufactured at the point of care, and modular manufacturing, where products are manufactured in modular, relocatable units.

The UK will be the first country worldwide to introduce such a regulatory framework. These regulatory changes will support the development of medicines at the forefront of technology, enable patient access to pioneering medicines and help move treatment closer to the patient.

Point of care manufactured products are often highly personalised, such as cell or gene therapies, 3D-printed medicines or treatments derived from a patient's own blood. These products can have extremely short shelf lives, sometimes as brief as an hour or even a few minutes. This requires manufacturing and supply either at the point of care or close to where the patient is being treated. This could include in hospital wards, operating theatres, community health centres or even the patient's home.

The current regulations are not geared for manufacturing at multiple different sites across the country in this way, and current regulatory barriers would make such manufacture complicated and burdensome. Current regulations also limit other innovative manufacturing models, such as modular, where products need to be manufactured in relocatable units, for example where cancer biopsies and blood-derived components are taken from a patient and sent to a local manufacturing site to manufacture a personalised cancer vaccine specific to that patient's disease.

Many of these technologies are currently in early development. Providing regulatory clarity now will enable new products and manufacturing approaches to be developed. A tailored framework will ensure that these novel medicines meet the same rigorous standards of safety, quality and efficacy as more traditional treatments, while removing barriers to using innovative manufacturing methods.

The new framework will bring a range of benefits to:

Patients and carers—who will benefit from access to new and more personal treatments in a timely and more convenient manner with the potential for less travel and time in hospitals, Healthcare professionals—by providing a greater range and more effective treatment options and improving patients' response to treatment, and

Innovators—by providing clear regulatory expectations and enabling speedier product development.

This instrument follows a public consultation that gained feedback from a range of individuals and organisations across the UK and internationally. The overwhelming majority of responses were positive, with 91% of respondents agreeing that a new framework was required and 94% agreeing with the framework proposed.

The regulations, along with the associated explanatory memorandum and impact assessment, have been published on gov.uk.

[HCWS152]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Interventions: Birmingham and Slough

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): All hon. Members will recognise the importance of having well-functioning local councils which provide essential statutory services local residents rely upon. Local councils must be fit, legal and decent. Today, I would like to update the House on the statutory intervention in Birmingham, which was a year old as of 5 October, and my plans to reset the relationship between central and local government with a focus on reform and recovery. I will also update the House on the statutory intervention in Slough, which has been in place since December 2021.

Birmingham city council remains in a challenging place. Significant challenges continue to face the council, as outlined in the commissioners' first progress report which I am publishing today. Steps towards financial stability have been taken, including setting the 2024-25 budget, and I am grateful for the significant oversight and direction from commissioners, who have been fundamental to this progress. The council is committed to leading its own recovery. I want to recognise the progress made by the council to date under the leadership of Councillor Cotton and his commitment to resolving the challenges facing the city. While there remains much more that needs to be done, I am keen that the intervention moves as quickly as possible to a model based around a more equal partnership with the council, working in the interests of the people of Birmingham.

Birmingham city council is committed to achieving financial stability, including finding a resolution to its significant equal pay liabilities once and for all, delivering the necessary savings to bridge the projected budget gap for 2024-25 and 2025-26 to move to a more stable financial footing and transforming local services, many of which still require significant improvement. I know that difficult decisions will need to be taken in the coming weeks and months. I am confident that Joanne Roney CBE, who has recently taken up her post as managing director at the council, will work with both

officers and members to improve the culture and governance of the organisation and shift the focus to growth opportunities in the city.

I am exploring options to reset and reform the system to provide a more supportive approach to stewardship for local councils, establishing partnerships across local government built on mutual respect, genuine collaboration and meaningful engagement. In any system with adequate checks and balances there will always be a need for Government to work directly with a small number of councils in difficulty, but I am clear that this should be done in a different way that is not punitive and is based on genuine partnership to secure improvements.

