

**Thursday  
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 21 November 2024**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 21 November 2024*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Speaker's Statement

**Mr Speaker:** Before we begin proceedings, I regret to have to inform the House of the death of Lord Prescott. John served the people of Hull for 40 years as a Member of this House, 10 of them as Deputy Prime Minister. He was a towering figure in the Labour and trade union movement, and a campaigner for workers. He was a fearless, loyal, active unionist, a dedicated parliamentarian and an advocate for his constituents. Our thoughts and prayers are with Pauline and the family. There will be an opportunity for the House to pay fuller tributes next week.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### TRANSPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Transport for London

1. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Mayor of London on financial support for Transport for London. [901356]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane):** Mr Speaker, as maritime Minister, I pay tribute to John Prescott both for his life at sea and for introducing the tonnage tax back in 2000 as Secretary of State for Transport, which secured the UK's position as a world leader in maritime services and trained a new generation of seafarers.

We continue to work collaboratively with City Hall, Transport for London and other mayors on long-term transport plans, providing lasting benefits for the public and the economy.

**Bob Blackman:** I join the Minister in expressing my sympathy to the family of John Prescott. He will be dearly missed across the House and in the other place.

The previous Conservative Government allocated £6.6 billion to subsidise the work of Transport for London, particularly to subsidise the fare box during the pandemic. I understand from the Budget that the Chancellor allocated £485 million to TfL, but the figure may include £220 million already announced to finance Elizabeth line trains. If that is discounted, that leaves £265 million. Can the Minister confirm that the position is that the Government have suspended the de facto

right of the Mayor of London to freeze fares and that they are requiring an inflation-busting 4.6% rise in fares in London?

**Mike Kane:** This is a devolved matter. As the hon. Member said, at the Budget we announced £485 million in capital funding for Transport for London. Shortly afterwards, the local transport Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), and the deputy Mayor met to discuss that. It is a matter for Transport for London. I am sure the hon. Member has a first-class relationship with the Mayor and I am sure he will press him on it.

#### Aviation: Accessibility for Disabled People

2. **Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve the accessibility of aviation for disabled people. [901357]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** May I take this opportunity to pay my tribute to the former Deputy Prime Minister and my predecessor as Transport Secretary? A merchant navy steward who became Deputy Prime Minister, a visionary Transport Secretary and an icon of the New Labour Government, he was an inspiration to working class boys and girls across our country for what our Labour movement can achieve. Our thoughts are with Pauline, his family and everyone who loved him in our whole Labour family.

The Government are committed to ensuring that aviation is accessible to all. I am proud that we have established the aviation accessibility task and finish group, bringing together industry and consumer advocates with first-hand experience to improve aviation accessibility.

**Richard Baker:** I associate myself with the tributes to Lord Prescott. As a sponsor of the Aviation (Accessibility) Bill, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis), I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement of the new expert group to break down the barriers to air travel that are still experienced by far too many disabled people. Does she agree that ensuring all disabled people have the ability to travel on flights safely and with dignity must now be a priority for the whole aviation industry?

**Louise Haigh:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and pay tribute to him and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) for their ten-minute rule Bill on this important issue. The human impact for too many people with accessibility issues when flying is severe and that is why it is this Government's priority to set up the accessibility task and finish group. We are requiring the industry to match our ambition.

**Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): For regional and island airports, accessibility equipment can carry significant cost in proportion to the number of passengers using the facility. However, it remains vital that disabled passengers' access is supported. What action is the Secretary of State taking to support smaller airports in this regard?

**Louise Haigh:** Airports are represented in the accessibility task and finish group through their trade association, AirportsUK, and both large and smaller airports are

represented individually as well. We will work closely with the industry to look at what voluntary measures can be adopted as we also consider enforcement powers for the Civil Aviation Authority.

### Midland Main Line Electrification

**3. Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): What recent estimate she has made of when electrification of the midland main line will be complete. [901358]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** The electrification of the remainder of the route to Nottingham and Sheffield via Derby—the midland main line electrification programme—is in development, and currently it is planned to be completed by the early 2030s, subject to business case approvals and wider affordability considerations.

**Neil O'Brien:** It is marvellous that we now have the electric lines energised up through Market Harborough to Wigston, and we are looking forward to our electric trains arriving next year. Even better, we have Spion Kop bridge staying open. Will the Rail Minister meet me to ensure that we avoid any risk that future electrification works lead to a further withdrawal of late and early services to Market Harborough? The last train back from London is already far too early, so we need to avoid the works having any further damaging impact.

**Lilian Greenwood:** We are all concerned about the impact of works on services. I know that the Rail Minister is aware of that and would welcome the opportunity to visit, alongside Network Rail, to see the work being done to mitigate the impact on the hon. Gentleman's constituents as that work continues.

### Bus Franchising

**4. Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Whether she is taking steps to support the participation of small and medium-sized local bus operators in bus franchising schemes. [901359]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** This Government are empowering every community to take back control of their local bus services. Legislation on bus franchising requires local authorities to consider small and medium-sized enterprises as part of the franchising process. We are working with those interested in pursuing franchising to develop different models, including smaller-scale models, which require less financial commitment and provide more opportunities for small and medium-sized bus operators to participate.

**Jayne Kirkham:** I am pleased to hear that this is part of the consultation on updating the bus franchising guidance. We have some strong local SMEs in Falmouth that provide a knowledgeable, local and flexible bus service, along with community bus services too. Will the Minister please confirm that she will be supportive of that kind of model when going through the guidance?

**Lilian Greenwood:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for businesses in her constituency. We recognise the important role that smaller local bus operators can

provide in delivering high-quality bus services; they know their customers and their communities. In addition to the requirement to consider SMEs as part of the franchising process, this Government's reforms to the bus system are designed to give more options to local communities to deliver local bus services. Our transformative buses Bill will seek to give local areas the choice of pursuing bus franchising, high-quality partnerships with the private sector or local authority-owned bus companies and, once in law, will provide more opportunities for all operators, including SMEs.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that answer, which is incredibly helpful. To support the participation of small and medium-sized local bus companies in bus franchising schemes, they also want to be energy-efficient. That enables them to apply for the franchises and do better. How can the Minister help those small and medium-sized bus companies to be energy efficient—with hydrogen buses, for example—and thereby gain the franchises and contracts?

**Lilian Greenwood:** Transport matters are devolved in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, of course, but putting buses at the heart of our policies and wanting to increase ridership provides brilliant opportunities for local manufacturers of buses to take part and supports local manufacturers and operators.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): On behalf of the Opposition Front Bench, I too offer my sincere sympathies to the family of the late Lord Prescott on his passing.

On Monday, in her statement on bus funding, the Secretary of State said that a formula was being used to allocate funding. She said that the formula will allocate funding

“based on local need, population, the distance that buses travel, and levels of deprivation... This formula and the funding allocated is a fair arrangement, ensuring that every area of the country gets the service levels it needs”.—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 43-45.]

The formula, including the weighting given to the various factors by the right hon. Lady, has not been published. When will it be?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question. We are proud of the work that we have done to ensure that every part of the country benefits from additional funding for their buses, and we will publish that later today.<sup>1</sup>

**Gareth Bacon:** The Secretary of State also said in her statement:

“Councils such as Leicester, the Isle of Wight, Torbay and Cambridgeshire will see unprecedented levels of funding for services.”—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 42.]

What levels of subsidy does she believe that bus services in those areas will require?

**Lilian Greenwood:** It is incredibly important that decisions about local services are taken by those who are operating them. That is why not only have we provided substantial levels of funding—£1 billion announced in the Budget

1.[*Official Report*, 26 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 10WC.] (Correction)

and the allocations set out on Monday—but we are providing local transport authorities with the powers they need to provide the services that local communities want and deserve.

#### **Local Bus Services: Travel to School**

**5. Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): If she will make an assessment of the effectiveness of local bus services in enabling children's travel to school. [901360]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane):** The Government know how important local bus services are in providing access to education. We have set out an ambitious programme of reform to empower local leaders to improve services for passengers, including through the introduction of the buses Bill, to ensure that they better reflect the needs of local communities.

**Mike Martin:** I, too, associate myself with the remarks about Lord Prescott.

In my constituency of Tunbridge Wells, a group of parents have told me about the difficulties that their children have in getting to Skinners' Kent academy. The children can get either the No. 2 or the No. 297. The first one gets them to school 90 minutes early, so they have to wait by the side of a busy road in the cold and the dark, and the latter gets them there 15 minutes late. Over a school year, that is 50 hours of education. Kent was given £23 million for bus services. Beyond giving the money, what will the Department for Transport be doing to ensure that the money will increase the frequency of services so that children can get to school on time?

**Mr Speaker:** I think an Adjournment debate may be needed.

**Mike Kane:** Well, Mr Speaker, I do not know the particular details of the No. 2 or the No. 297—[*Interruption.*] Forgive me. As the hon. Member has pointed out, Kent county council has been given £23.1 million as part of our £1 billion package for buses. We are righting a lot of wrongs over the underfunding of rural services, in particular, over the years, and we expect to see a much better bus service across our whole country in the future.