Building a wider partnership to deliver for the city of Birmingham is essential. I encourage Birmingham city council to consider establishing and deepening partnerships with private and public partners in the region, including Mayor Parker of the West Midlands combined authority, so they can be more involved in shaping decisions around asset realisation and the growth strategy, linking in with local growth plans as necessary. Such partnerships will help unlock Birmingham's huge potential for growth and drive forward skills, jobs and opportunities in the wider region.

I have asked that commissioners provide a further assessment of the council's progress in January, including their assessment of how the council's growth strategy can support the council's recovery and contribute to this Government's wider ambition for national renewal. I would like to place on record my gratitude to Lord Hutton, who is stepping down from his role as a political adviser to the intervention, for his knowledge and expertise which has been of immense value to both the council and the wider commissioner team.

I also want to acknowledge the diligent and hard-working members of staff at the council who do their utmost to provide essential frontline services for residents. I, in turn, will do my utmost to ensure that all interested parties/partners work collaboratively to guarantee Birmingham's recovery remains on track so that residents have a well-functioning local authority with a set of statutory services they deserve.

I will keep the House and the public updated on any changes to the intervention, including publishing the second commissioners' report in the new year.

Slough borough council has been in intervention since December 2021 and this House has received a series of updates on the recovery of the council. The last update was in February, when the view of commissioners was that the council would continue to need support beyond the scheduled end of the intervention on 30 November this year. Significant challenges continue to face the council, as outlined in the commissioner's report from April and update letter from September, both of which I am publishing today.

While some improvements have been made since the start of the intervention, there are still a substantial number of areas which require further improvement. There remains volatility in the council's financial position, and there is not yet a target operating model that aligns with the medium-term financial outlook. A robust and resourced transformation plan that aligns to the target operating model is needed to drive change, which must be underpinned by strong leadership and a comprehensive workforce strategy to foster and embed cultural change.

Further improvements still need to be secured relating to risk management, governance, including the scrutiny function and audit committee, evidence-based decision making and resident engagement. Separately, the continued progress in children's social care and SEND services under Department for Education intervention has been noted.

Having considered carefully the findings and evidence presented in the report and update letter, I have concluded that the council is not yet meeting its best value duty and that issuing new directions will provide Slough borough council with ongoing Government support via commissioners. They would continue to assist the council to design, implement and embed the necessary changes and improvements. Accordingly, I am now seeking representations by 4 November on the report and update letter and a proposal to issue new directions under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999. These would set a new end date for the intervention of 30 November 2026, require the council to take actions that are consistent with both the existing directions and the priorities the commissioners have set for the council, and provide for commissioners to continue to be able to exercise council functions relating to governance, finance and appointments. I understand that the council would welcome the extension of the intervention, given the challenges ahead that they also recognise, and I am keen to explore further opportunities to work in partnership to support their reset, reform and recovery.

If, following my consideration of any representations, I decide to implement my proposal, I intend to reappoint the existing commissioner team of Gavin Jones, Denise Murray and Ged Curran, who I know are working with the council with mutual respect, genuine collaboration and meaningful engagement. To further support the council to lead its own recovery, I also intend to appoint the interim chief executive, Will Tuckley, as managing director commissioner.

I again want to acknowledge the diligent and hard-working members of staff at the council who do their utmost to provide essential frontline services for residents, and reinforce my commitment to support Slough's recovery remaining on track so that residents have a well-functioning local authority with a set of statutory services they deserve.

I will keep the House and the public updated on my proposed change to the intervention.

I will deposit in the House Library copies of the documents I have referred to, which are also being published on www.gov.uk today.

[HCWS155]

JUSTICE

Sentencing Review and Prison Capacity Package

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): As I informed the House earlier today, this Government inherited a prison system at the point of crisis. Prior to September, the adult male prison estate was running at over 99% capacity for 18 months, and the system was at risk of imminent collapse, with grave consequences for public safety and the whole criminal justice system.

In July we made the difficult but necessary decision to introduce a temporary change in the law to reduce the eligible standard determinate sentence release point from 50% to 40% (SDS40), with the second tranche of releases being implemented today. There are important offence exclusions for serious violent offences with a sentence of four years or more, sex offences, and certain domestic abuse-connected offences, and a commitment to review the change in 18 months. This decision was not taken lightly, but we are clear that this was the safest way forward given the scale of the emergency facing our prisons.

SDS40 bought us valuable time, which has ensured that we could keep sending criminals to prison, protect the public and make prisons safer for hard-working staff. We have already ended the previous Government's "end of custody supervised licence" scheme, which released over 10,000 offenders early, often with very little warning to probation officers, placing them under enormous strain. We have also deactivated Operation Safeguard, which saw cells in police custody suites made available to hold prisoners temporarily when reception prisons did not have space to accept new prisoners. The headroom created by SDS40 enabled us to increase magistrates courts' sentencing powers—from six to 12 months' maximum custodial for a single triable either-way offence—in order to bear down on our large remand population. This measure will also help reduce the Crown court backlog. However, SDS40 was not a permanent solution, and we must now turn our attention to implementing a sustainable solution to the population crisis.

New prison places will continue to form a key part of our solution. We are committed to continuing the prison build programme that the last Government promised but did not deliver, building 14,000 places through the construction of a further four new prisons, as well as the expansion and refurbishment of the existing estate. We will also publish a 10-year capacity strategy later this year, which will set out our long-term plan for the prison estate, including streamlining the planning process.

However, we cannot build our way out of this crisis. The prison population is rising by around 4,500 each year. The current level of demand would see us need to build three mega-jails a year. The last Conservative Government managed to build three prisons in the last 10 years. However fast we build, increasing demand will outstrip supply. While there will always be a place for prison to punish offenders and keep the public safe, we must therefore review our sentencing framework, ensuring we never run out of prison places again.

We have therefore today commissioned an independent review of sentencing, which will deliver on the Government's manifesto commitment to bring sentencing up to date. It has a clear objective to re-evaluate the sentencing framework to ensure that this Government are never again in a position where we are forced into the emergency release of prisoners. To ensure an effective and coherent justice system, the sentencing review will be guided by three principles:

First, sentences must punish offenders and protect the public, and there must always be space in prison for dangerous offenders;

Secondly, sentences must encourage offenders to turn their backs on a life of crime; and

Thirdly, we must expand the use of punishment outside of prison. In doing so, the review will look at how technology can support the administration of sentences outside of prison.

This will be chaired by the former Lord Chancellor, the right hon. David Gauke, supported by a panel that will include judicial expertise and expertise from across the justice system.

After the violent disorder, we came dangerously close to a disaster. Without action, we would have faced the prospect of a total breakdown of law and order. As a result, pressure on the system has increased, and so we must implement further urgent measures that will ensure the prison system avoids collapse before the sentencing review concludes and we can implement its recommendations. We will take a transparent approach that is proportionate to the levels of pressures seen, and this will not mean any further emergency releases.

We will:

Extend the maximum curfew period that offenders can spend on home detention curfew (HDC) from six to 12 months, meaning that those released on HDC will spend less time in prison and longer in the community subject to electronically monitored curfew.

Change the policy of risk-assessed recall review (RARR) to enable its use in a greater number of low-risk cases than at present to target the unsustainable growth in the recall population.

Work with the Home Office to identify further ways to speed up the removal of foreign national offenders from prison.

The measures on HDC and recall reform will make greater requirements of the probation service. In addition to our commitment to fund at least 1,000 additional trainee probation officers by the end of March 2025, HM Prison and Probation Service will also be considering what operational changes may be required in order to maintain a focus on higher-risk individuals supervised in the community and ensure that the public continue to be protected.