**Neil Duncan-Jordan** (Poole) (Lab): May I, too, associate myself with the tributes paid to John Prescott?

Over the past few weeks, a number of parents have contacted me to ask whether school transport can be brought into the scope of the bus fare cap. Will the Minister agree to look at that?

**Mike Kane:** Services from participating operators that serve schools are open to members of the public and run all year round and will be eligible for inclusion in the scheme. The current fare cap does not allow for the inclusion of closed school services at the moment—that is for logistic reasons, I understand.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): In the statement on bus services on Monday, I asked the Secretary of State about extending concessionary travel to children and young people. Her response was to suggest that MPs should talk to our individual local

authorities about this, but that is not the approach that we take to concessionary travel for pensioners. I have just been contacted by somebody aged over 16 who cannot afford to go to college because it would cost £1,500 a year, and her family just cannot afford that. Is it not the case that concessionary bus travel for children and young people should be extended on a national basis, rather than having this postcode lottery?

**Mike Kane:** As a former schoolteacher, I know how important getting children to education is, and those bus services provide vital lines. That is why we have put £1 billion into our bus services network. I suggest that local services, such as mine in the Bee Network in Greater Manchester, have used their resource to improve access to education for young people.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): Rural communities in towns and villages such as Holwell in my constituency, which I visited last week, often depend on buses for their day-to-day life and for getting their children to school, but all too often the reliability of these services makes it increasingly hard for families to depend on them. What new powers and funding will this Government be giving transport authorities, such as Hertfordshire and Central Bedfordshire, to ensure that they can get buses for my community back on track?

**Mike Kane:** Like our rail users, bus users depend on punctuality. Our bus services have not been up to scratch, with vast underfunding over the past few years. We are hoping that the £955 million investment in our buses will give local communities the powers they need to hold operators to account on the punctuality of those buses, so that our young people can get to their colleges and schools on time.

#### **Transport Infrastructure**

**6. Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve transport infrastructure. [901361]

**10. Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve transport infrastructure. [901365]

**16. Connor Naismith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve transport infrastructure. [901373]

**21. Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve transport infrastructure. [901379]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** We have heard over the last 14 years that the infrastructure sector and wider supply chain needs stability and certainty—no more chopping and changing—and last month's Budget committed this Government to that approach, ensuring that people have access to transport services and infrastructure that meets their needs. The Department's capital settlement secures the delivery and development of infrastructure projects, including upgrades to rail in the north, further electrification of services between Church Fenton and York by 2026, and significant major road upgrades across the north of England.



**Perran Moon:** I associate myself with the comments about Lord Prescott.

Public access to electric vehicle charging infrastructure is vital to encourage motorists to switch away from petrol and diesel vehicles, but the roll-out process is reliant on dedicated and experienced local authority resources, funding for which is due to run out next year. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss measures to avoid local authorities becoming bottlenecks in the roll-out of publicly accessible EV charging infrastructure?

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Our manifesto was clear that we are committed to accelerating the electric vehicle charge point roll-out, particularly to address the inequity across the country. I fully recognise the importance of local authorities in achieving that, and in the Budget we announced over £200 million of investment in charging for 2025-26, including that important support for local authorities. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister for the future of roads would be happy to meet him.

**Jen Craft:** The Dartford crossing linking Essex and Kent is a key piece of transport infrastructure in my constituency. However, since moving to a new charging system last year, there have been serious failings in the administration of the Dart charge. Problems include credit not being carried over from the old system. Cars have incorrectly been charged, accounts have been closed in error and, in one particularly egregious example, a constituent of mine was told by an enforcement agent standing on her doorstep that she owed £8,000. I thank the Secretary of State for her attention on this matter. Will she update the House on the steps that her Department is taking to resolve the matter?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. I have received several representations about its impact on drivers who use the Dartford crossing. It is essential that when errors occur they are cleared up quickly, and with compassion for those affected. I expect National Highways to work with its service providers at the Dartford crossing to ensure that that happens, and my hon. Friend the Minister for the future of roads has been holding National Highways to account. My officials are continuing to work with National Highways to drive down incorrect penalty charge notices and provide much better support to customers.

**Connor Naismith:** The Labour mayors Andy Burnham and Richard Parker are developing proposals for a new rail link between Birmingham and Manchester. What engagement has the Department had with the mayors and investors in relation to this project, and does my right hon. Friend agree that, as a key transport hub, Crewe must be at the heart of any future rail infrastructure connecting the north and the midlands?

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend has consistently stood up for Crewe in the wake of the cancellation of HS2. Crewe was particularly badly hit by that announcement. I was pleased to meet with Mayors Burnham and Parker this week to discuss their proposals to address the capacity and connectivity issues north of Birmingham, and I will continue to engage with all relevant stakeholders on this topic.

**Catherine Fookes:** I welcome the Government's recommitment to improving public transport and rail infrastructure across Britain. In Monmouthshire, we are eagerly awaiting the innovative Magor walkway station, which will reduce M4 congestion, improve public transport and, most importantly, help us in our mission to bring economic growth and boost the economy locally. Will the Secretary of State commit to working with me and Welsh Ministers to deliver the five Burns stations, including the Magor walkway, and will she meet me to discuss progress?

**Louise Haigh:** I am familiar with Lord Burns's recommendations for new stations in south Wales to relieve congestion on the M4 motorway, and I am in discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and Welsh Ministers on these proposals. I would be more than happy to discuss progress with my hon. Friend.

**Rishi Sunak** (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for agreeing to meet me and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about the A66. While there is a strong economic case for dualling, the road safety considerations concern me most. As she will know, 12 people tragically lost their life on the road last week. I recently met constituents in Ravensworth who live near one of the single carriageway sections of the road. They live daily with those fears. Will she reassure them that she and her team will keep road safety considerations uppermost in their mind as they think about the future of the A66?

**Louise Haigh:** The former Prime Minister managed to ask two questions, because he asked his first behind the Chair earlier. I am more than happy to meet him to discuss the A66, which we are considering and which provides that crucial northern trans-Pennine connectivity. I reassure him that we take road safety seriously, particularly on that section of road. We are in the process of developing the first road safety strategy in more than a decade.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Bath's council is consulting on creating 6.2 km of cycle roads. The recent £100 million increase to the active travel fund is welcome, but councils need long-term funding. Will the Secretary of State commit to long-term funding of the active travel plans?

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and we were pleased to overturn the previous Government's cuts to Active Travel England, ensuring that it can help authorities such as Bath scale up their capability and capacity and deliver those important active travel routes. As we look towards the second phase of the spending review, the ambition is absolutely to move to multi-year settlements, deliver that important consistency and sustainability for local authorities.

**Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Con): I thank the Minister with responsibility for roads for meeting my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and me last week to discuss the future of the A303 and the north-south routes through Wiltshire; village roads are clogged with heavy goods vehicle traffic. Seeing as the Government have scrapped the Stonehenge tunnel, saving billions of pounds, I implore the Minister, as she

considers the road investment strategy for next year, to think about mitigation of the unsustainable traffic problems that we have in Wiltshire. We have been waiting years for improvements. Please could that be considered as part of the next RIS?

**Louise Haigh:** As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Minister has already asked National Highways to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to discuss those important issues. We will place statutory duties and stretching freight targets on Great British Railways to encourage freight off the roads and on to the railways, but we are absolutely considering the specific congestion issues in the south-west as we look towards the road investment strategy.

**Peter Fortune** (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): An increasing amount of Transport for London's funding comes from punitive taxes on motorists, including those in my constituency of Bromley and Biggin Hill. There are reports that the Mayor of London was actively planning to charge drivers up to 60p a mile to drive. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to discourage the mayor from introducing pay-per-mile road user charging across Greater London?

**Louise Haigh:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is fully aware that the mayor has repeatedly made it clear that he has no plans to act on road user charging.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): We will all miss John Prescott. He was a titan of our politics, and a man not afraid to come out swinging for what he believed in.

The figures show that capital spending on transport is not rising under Labour; it will fall by 3.1% in real terms next year. We have huge tax rises and a more than £70 billion increase in tax. Labour's black hole myth has been debunked by the Office for Budget Responsibility, the *Financial Times* and the Institute for Fiscal Studies—all real economists—so why the cut in capital spending? The Secretary of State was out of her depth when she negotiated a £9,000 pay rise for ASLEF train drivers with nothing in return. Was she out of her depth when she negotiated with her own Chancellor?

**Louise Haigh:** This Budget delivered £1 billion funding for local bus services and transformational capital investment in infrastructure projects, such as the trans-Pennine route upgrade, the A57 and, of course, East West Rail. This Government are committed to investing, investing, investing in transport, transport, transport.