We are extremely grateful for the ongoing support shown by all those working in the criminal justice system, who have worked tirelessly to keep the system from collapsing. This Government will always put the country and its safety first and will take steps so the prison system is never allowed to reach this point again.

[HCWS156]

TRANSPORT

UK Airspace Design Service: Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): Today, the Department for Transport (DfT) and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) are launching a consultation proposing the creation of a new UK Airspace Design Service (UKADS) that would act as a single guiding mind for modernising the design of UK airspace.

The consultation demonstrates the Government's commitment to delivering holistic and modernised UK airspace as part of the CAA's airspace modernisation strategy (AMS). The AMS vision is to provide quicker, quieter and cleaner journeys, and more capacity for the benefit of those who use and are affected by UK airspace.

Modernisation will help meet the needs of passengers, businesses and the wider economy, while bringing environmental improvements that contribute towards the aviation sector achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

UK airspace is an invisible but vital piece of our national infrastructure. Using an ageing network of ground navigation beacons, its design has remained largely unchanged since the 1950s, when there were fewer than 1 million flights per year in UK airspace. This compares with 2.5 million flights in 2019 and projections of 3 million annually by 2030¹. In many cases, today's aircraft still use the same outdated routes, flying further than necessary at sub-optimal altitudes and speeds because the routes rely on the location of the ground navigation beacons, instead of following shorter, more efficient flight paths.

Doing nothing is not an option. If UK airspace is not modernised, NATS (En Route) plc (NERL), the UK's licensed provider of en route air traffic control services, estimates that by 2040, delays at a national level may increase by more than 200%, which would result in one in five flights experiencing disruption of more than 45 minutes².

Modernised airspace will make it easier for aircraft to fly more direct routes, with better climb and descent profiles to and from energy-efficient cruising altitudes to help reduce CO₂ emissions. It will also ensure that future technologies such as remotely piloted aircraft systems can operate beyond visual line of sight in the UK in a safe and efficient manner.

The current model for airspace change requires airports and air traffic control providers to develop their own airspace designs individually. Co-ordinating these changes creates significant challenges, particularly for the airports in and around the complex London area, where airspace designs overlap.

The consultation proposes creating a new single guiding mind on future airspace design, to deliver much-needed modernisation at scale and at pace. This will help to instil confidence among stakeholders in the delivery of airspace changes that will facilitate overall reductions in carbon emissions, noise and delays.

The consultation seeks views on the overall concept of a UKADS, including its responsibilities, governance and funding. Views from stakeholders will be critical to the next phase of work and we welcome responses from all interested parties.

¹ NATS (En Route) plc forecast traffic growth estimates (2026 to 2040)

² Airspace Change Masterplan Iteration 2, CAP2312b, ACOG (2022). [HCWS149]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pensions Dashboard

The Parliamentary Secretary, His Majesty's Treasury (Emma Reynolds): The Government want to shape the pensions system to serve the interests of savers and future pensioners, ensuring decent, secure retirement incomes for all. As part of achieving that goal, we want to make it easier for people to understand their pensions information so they can better prepare for financial security in later life.

As people often move around the labour market throughout their working lives, this can make it difficult for individuals to keep track of their pensions savings. To help solve this problem, the Government are committed to the delivery of pensions dashboards.

Pensions dashboards will provide a secure way for individuals to view a summary of their pensions picture online, including information about the state pension. This will help people find their lost pension pots and promote greater engagement—empowering individuals to plan their future more confidently.

The Pensions Dashboards Programme (PDP), which is part of the Money and Pensions Service (MaPS), recently concluded a formal reset process which generated a revised delivery plan. In line with that plan, the programme has begun testing the connection journey with a small number of external organisations which will help facilitate wider industry connections. Alongside this, the PDP has published an updated draft code of connection, technical standards, and data standards to support the pensions industry to prepare for connection. As a result of the PDP's progress, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority has increased its confidence in the programme's ability to deliver against their revised plan.

While it is too early to confirm a launch date for public use, we are taking steps to help the public realise the benefits of using a pensions dashboard at the earliest opportunity. I have directed the PDP to focus its efforts on the connection and launch of the MoneyHelper dashboard service (provided by MaPS), before turning to the work of connecting commercial dashboard services.

The Government support the principle of enabling multiple commercial pensions dashboard services, which will provide savers with greater choice to access their pensions information from organisations they are familiar with, promoting greater engagement with pensions. However, in the interests of ensuring consumers have the best experience on dashboards, it is prudent to allow a period while only the MoneyHelper dashboard is operational. Prioritising the launch of the Government-backed dashboard in this way will provide an opportunity to obtain better insights into customer behaviour and ensure greater confidence in operational delivery, security, and consumer protection before facilitating the connection of commercial dashboards.

We are committed to the existing published timetable for the connection of pension schemes and providers to the pensions dashboards ecosystem, which is expected to begin in April 2025, as well as the overall connection deadline of 31 October 2026. It is therefore essential that the pensions industry continues to prepare for connection, having regard to the timetable set out in DWP's guidance.

Facilitating the launch of pensions dashboards is a challenging and complex undertaking, but the Government are firmly committed to their successful delivery and to unlocking the potential benefits they will offer to future pensioners.

[HCWS148]

Petition

Tuesday 22 October 2024

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

The Darwin Oak

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Darwin Oak, a 550-year-old oak tree, is threatened with felling by the proposed North West Relief Road scheme at Shrewsbury; further declares that the loss of large-canopy, open-grown trees like the Darwin Oak would amount to a significant loss of biodiversity and carbon sequestration capability; further that the proposed felling of hundreds of trees, including numerous veteran trees and the Darwin Oak, goes against the Government's National Planning Policy Framework and the 'Keepers of Time' policy; and further that the proposed felling of trees would lead to a huge loss of green space used for exercise and the well-being of Shrewsbury residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Shropshire Council to safeguard the Darwin Oak tree as part of the North West Relief Road scheme and ensure its preservation for future generations.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Julia Buckley, Official Report, 8 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 276.]

[P003010]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

I note your concerns regarding the Darwin Oak and the role it plays for the environment, as well as the community, and the possible impact that the road scheme may have on it.

This scheme is promoted by Shropshire county council, and it has the responsibility for addressing environmental risk and mitigations, as well as maximising the growth and transport benefits of the scheme.

The Department's role is to agree funding, subject to a business case provided by the local authority. Our review of that case is required before a decision is reached and the Department will address all aspects of value for money, including environmental impacts, before reaching a decision.

All capital spend, including this scheme, is subject to a Department for Transport capital review and the cross-Government spending review.

For reference, please see the links below, with further information:

FAQs from Shropshire Council regarding the Darwin Oak tree—

<https://next.shropshire.gov.uk/roads-and-highways/shrewsbury-north-west-relief-road/faqs/>

“No commitment to relief road funding in MP meeting”—Shrewsbury MP meeting with Lilian Greenwood, 10 October 2024—

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2kd33j0le1o>

Written Correction

Tuesday 22 October 2024

Ministerial Correction

EDUCATION

Government's Childcare Expansion

The following are extracts from the statement on the Government's Childcare Expansion on 17 October 2024.

Stephen Morgan: On school-based nurseries, the pilot during the testing phase is for 300 places from April. Our ambition is for 3,000 places over the course of this Parliament.

[*Official Report*, 17 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 1020.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan):

Stephen Morgan: On school-based nurseries, the pilot during the testing phase is for **up to 300 nurseries from September**. Our ambition is **to take this forward** over the course of this Parliament.

Stephen Morgan: We are starting a test-and-learn phase in April; the roll-out will be in September.

[*Official Report*, 17 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 1024.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South:

Stephen Morgan: We are starting a test-and-learn phase **with delivery of the first nursery places from September 2025**.

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