### Railway Ticketing

7. **Anneliese Midgley** (Knowsley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to simplify railway ticketing. [901362]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** This Government are committed to reviewing the over-complicated fares system to simplify it. We only have to look on social media any day of the week to see examples of people being confused and wrongly prosecuted because of the confusing nature of the rail system. My officials

are exploring how ticketing innovations such as digital pay-as-you-go and digital season tickets can be rolled out more widely as quickly as possible.

**Anneliese Midgley:** I associate myself with the tributes paid to John Prescott. Radio Merseyside has featured many stories about passengers who were fined because they bought train tickets in good faith, only to find out that they were the wrong ones. Some of my Knowsley constituents find themselves being fined or denied travel by Merseytravel for buying tickets legitimately online. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to work with our mayor, Steve Rotherham, and with Merseyrail and other operators, to ensure that passengers are not unfairly penalised, and to create a clear and fair ticketing system that is easy for everyone to use?

**Louise Haigh:** We are working with the mayors as we look to establish Great British Railways. I have asked the Office of Rail and Road to conduct an independent review of rail operators' revenue protection practices. That launches today and will involve devolved operators, where appropriate. Addressing fare evasion is a priority, but we must always treat passengers fairly and appropriately.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): May I join others in expressing my party's sympathy for the family, friends, colleagues and former constituents of John Prescott? He was a towering figure.

I welcome the Secretary of State's comments on simplifying ticketing. That will doubtless help to get people back on to the railways. Affordability is also critical to increasing the use of public transport. Alongside her 50% hike in bus fares, the Chancellor buried on page 97 of the Budget an above-inflation rail fare increase of 4.6%. That kicks in from March 2025, just when we expect public ownership of the railroads to begin.

**Mr Speaker:** Ahem.

**Mr Kohler:** Now that the railways are coming under her guardianship, will the Secretary of State assure the House that that will be the last above-inflation rail fare increase in this Parliament?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Questions should be a bit shorter. I do not know who is doing your briefings—well, I suspect I do—but shorter questions would be helpful.

**Louise Haigh:** Of course, a priority for this Government is to keep public transport affordable, but our absolute priority is to fix the mess in the railways that we inherited after 14 years of under-investment, decline and putting passengers last in a broken system.

### Condition of Local Roads

8. **Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [901363]

9. **Mr Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [901364]

**13. Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of local roads. [901368]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** The Government are determined to improve the condition of local roads. We had a manifesto commitment to support councils in fixing up to 1 million more potholes per year. We are going above and beyond that manifesto commitment: last month's Budget confirmed an increase of £500 million for next financial year to fix Britain's crumbling roads.

**Matt Rodda:** I pay tribute to Lord Prescott. I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement of this vital funding. Will she comment on the excellent work carried out by Reading borough council, which has started resurfacing large sections of road? That not only creates a smoother surface for drivers, but has been proven to save money in the long run.

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the excellent practices being undertaken by Reading borough council. That is the kind of innovation that we need to see across the country—not just fixing and repairing potholes, but ensuring that we prevent them and improve the quality and lifespan of our local roads.

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): People living near the concrete sections of the M25 in my constituency are besieged by motorway noise. In fact, some schools and homes cannot open windows, such is the noise nuisance. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is an absolute disgrace, and will she support my campaign to scrap the concrete sections of the M25 motorway?

**Louise Haigh:** I believe the hon. Gentleman met the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), last week on exactly that issue. She will follow up on it, as will National Highways.

**Mr Swards:** I associate myself with the comments about Lord Prescott. I am grateful for the Secretary of State's answers on local roads. The roads in Leeds South West and Morley are in a dire state. Asquith Avenue has been compared to the surface of the moon. Commuters in Farnley, Wortley, Morley and Tingley have to dodge potholes every day, and even the more rural areas of my constituency, such as Ardsley and Robin Hood, are suffering the same fate. What reassurances can the Secretary of State give my constituents that those roads will be improved, and when can they expect those improvements?

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Potholes and poor road conditions are a menace that make our roads less safe and have saddled drivers with costly repairs. The £500 million uplift will be available in '25-26, and we will announce the allocations shortly, including those for West Yorkshire.

**Rachel Taylor:** I also pay tribute to Lord Prescott. Nearly 20% of my constituents work in the vital freight and logistics sector, yet the industry continues to pick

up the bill for the failure of Warwickshire county council to fix my constituents' pothole-riddled roads. Now that the Government have provided a £500 million increase to fix potholes, does the Secretary of State agree that the council must take action to tackle the scourge of potholes, which are causing untold damage to my constituents' cars, trucks and lorries?

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Local authorities are responsible for the state of their local roads, but with this significant uplift for '25-26, we expect them to ensure that that is a priority, and to tackle the state of the local roads, which is affecting my hon. Friend's constituents so badly.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): John Prescott was a towering figure in the politics of the Humber region, and I associate myself with the words of sympathy to his family. Roads in my constituency are under greater pressure because traffic from the A180 is continually being transferred on to them while it is being patched up. Earlier this month, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and I met National Highways, and it is perfectly obvious that the A180 will be in its present state for many years to come. Will the Secretary of State meet me and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes to discuss this and other transport issues in the area?

**Mr Speaker:** You are running out of road.

**Louise Haigh:** I am sure that the Minister with responsibility for roads, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn).

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): The safety and condition of our roads are hugely dependent on those who drive on them, but too many vehicles illegally use our roads without tax, without registering their details with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, and without their MOT. I thank Jamie from Seven Sisters garage for sorting my MOT out last week. Will the Secretary of State meet industry experts, such as Eastbourne's very own Alan Wood of the National Persistent Evader Database, to discuss their solutions to tackling this problem, and making our roads safer?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that important point. I have met the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency to talk about its important enforcement work in this area. Measures of that kind will absolutely be considered in the development of our road safety strategy, and we will work closely with stakeholders, exactly as the Minister with responsibility for roads mentioned.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I associate myself with the tributes paid to Lord Prescott. Talking of pothole repairs and road resurfacing, the director of the RAC, Steve Gooding, said:

"The long-term solution is a long-term funding settlement for councils so they can finally get on top of what has been a perennial problem."



But councils—[*Laughter.*] Hon. Members might laugh, but our councils, which have to do the work of repairing our roads, do not know how much money they will get from the much-trumpeted £500 million. When will our councils actually get their allocations?

**Louise Haigh:** As I have said, the £500 million is available for '25-26, and those allocations will be announced shortly. The brass neck on Opposition Members never ceases to amaze.

**Greg Smith:** I am just trying to get answers for our councils. Of course, it was the previous Government who committed £8.3 billion to road repairs, using money from the rightly cancelled sections of High Speed 2. Back in May, when it was in opposition, Labour tried to claim a backlog of more than £16 billion in road repairs, but now it just trumpets funding of £500 million. That is not enough, is it?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for recognising the appalling state of our local roads, and the appalling backlog that we inherited. The significant uplift allocated for next year will start to turn the page on 14 years of decline, but of course that cannot be achieved overnight.

#### Rural Bus Services

11. **Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of bus services in rural areas. [901366]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** Fourteen years of decline in local bus services under the previous Administration has hit communities across the country hard, especially in rural areas. This Government know that buses are a lifeline, and through our upcoming buses Bill, we will give all local leaders the powers that they need to design networks that meet the needs of their communities, including measures to ensure that vital services for passengers remain running.

**Claire Young:** Many of my Thornbury and Yate constituents have been impacted by the loss of the 84/85 bus. I am told that funding is made more difficult because that bus is a cross-border service between Gloucestershire and the west of England. Does the Minister agree that the rules need clarifying, so that they do not get in the way of ensuring that we keep important bus services running?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I absolutely recognise the concern that arises when vital bus services are lost, which the hon. Lady mentioned. That is why, in the forthcoming buses Bill, we will explore a local network management measure that will give local transport authorities the power to ensure that cuts to local networks are made only when absolutely necessary, thus protecting people like her constituents, who relied on that vital bus service.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Chris Bloore.

**Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for recognising my half-bob. My thoughts are with Lord Prescott's family; he was one of the first politicians I met as a young student, and he certainly made an impression.

May I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister on the £9.3 million investment in buses in Worcestershire? I represent a rural constituency where people have not been able to get to work, access health services or stay connected with friends and family. This investment may well make a real difference to their lives.

**Lilian Greenwood:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to speak up for his constituents in Worcestershire, and about the difference that will be made by the funding that this Government are providing. It will ensure that his constituents have the connections that were cut off for too long under the previous Government.

#### Railway Stations: Accessibility

12. **Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve the accessibility of railway stations for disabled people. [901367]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane):** Ensuring that rail services and facilities are accessible to all is a core principle of our plan to fix Britain's broken rail system. The Department is carefully considering the best approach to station accessibility, and recognises the huge social and economic benefits it brings to communities. MPs and stakeholders will be updated in due course.

**Andrew Cooper:** After Northwich station collapsed in 2021, an Access for All application was submitted, with the support of local partners, to add step-free access to the Chester-bound platform. Unfortunately, that opportunity was missed by the last Government, and the station has been rebuilt without those accessibility improvements. I welcome the inclusion of improving accessibility in Great British Railways' mandate, but what steps can be taken to ensure that stations such as Northwich see improvements while we wait for GBR to get up and running?

**Mike Kane:** First, I thank my hon. Friend for picking up the baton on Northwich station—we all remember the terrible situation when the canopy collapsed. This Government are committed to improving the accessibility of the railway, and recognise its huge social and economic benefits. The Access for All programme will deliver 32 step-free stations this financial year, the most since that programme started. Anyone unable to use a station in the meantime can book alternative transport with the operator at no additional cost.

#### Chiltern Railways: Overcrowding

14. **Freddie van Mierlo** (Henley and Thame) (LD): If she will take steps to help reduce overcrowding on Chiltern Railways services. [901371]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** The Secretary of State for Transport, Lord Hendy and officials continue to work closely with Chiltern Railways to support delivery of an improved passenger experience. To reduce crowding, Chiltern periodically adjusts its timetable, responding to passenger demand. It is exploring options for procuring additional trains, in order to relieve crowding while ensuring value for money for the taxpayer.

**Freddie van Mierlo:** Haddenham and Thame Parkway train station is a key transport hub for my residents who commute regularly to London. However, constituents face overcrowded trains; some even report fainting on hot, stuffy trains. I understand that Chiltern Railways has an active business case with the Department for Transport. Will the Minister approve, as a matter of priority, the replacement trains and carriages that it is requesting?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question on behalf of those people who travel on Chiltern Railways. The Rail Minister has assured me that the cascaded rolling stock is under active consideration in the Department, and we will complete the process as soon as possible.

### Tyne Bridge Restoration

15. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): If she will take steps to help ensure that the Tyne Bridge is restored in time for its centenary in 2028. [901372]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** I thank my hon. Friend for that question—she is a great champion for her city. It is the responsibility of Newcastle city council to manage the bridge restoration project, but we encourage the council to do all it can to ensure that the restoration of this iconic bridge is completed in time for its centenary celebrations.

**Chi Onwurah:** As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on jazz, I want to add to the many tributes paid to the great Lord Prescott by saying that he was a champion of jazz and a jazz lover as well.

I do hope that the Minister will be able to join us on the restored Tyne bridge for its centenary celebrations in 2028. However, she may be aware that an uplift to the funding announced under the previous Government for the restoration has not yet materialised, and inflation and issues uncovered during the project have led to a rise in costs. Could she confirm to me that the difficult decisions this Government have made mean that the uplift in funding will be available for the fully restored Tyne bridge?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I thank my hon. Friend for that fantastic invitation on 2028. This Government's manifesto was clear that we want to forge ahead with infrastructure improvements as part of our mission to kick-start economic growth. As with all schemes in the major road network programme, the Department's contribution is fixed once the scheme is approved, and Newcastle city council was awarded over £35 million towards the total cost of the scheme. However, I absolutely commend her for championing this important project. As she says, it is one of the world's most iconic bridges, and we are happy to keep this in mind in the context of the spending review.

### Transport Decarbonisation

17. **Dr Jeevun Sandher** (Loughborough) (Lab): What steps she is taking to decarbonise the transport sector. [901374]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane):** The Government are committed to delivering greener transport. The Department is overhauling public

transport services to make the sustainable choice the most convenient choice. It is turbocharging the roll-out of electric vehicles and charging infrastructure, and it is making the UK a world leader in the production and use of sustainable aviation fuels.

**Dr Sandher:** Transport is decarbonising more slowly than other sectors because, while car emissions have fallen by 20% since 1990, haulage emissions have barely moved. Earlier this month, my constituency hosted the East Midlands Hydrogen summit, where we saw how heavy goods vehicles can be powered through green, clean hydrogen. What steps is the Department taking, and what steps will it take, to support green hydrogen in the use of heavy goods vehicles?

**Mike Kane:** It is great that my hon. Friend is such a champion of hydrogen. The Department's £200 million zero emission HGV and infrastructure demonstration programme is funding hundreds of hydrogen fuel cell and battery electric HGVs and their refuelling and recharging infrastructure. To support the transition to zero emission HGVs, data will be published and widely shared with the haulage and logistics industry.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Yesterday, Ford announced that 4,000 jobs are going across Europe, including 800 here, many of which are in my constituency of Basildon and Billericay. There are real concerns about the lack of take-up of electric vehicles because the Government are not providing clear enough long-term support, and about the extra taxes imposed on both ICE—internal combustion engine—vehicles and electric vehicles through vehicle excise duty at the Budget. Would the Minister meet me and other affected MPs to see what can be done to address these important issues affecting workers in our constituencies?

**Mike Kane:** The right hon. Member is right to raise this, and the Secretary of State did meet Ford yesterday. We understand that this is a concerning time for workers at Ford, especially as it is a significant player in the UK's automotive industry. We committed £200 million in the Budget for this area of work, and we hope to alleviate the situation as soon as humanly possible.

### Local Transport Funding

18. **Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): What financial support she is providing to local transport authorities and mayors. [901375]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** In the Budget, the Government confirmed over £1 billion of funding to support bus services, an additional £200 million for eligible mayors, over £650 million for local transport outside the city regions, a £500 million increase in local highways maintenance and £485 million for Transport for London, which includes funding for rolling stock on the Piccadilly and Elizabeth lines.

**Jas Athwal:** May I, too, associate myself with the tributes paid to the late Lord Prescott?

I commend the Government's initiatives to increase connectivity across London. For example, the new zero emission buses are making public transport so much more convenient and greener. Nearly half of my constituents

in Ilford South travel by public transport. What support is the Secretary of State providing to the Mayor of London, and TfL in particular, to ensure that my constituents can continue to commute to work?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his championing of his constituents' ability to commute affordably and reliably. The Government provided Transport for London with £485 million of capital funding for 2025-26, which includes funding for the procurement of new trains and rolling stock.

### Rail Connectivity

19. **Lorraine Beavers** (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve rail connectivity. [901377]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** For too long, poor performance and connectivity particularly across the north of England has been tolerated. That is why one of my top five transport priorities is improving performance on the railways and driving forward reform. The Budget confirmed significant investment in rail enhancements, such as the TransPennine route upgrade, and we are committed to improving connectivity in addition to our work improving our overall network.

**Lorraine Beavers:** I too send my condolences to John Prescott's family.

The town of Fleetwood and Thornton in my constituency has suffered poor transport connections for many years. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the status of the funds to improve rail links across the country, and will the relevant Minister meet me to discuss ways to improve transport connections into and out of Thornton and Fleetwood?

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is a champion for her constituency. We confirmed significant investment in rail enhancements across the country in the Budget, but as we look to the second phase of the spending review we will be setting out the long-term infrastructure strategy. On Fleetwood in particular, I am sure the local transport Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this particular transport need in her constituency.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): At the last Transport questions on 10 October, I asked the Transport Secretary to confirm the status of the ringfenced funding for Aldridge train station. She promised to reply in writing. I followed this up with a letter. To date, I have received no response. The people of Aldridge deserve to know what has happened to the £30 million awarded to us for our new train station: can the Secretary of State tell us where it is, please?

**Louise Haigh:** I sincerely apologise to the right hon. Lady and will make sure she receives that letter today.

### Topical Questions

T1. [901381] **Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):** Moving fast and fixing things is a promise not a soundbite. Yesterday the landmark Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill completed its passage through this place and now awaits Royal Assent. This is a significant milestone, bringing the railways back into public hands, restoring trust after years of lack of trust and renewing a promise to passengers that the railways can work better for them. At the same time, we are tackling rail performance now. London North Eastern Railway and TransPennine Express cancellations are down. I have tasked the Office of Rail and Road with reviewing ticket enforcements.

On roads, this Government's £500 million boost for local highways next year will support local leaders to fix up to 1 million more potholes per year, delivering on our manifesto pledge. On top of this, we are delivering transformative investment in infrastructure that connects our great cities and towns. This Government are delivering transport enhancements that drive growth, improve lives and connect every corner of the country.

**Martin Wrigley:** The storm in 2014 broke the Dawlish sea wall, collapsed cliffs and blocked the south-west main line for months. Will the Secretary of State assure us that the crucial rail resilience programme final phase will be funded so that Network Rail keeps the project alive, rather than halting it in its tracks?

**Louise Haigh:** As we look to settling Network Rail's control period 7, of course that will be a major consideration in the next funding settlement.

T2. [901382] **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): Earlier this year the Prime Minister committed to working with metro mayors on improving rail links between Manchester and Liverpool. Skelmersdale in my constituency is a town of 40,000 people slap-bang between those two great cities and does not have a train station. What measures in the Budget will help support transport links for my constituents, and will the Transport Secretary meet me to discuss rail links and a station train for Skem?

**Louise Haigh:** The Budget committed significant funding both for mayoral areas and those not covered by mayoral combined authorities through the local transport fund. Crucially, new powers will be delivered to those areas to ensure they can take back control of their local public transport services. Of course I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): Greater London is the most heavily populated and most economically active area in the whole country. It also has the highest level of bus use. In the last financial year, the level of bus subsidy in London amounted to £646 million. In the Secretary of State's statement on Monday, of the £1 billion of funding that she indicated, £700 million will be spent on producing bus planning documents, and only £243 million is going to bus services. That will not touch the sides, will it? Is the truth not that, far from it being generational reform, it is publicly funded window dressing?

**Louise Haigh:** The way that the previous Government approached bus service improvement plans was to force local authorities to waste money on developing those



plans. This money is going directly to authorities to make sure they are delivering public services. Public transport is a public service and it should always be funded.

T3. [901383] **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): John Prescott was a good friend, and condolences go to his wife Pauline and his family and friends.

Northumberland's biggest town, Blyth, is in desperate need of a relief road. It was much promised by the previous Government, and the plan was submitted before the general election in 2024. Can the Minister update the House on that plan's progress?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** Like my hon. Friend, we are all thinking of Lord Prescott and his family today.

My officials have had meetings with Northumberland county council, which is working to strengthen the case and provide further analytical work before the scheme can be fully appraised. I would be happy to update my hon. Friend on those discussions when I can do so.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the passing of the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill yesterday. Northern Rail has been publicly owned for the past four years, running trains on tracks that have been publicly owned for more than two decades. Sadly, Northern Rail still has some of the worst cancellation and punctuality rates in the country. Can the Secretary of State tell us what she has learned from her Department's experience with Northern Rail? What else is she planning beyond nationalisation to improve the rail network?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his party's support in passing the public ownership Bill yesterday in the other place. He is right, and I have made clear to Northern Rail that its performance is not acceptable. We are addressing that through new agreements on rest-day working to drive down cancellations, and crucially through integrating operations with Network Rail to deliver savings and better performance.

T4. [901384] **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): I would like to share the experience of Northern Rail services of one of my constituents who commutes to work from Lostock to Manchester. On 30 October, the 1639 service leaving Manchester was cancelled, the 1708 was cancelled, the 1808 was cancelled and the 1839 was cancelled. The one running train, the 1739, was so overcrowded that no one at stations further down the line could board it. Does the Minister agree that my hard-working constituents in Bolton West deserve better?

**Mr Speaker:** Yes, I am on the same line.

**Louise Haigh:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I have repeatedly made clear that it is not good enough. We inherited a railway where workforce terms and conditions were completely outdated and not fit for a modern railway. We are addressing that, and as a result Northern's cancellations are starting to come down, but we appreciate that there is still a long way to go.

T5. [901385] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The last Government and Surrey county council were working on progressing junction improvements with the A31 at Hickley's Corner in Farnham. Can the Minister confirm that that improvement will go ahead? In addition, the pressure on the A325 through Wrecclesham is becoming intolerable. Will she work with local authorities to provide a Wrecclesham bypass, which is so sought by my constituents?

**Lilian Greenwood:** I would be happy to get my officials to write to the hon. Gentleman to provide an update on discussions around those important schemes.

T6. [901386] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): The key to improved rail performance in my constituency is the reinstatement of rail infrastructure, notably the Burscough curves, alongside improved services to Manchester, where my constituents are also continually let down by Northern Rail. Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the best ways to achieve the high growth that the country needs is to improve those transport connections? Will she meet me to discuss that further?

**Louise Haigh:** Our manifesto was clear that we are committed to improving rail connectivity in the north of England. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to address the specific issues on that line.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): The Ely and Haughley upgrades are vital for getting freight from Felixstowe off roads and on to rail, reducing congestion on the A14 and providing much-needed relief to villages such as Kentford in my constituency. Can the Secretary of State commit to a timescale for their commencement?

**Louise Haigh:** I am well aware of the strong case for the Ely junction improvement and the impact that will have on freight. That is absolutely being considered as we look towards the 10-year infrastructure strategy and we consider GBR's stretching target for getting freight off the roads and on to the railways.

T7. [901387] **Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): Next year will mark the 180th anniversary of Wymondham train station, but sadly it is not accessible to all. A great birthday present for my station would be to make it so. Will the Minister meet me and the Wymondham access group to ensure that we can deliver that for the future?

**Mr Speaker:** I think a yes will do.

**Louise Haigh:** Sure thing.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): My condolences to John Prescott's family. I am long enough in the tooth to remember when he was the Transport Secretary.

A feasibility study on the Borders rail link was a fundamental part of the Borderlands growth deal. For some reason, the Scottish Government do not seem to prioritise transport links with England, so it is vital that the Department pushes that forward.

**Louise Haigh:** I am engaged with the Transport Minister in Scotland on exactly that issue.



T8. [901388] **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): I am regularly contacted by constituents of mine who are concerned about delays and cancellations on the Tyne Valley line, which is so fundamental to my constituency. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss delays and improvements to that line?

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is right that Northern rail services on that line are very poor. That is exactly what we are addressing through continued negotiation on rest-day working agreements. My noble Friend the Rail Minister will be happy to meet him.

**Ben Maguire** (North Cornwall) (LD): We have just seen the third fatality in six months at the Plusha junction in my constituency. How many more lives will be lost before her Department, National Highways and Cornwall Council finally plan to implement a flyover at this accident blackspot?

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that. We are developing the first road safety strategy in over 10 years, and improvements in infrastructure like that are exactly what will be considered under that plan.

T9. [901390] **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Branston bridge in my constituency, a main route in and out of Burton and Branston, is falling down. It was confirmed yesterday that it will be closed to vehicles for safety reasons, which is causing significant distress to residents, local businesses and commuters. Will the Minister work further with me and others so that we can solve this problem?

**Lilian Greenwood:** Of course, I recognise that Branston bridge is a vital part of Staffordshire county council's road network, linking communities and businesses in

my hon. Friend's constituency. In addition to the £500 million of maintenance funding that the Chancellor announced in the Budget, there is also £650 million of transport funding outside city regions next year. Full detail on how that funding will be allocated will be confirmed in due course.

**Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): Several key roads in my constituency are either closed or partially closed for roadworks, which are being done by utility companies who are increasingly getting around road permits by declaring an emergency. Will the Minister look into that to ensure that utility companies use emergency powers only when absolutely necessary?

**Lilian Greenwood:** The hon. Member raises a really important point about the disruption of roadworks. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that we mitigate those problems and deal with them exactly as he said.

**Dr Marie Tidball** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments about Lord Prescott, a true working-class hero.

Constituents regularly tell me that the No. 57 bus that connects Stocksbridge to Sheffield is often delayed and does not always stop, even when bus stops are busy. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the funding she announced this week will provide reliable and affordable bus routes connecting our rural and urban communities in Penistone and Stocksbridge?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend and colleague from Sheffield. I am well aware of that bus route and can confirm that the £18 million settlement for South Yorkshire will deliver better, more reliable and more frequent services for the good people of Sheffield.

## G20 and COP29 Summits

10.33 am

**The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your earlier words about John Prescott. We woke today to the deeply sad news that we have lost a true giant of the Labour movement and of this House; a man who fought for working-class ambition because he lived it. As one of the key architects of a Labour Government, John achieved that rare thing: he changed people's lives and he set the path for us all to follow. I will always be grateful to him for that. He did it all in his own way, with humour, pride, passion and total conviction. He truly was a one-off. There will be a moment for fuller tributes, but today I send my deepest condolences and, I am sure, those of the whole House to John's wife Pauline and his family, to the city of Hull, and to all those who knew and loved him. His legacy lives on in all of us.

I wish to update the House on my engagements at COP and the G20. We live in a dangerous and volatile world. We all wish that that were not the case, but it is, and it means that global problems are reaching into the lives of our constituents more and more. Climate change causes extreme weather, such as the terrible floods that we saw in September, and drives down economic growth; conflicts drive up the prices of fuel, food and energy and threaten our stability and security; and both are drivers of migration. To serve the British people we must tackle these problems head-on, because they do not stop at our borders—and that is the fundamental point. At every meeting I had at COP and the G20, and in every agreement I entered into, my focus was on tackling these problems to deliver growth and security for the British people.

At COP, I made the case that we must act on climate change and nature loss as some of the greatest long-term threats we face, and in doing so we must seize the opportunities of the low-carbon economy for investment, for UK businesses and for British workers. At COP, I was proud to announce the UK's new nationally determined contribution, with a 2035 target to reduce all greenhouse gas emissions by at least 81% on 1990 levels. I called on other countries to match that ambition to limit global temperature rises to 1.5°, and I made the investment case for the transformation that we are leading here in the United Kingdom.

By launching GB Energy, creating the national wealth fund to build new energy infrastructure and setting a path to clean power by 2030, we will not just boost our energy security and protect bill payers, but put Britain in pole position to claim the clean energy jobs of the future. That is why at COP, I was able to announce a £1 billion wind turbine investment that will support 1,300 local jobs around Hull—something of which John would have been very proud—and produce enough clean energy to power 1 million homes. That is in addition to the recent investment in carbon capture in Teesside and Merseyside, which will create 4,000 jobs, and the investment announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for 11 new green hydrogen projects across Britain.

Tackling climate change is, of course, a global effort, so at the G20, together with Brazil and 10 other countries, I launched our global clean power alliance to speed up the international roll-out of clean power, accelerate investment, and cut emissions around the world.

We came together at the G20 to meet other challenges as well. I was pleased to join President Lula's Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty to bring an end to the lost decade in that fight, because this is also an investment in stability and in tackling the factors that force people to leave their homes and make long journeys that too often end with criminal gangs exploiting them and putting their lives at risk in the English channel. We will smash those gangs. I am sure the House will welcome last week's news from the Netherlands, where the National Crime Agency, operating with European partners, arrested a man suspected of being a major supplier of small boats equipment. We will hit these organised criminals with the full force of the law, but we will also work with our partners to address the root causes of the problem.

The G20 represents 85% of global GDP, so we have a shared interest in driving up growth and investment. I held productive bilateral meetings with many G20 leaders to that end: Brazil, Japan, Italy, South Africa, the Republic of Korea and others. I also met representatives of Italy and Japan to take forward the global combat air programme, which will build the next generation of fighter jets, create high-skilled jobs and strengthen our national security for the long term.

I had a good discussion with Prime Minister Modi about deepening our bilateral ties. We agreed to raise the ambition of our UK-India comprehensive strategic partnership, which covers security, defence, technology, climate, health and education, building on the unique bonds and cultural ties between our two countries. Crucially, this work will start with trade and investment, and I am pleased to say that we agreed to relaunch free trade agreement negotiations early in the new year.

I also held a bilateral meeting with President Xi. This was the first leader-level meeting between the United Kingdom and China for six years. We had a frank, constructive and pragmatic discussion as G20 economies and permanent members of the UN Security Council. At a time of huge volatility, we both recognise the importance of engagement. I was clear that we will always act in our national interest, but we need to work together on challenges such as climate change and delivering growth. We agreed a new dialogue on these issues, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will take forward with Vice Premier He in Beijing. Of course, there will continue to be areas where we do not agree, and we will address them clearly and frankly. They include a number of human rights issues, the sanctioning of Members of this House and, of course, Hong Kong, but here too we need to engage. The lesson of history is that we are better able to deal with problems, and the world is safer, when leaders talk, so we agreed to keep this channel of communication open.

Although it was not on the formal agenda of the G20, the spectre of conflict loomed large over the summit. Conflict is spreading misery, destruction and despair, and causing children to starve and families to flee their homes. I called again for the immediate and unconditional release of the hostages in Gaza, who are always uppermost in our minds. I also called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and for a massive increase in the flow of aid, which is desperately needed. Yesterday, we backed a UN Security Council resolution to that end. We must find ways to make this international pressure count, to end the suffering on all sides.

The G20 coincided with the marking of 1,000 days of conflict in Ukraine. For the third year running, Putin did not attend. Instead, on the eve of the summit, he launched Russia's biggest attack for months, killing yet more innocent Ukrainians and hitting civilian energy infrastructure at the start of winter, and he indulged yet again in dangerous, irresponsible rhetoric. This is a member of the UN Security Council acting with contempt for the UN charter. Whereas Brazil made finding solutions to hunger and poverty the focus of its presidency, in recent weeks Russian missiles have continued to rain down on civilian ships carrying grain bound for Africa. It could not be more clear: this is a man who wants destruction, not peace.

After 1,000 days of war—1,000 days of Ukrainian bravery and sacrifice—I am clear that we must double down on our support. We will not be deterred or distracted by reckless threats. We have consistently said that we will do what it takes to support Ukraine and put it in the best possible position going into the winter. The UK's support for Ukraine is always for self-defence, and it is proportionate, co-ordinated and agile. It is a response to Russia's own actions, and it is in accordance with international law. Under article 51 of the UN charter, Ukraine has a clear right of self-defence against Russia's illegal attacks. I say again that Russia could roll back its forces and end this war tomorrow. Until then, we will stand up for what we know is right, for Ukraine's security and for our own security, and we will back Ukraine with what is needed for as long as it is needed.

In challenging times, I take the view that British leadership matters more than ever. For the sake of our growth, our security and making our presence felt, giving the British people a voice on the global stage once again and standing up for the national interest, I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Leader of the Opposition.

10.45 am

**Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (North West Essex) (Con): With your permission, Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to express heartfelt condolences on my behalf and that of my party on the death of Lord Prescott. He was a titan of British politics in the 1990s, one of this country's greatest examples of social mobility, and a true patriot—no one who had two Jags could not love this country. We all especially remember that moment when he connected with the electorate during the 2001 general election. Many of us across the country, as well as the public, were very much on his side during that altercation. May he rest in peace.

I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement. As he said, this week marks the 1,000th day of Russia's unprovoked invasion. Ukraine is in a fight for its survival. The people of Ukraine are in our thoughts daily, but those thoughts must translate into action—action from us and from our allies.

I am proud of the last Conservative Government's contribution to Ukraine: £12 billion-worth of military, humanitarian and economic support; a commitment to spend at least £3 billion a year on military support; and hitting Russia with the largest sanctions package ever imposed on a major economy. I said we would be a constructive Opposition, and I meant it. We will work with the Government to ensure that British support for

Ukraine is steadfast and continuing. However, at the G20, the Prime Minister was not able to achieve his goal of getting leaders to double down on support for Ukraine. As Chancellor Scholz said:

"It is too little when the G20 cannot find the words to make it clear Russia is responsible."

The Prime Minister's meeting with the Chinese President has also attracted much interest. A day after his meeting with President Xi, in which the Prime Minister said he wanted a respectful relationship where both countries avoid surprises, 45 pro-democracy campaigners were imprisoned in Hong Kong. I was disappointed not to hear the Prime Minister condemn that at the time. Will he do so now, unequivocally? Will the Prime Minister confirm that he explicitly called for the repeal of the national security law and for an end to Jimmy Lai's politically motivated trial when he met President Xi? Can he point to any tangible benefits for UK interests from that meeting?

COP has not yet concluded, so we do not know what the final impact on the UK will be, but we do know that the Prime Minister's rush to a further cut in our emissions is yet another example of politicians putting short-term publicity above long-term planning. When will he publish the plans to achieve this new target? Where this Government do the right thing, we will back them; but where they put politics before people, and where they put press releases before practicality, we will hold them to account. It is time for politicians to tell the truth, and it is time for the Prime Minister to provide some substance to back this costly rhetoric.

Given how badly things are going at home, I am sure it was a lot easier being in Baku and at the G20, but while the Prime Minister was in Rio de Janeiro, hard-working farmers were protesting outside the gates of Downing Street against his cruel family farm tax. His Government have stoked inflation, and the Budget has caused employers to warn of job losses, price hikes and shop closures due to Labour's jobs tax. He needs to show that what he is doing abroad is in the interests of this country and making lives better.

That is why I welcome the Prime Minister's continuation of FTA negotiations with India. However, beyond the work we started, at the moment the Prime Minister's foreign policy is a pick and mix of empty platitudes, unilateral commitments that he could have announced at home and dangerous precedents: rushing to give away the Chagos islands, and paying for the privilege; an ill-judged suspension of export licences to Israel, damaging our defence and security industry; and failing to set out a road map for spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, in a world that is becoming yet more dangerous.

I hope the Prime Minister is up to the very real and serious challenges posed to our security and prosperity. He has many questions to answer this morning, and I look forward to hearing his response.

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the Leader of the Opposition for her tribute to John Prescott. We really appreciate that, and I am sure his family will as well.

On the broad issue of Ukraine, I welcome the continued unity across the House. The conflict has gone on for just over 1,000 days, and I am proud of the fact that throughout that time we have had unity across the House. I welcome the fact that we will continue to do so. If we



[*The Prime Minister*]

divide on the issue, the only winner will be Putin and I am not prepared to let that happen. In relation to the G20 words, it was clear about the UN charter. My position on doubling down was absolutely clear in everything I said on the record at G20 and in everything I have said and done in the past few weeks.

On China, I made it very clear in my meeting with the President that where we disagree, we will be frank and open about that disagreement and raise those issues of concern. On the right hon. Lady's specific question about the action in Hong Kong, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), made a statement condemning that action just a few days ago. I am happy to repeat and affirm her position, because that is the Government's position. The right hon. Lady will have seen some of the references to other issues that I raised in my meeting. Those issues are raised consistently with the Chinese by all members of this Government and, to be fair, they were raised by members of the previous Government when they were in office. Again, there is a lot of common ground.

On COP, we used the meeting to push forward on the targets. It is a shame that what used to be a cross-party issue not so many years ago—[*Interruption.*] When COP was in Scotland, there was a real unity across the House about the importance of tackling one of the most central issues of our time. The fact that the Leader of the Opposition is now taking the position of attacking the very idea of setting targets shows just how far the Conservative party has fallen. On this issue, I was proud that under some of her predecessors we had that unity. It is a shame that has now been lost because of the position adopted by the Opposition.

The right hon. Lady referenced my being at G20 in Rio when the farmers were protesting. G20 is an opportunity for the leading economies of the world to get together and discuss questions of common issues on the economy and security. If her implication is that the UK should not be there at leader level—that we should join Putin in avoiding that meeting—and that is the position of her party, then she should say so.

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

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): At this time of such great uncertainty and with so many threats, there has never been a more important time for Britain to be back on the world stage, and we have been missed. We can be a force for good, and our great friend, the sadly missed John Prescott, would be cheering the Prime Minister on as he takes a leadership role in tackling the most important threat of all—climate change. John was an early champion of that. Will my right hon. Friend give us more details about how the UK-led global clean power alliance uses our convening power on international finance to unlock private finance, support the climate transition and help the developing world?

**The Prime Minister:** The clean power alliance is a global alliance, and countries are lining up to sign our initiative to speed up the development of renewables to

ensure we have the funding—and that is the great opportunity. Climate is a huge challenge and we have obligations that we must meet globally, but it is also the single biggest opportunity we have for investment in jobs in this country, for energy security and to ensure the safety and security of everyone in this country.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Mr Speaker, may I echo your words about the passing of John Prescott? He dedicated himself to serving people and his enormous influence will be felt long into the future, not just in this country but around the world, with his incredible achievement of securing the world's first international agreement on climate change at Kyoto. Our thoughts are with his family and friends, and with those across the House, too.

I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. I welcome his commitment at Baku to the new emissions targets. We support those targets. When will he set out an action plan to meet them? Many families across the country will be worried not just about climate change, but about an increasingly insecure world: the devastating conflict in the middle east; the actions of China, not least with the continuing imprisonment of Jimmy Lai; the war in Sudan, of which I was alarmed to see no mention in the G20 declaration; and on our own continent, where Putin's forces continue to wage their illegal and outrageous war against the innocent people of Ukraine.

On the middle east, we welcome the reiteration of the G20's commitment to the two-state solution and the calls for ceasefires in Gaza and Lebanon. But with the United States once again vetoing a UN resolution for a ceasefire in Gaza, does the Prime Minister agree that now is the moment for the UK to recognise the independent state of Palestine?

On Ukraine, we welcome the new approvals on long-range missiles. We must give our Ukrainian allies whatever they need to win this war. The reality is that that support should have been given sooner. Why has it taken the threat of a second Trump presidency for there to be action? This is a war for our security and for the values we hold dear. Does the Prime Minister agree that now is the moment for the UK to lead in Europe? Will the Prime Minister convene a summit of European leaders to seize the Russian assets which are at our fingertips? We must not and cannot look back at this moment and wonder whether we could have done more.

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his tribute to John Prescott.

I was pleased to set out our emissions targets and of course we will set out our plan, but the single most important issue is achieving clean power by 2030. That is the game changer and one of the Government's five missions. On Sudan, he rightly raises an important issue, which I did raise at the G20. On Gaza, we supported the UN Security Council resolution, as I referenced in my words earlier. We have a long-standing policy on recognising Palestine as part of the process. A two-state solution is the only way for a political solution to this awful and ongoing conflict. On Ukraine, careful decisions are made, co-ordinated and collaborated with our key allies. On Russian assets, action is being taken. That is already being done in a number of forums, as I think the right hon. Gentleman knows.



**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the restoration of UK leadership. Lord Prescott, who did so much to lead on Kyoto, would be truly proud of my right hon. Friend's work and that of his Cabinet. I was very proud to lead the UK Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to Baku this weekend, where we heard loud and clear a report from finance experts who say that we need \$1 trillion a year in climate finance between now and 2030. The UK has led from the front, but the reality is that we cannot hit that target without building a bigger World Bank. We could lead that charge by recycling some of the £3 billion we get back from the European Investment Bank. Is that an initiative the Prime Minister could look into?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. On UK leadership, we are back leading on the stage. The sentiment among other leaders is that they are glad to see the UK back, leading on these issues. Their words to me are that they feel there has been an absence under the previous Government. On finance, this is really important. There are a number of ways we should and can leverage private money to meet very important challenges, whether the global climate challenge or other challenges. We took steps at COP to set out how those mechanisms could be improved.

**Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): I strongly welcome the decision to allow Ukraine to strike against targets in Russia, from which missiles, drones and glide bombs are launched. In discussing how best to support Ukraine, will the Prime Minister say what progress was made in assisting Ukraine's own military industrial sector to allow it to develop its own technology and to reduce its reliance on the West?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue, because I think it is very important that that work goes on. We are making our own contribution to that. I will not go into the details here, as he will understand, but I can make sure that he has a meeting, should he wish one, to give some of the details of that.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): In the Prime Minister's statement, he refers to the £1 billion investment for wind turbines in Hull. How does he envision that will benefit and improve lives and opportunities for my constituents in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes?

**The Prime Minister:** I was very pleased to announce the work in Hull, with about 1,300 well-paid jobs there, making the blades for wind turbines. It was not that many years ago that I went to the Whitelee wind farm just outside Glasgow; there are 350 or so wind turbines up there. I asked how many were built in Britain and the answer was none—not a single component. Not only is this announcement very good for Hull, with well-paid, secure jobs, but it is very good for the United Kingdom that we are beginning to make the components for wind turbines.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I return the Prime Minister to his meeting with President Xi. He may recall that at the time, President Xi put four red lines, one of which was about democracy and human rights, which he said he would

“allow no challenge”. I have been in contact with many Hong Kong refugees here, who fled Hong Kong, and they were worried about the Prime Minister's failure to condemn the arrest of the 45 and to call for their release and that of Jimmy Lai.

I do not believe the Prime Minister really answered the question properly, so I will give him another opportunity. Can he now get to the Dispatch Box—he can forget that another Minister who might have said it—and say, right now, that he as Prime Minister condemns the Chinese Government for their arrest and incarceration of the 45 peaceful democracy campaigners and calls for them to release the campaigners and Jimmy Lai immediately, because they are in breach of the Sino-British agreement?

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to affirm and confirm all of that. I did raise those issues—[*Interruption.*] I said I condemned it a moment ago and I am happy to say so. [*Interruption.*] I just did and I will say it again. These are serious issues that the right hon. Member has consistently raised, and I recognise that and we have discussed the matter between ourselves on previous occasions. It is important that where we have these significant differences, particularly on issues of human rights, we have frank, open discussions about them. That is why these matters have been raised repeatedly, and I myself raised them in the meeting I had earlier this week and will continue to do so. I am happy to be clear about that condemnation and to repeat that for him.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I know the Prime Minister shares my disappointment at the weakness of the G20 statement on Ukraine, compared with the G7 statement. When he met President Xi, did he raise China's support of Russia in the war in Ukraine and ask him to step back and join us in trying to end the war in Ukraine on fair terms for the Ukrainians?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I did raise the position of China's stance in relation to the conflict and there is a clear read-out of the meeting. It is not the first time that has been raised by this Government or, in fairness, by the previous one.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Not all members of the G20 at the summit are as concerned about the Russian invasion of Ukraine as the UK is. Ahead of the summit, it was said that the Prime Minister would talk about the “unfathomable consequences” if Putin succeeds. Did the Prime Minister talk to some of those sceptical leaders about those consequences? If so, what did they say?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, of course I did. Russia is a member of the G20. Putin was not there. The Conservative party seems to be suggesting that we should not have been there either, which I find a very odd implication. But, yes, it is really important to take every opportunity at these sorts of meetings to have the discussions that we need to have at leader level not only with our close allies, but with those who do not agree with us, so that we can raise those concerns and try to find a way forward, which is what we did.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Mr Speaker, may I associate myself with your remarks, the Prime Minister's remarks and the remarks

[Debbie Abrahams]

of others about the late Lord Prescott? He really was a one-off, and I will never forget his kindness and support of me.

On the substantive issue of the statement, I wish to congratulate the Prime Minister and colleagues on last night's Security Council vote to try to get Israel to provide humanitarian access to Gaza. But on its own, the vote will not stop the Israeli Government's destruction of Palestinian lives and homes. The inaction that we saw from the previous Government over the past year means that there is an even greater pressure on this Government to act quickly. Given that Israeli Government Ministers are knowingly ignoring international law and ordering preparations for the annexation of illegal settlements to start in January, will the Prime Minister impose sanctions on them and the organisations that fund them?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the important issue of the west bank and settlements. It is a major and escalating cause of concern and has been for some time. Certainly, sanctions have been imposed in the past and will continue to be imposed.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement condemning China's actions, but can he make a commitment here, now and completely clearly that, before any Minister meets any Chinese official, they will meet with the family of Jimmy Lai, or indeed any of the other many Hongkongers who are here and whose families have now been detained. We know—we can brief the Prime Minister on this—that there are Hongkongers who are threatened by the Chinese state here in the UK today, and it is his job to defend the people of this country, not to bow to the people in Beijing.

**The Prime Minister:** Defending the people of this country is what we do every day. Raising these important issues is the right way to do it. I was very clear about what I raised, and that is a matter of public record, as the right hon. Member will well know.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): In the past few days, the Labour Government have reaffirmed our commitment to Ukraine in its existential war against Russian aggression, reaffirmed our commitment to combating climate change in all our interests, and reaffirmed our commitment to backing the UN's resolution for a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of all hostages. Does the Prime Minister agree that, at a time of global volatility, geopolitical uncertainty and rising authoritarianism, it is more important than ever that Britain and Britain's values are back in action on the global stage?

**The Prime Minister:** I do agree with that. It is clear that we live in a more volatile time now than I think many of us can remember. These are issues of global concern—whether that is climate change or conflict—and they have a direct impact on the United Kingdom, so it is in our national interest to show the leadership that we have been showing on these issues. That leadership was sadly missing under the previous Government.

**Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Mr Speaker, may I associate myself and my colleagues with your remarks and the remarks of hon.

Members on the passing of John Prescott? John was a deeply principled man, clearly driven by a desire to improve people's lives. Our thoughts are with his wife, Pauline, and his family.

The investment that we have seen in renewables, particularly in Scotland, not only is essential in tackling the climate crisis, but has the potential to enable people to live in warmer homes with lower bills. However, the totally outdated set-up of the UK's energy market, where electricity prices are tied to global gas prices, means that people are not feeling the benefit of the roll-out of cheap renewable energy sources. As temperatures drop below freezing and millions of pensioners struggle without the winter fuel payment, will the Prime Minister now commit to domestic energy price reform?

**The Prime Minister:** This is a really important point, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising it. We are powering forward to clean power by 2030, which will not just achieve independence, particularly to stop Putin putting his boot on our throat with energy bills—everybody has suffered because of that—but will also bring down prices, meaning cheaper bills, which is really important. To the hon. Gentleman's point at the beginning of his question, it will deliver the next generation of well-paid, secure jobs across the United Kingdom, including in Scotland.

**Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): A couple of years ago, my constituents were hit hard by rocketing gas prices and energy bills, because the last Government left the UK hooked on global gas markets controlled by dictators such as Vladimir Putin. Following the COP summit, can the Prime Minister reassure my constituents in North Warwickshire and Bedworth that he will work relentlessly to ensure that nothing like that ever happens again?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I can; it is an important point. All countries were impacted by the conflict in Ukraine. We were impacted more than other countries, because some of the steps that could have been taken in the move towards renewables were not taken at speed by the previous Government, and people across the country paid the price.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Given the Prime Minister's unequivocal backing of Ukraine, and his admirable assertions that Putin must be seen to fail, will he rule out replacing, if she has to be replaced, our professional diplomatic ambassador in Washington with a party politician who has stated that Ukraine must lose the occupied territory to Russia, give up on becoming a member of NATO, and rely instead on security guarantees from European states?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the joint position in relation to the importance of Ukraine. I will resist the temptation that he offers for me to start discussing the position that he referenced.

**Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I echo your remarks, Mr Speaker, and those of the Prime Minister about Lord Prescott. He was a true embodiment of working-class values and aspiration. As he always used to say, nothing is too good for the workers.

This weekend, I will join Rochdale's Ukrainian community to commemorate the 91st anniversary of the Holodomor, Stalin's man-made famine against the Ukrainian people, which resulted in the loss of up to 4 million lives. Does the Prime Minister agree that the Russians will never crush the spirit of the Ukrainian people, and that we will do everything possible to aid them in their defence against Russian aggression?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I agree. I was struck during the general election campaign, as I think members of all parties will have been wherever they campaigned across the country, that support for Ukraine was there in every quarter of the United Kingdom. I am very proud of the fact that that is the position across our country.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I was struck that the Prime Minister's statement contained not a single reference in to our most important security and trading partner, the United States, particularly at this time of change, with the good news of the election of President Trump. While the Prime Minister was at the COP summit, he may have missed the fact that growth is falling in this country, debt is rising, and the motor industry is panicking as jobs are being destroyed. Just yesterday, Nissan announced further job cuts, as has Ford, because of electric vehicle targets, which are causing irreversible damage to our motor industry.

**Hon. Members:** What was the question?

**The Prime Minister:** I do not think that there was a question. We have stabilised the economy, and we have an absolute mission on growth. There was no growth for 14 years. The hon. Gentleman's party was cheering along the mini-Budget not so long ago, which was the major cause of many of the problems that we are facing today.

**Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): May I offer my condolences to Lord Prescott's family? He was a true pioneer and an inspiring role model, and he will be remembered here and in every place that benefited from his leadership and support for communities and neighbourhoods.

Last month, I met my constituent Sebastien Lai. We talked about my constituent Jimmy Lai, the British citizen who has been arbitrarily detained. I share my heartfelt thanks and the thanks of my constituent's family to the Prime Minister for raising his case at the G20. Will he share his expectations as a result of the conversation?

**The Prime Minister:** I raised it personally myself because it is such an important case, and it is very important that we continue to do so. It is raised by Government Ministers every time we engage with China. It is such an important case—this House knows the details—which is why I took the opportunity in the meeting I had earlier this week to raise it directly with the President.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): Everyone in the House welcomes high ambitions for our country, but given the complexity of delivering against the ambitious targets that the Prime Minister set out, there will be apprehensiveness about other countries going down the track at a different pace, which will have implications

for our economy. May I draw his attention to the excellent comments made by his Chancellor about the financial services industry last week at the Mansion House? What assessment has he made of the prospects of another economic and financial dialogue with China, building on the one I attended in 2019 in London, as an opportunity to extend economic dialogue, which has to be positive for the UK economy?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful to the right hon. Member for referencing the Chancellor's excellent Mansion House speech last week. On matters economic, I do think there is a dialogue to be had with China. It needs to be pragmatic and serious, and it needs to sit alongside the frank discussions we need to have, as we have referenced in this House, on the issues on which we disagree. But I do think there is room for that dialogue in the national interest—in our own interests.

**Abtissam Mohamed** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I associate myself with the condolences for Lord Prescott.

I welcome G20 leaders calling for a comprehensive ceasefire in Gaza and Lebanon and the UK's decision to support a resolution on the ceasefire. I thank the Prime Minister for his personal involvement in ensuring that this would happen. Sadly, we seem to be moving further and further away from peace. Gaza is on the verge of famine, and Palestinians are being deprived by Israel of food and humanitarian aid. The countdown on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency coming to an end is looming. Will he share what conversations he has had to press Israel to either reverse or pause its decision, or to explain how it will meet its obligations under international law?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend very much for raising this issue. I have pressed the issue on numerous occasions with many leaders in the region and elsewhere. We have to keep pressing for the hostages to be released. We must never forget that they have been held for a very long time, and in the most awful of circumstances, and what their families are going through is absolute torture. But we also absolutely need to be clear that aid is desperately needed in Gaza, where tens of thousands of people have been killed. That aid needs to get in, and it needs to get in urgently. I will continue to press that case.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): Time is running out at COP29 and the clock is ticking on the climate crisis. I welcome the leadership shown by the Prime Minister in attending COP29 and setting ambitious targets for the UK. The need to agree a global finance goal is vital, and making progress in Baku is clearly challenging. Will he assure me that he is pulling out all the stops this week to ensure that an agreement is reached and that it will be adequate to meet the needs of the poorest countries? Will he assure the House that the UK's pledges will be primarily in the form of grants?

**The Prime Minister:** As the hon. Lady knows, those discussions are ongoing, and it is important that we play our full part in ensuring that they conclude in a satisfactory way. Alongside that, it is important that we push the case for leveraging private finance, which will be needed to meet this challenge, and we are continuing to do that.



**Mr Mark Sowards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's global leadership—he has restored our place on the world stage. Climate change is the biggest threat facing us all. That used to be an uncontroversial statement, which is why I was stunned to hear the Leader of the Opposition describe the actions we have taken to deal with that problem as being done for “short-term publicity.” That is absolutely outrageous. Is the Prime Minister as delighted as I am that the climate sceptics of the Conservative party are now sitting on the Opposition Benches, so that we can take the long-term decision from the Government Benches?

**The Prime Minister:** It is a great shame that the Conservative party has decided to go backwards on that important challenge. Not so many years ago, there was a united position across the House because it is such an important challenge. I think that is simply a sign of how far the Conservatives have fallen. It is unsurprising that they are on the Opposition Benches. May they remain there for very long time.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome the commitments that the Prime Minister shared with Prime Minister Modi in their discussions. The Prime Minister set out in his statement the position on reigniting the free trade talks that began under the previous Government. Did he set out any red lines on that free trade agreement, and has a timetable been agreed? The previous Prime Minister promised a free trade agreement by Diwali. Will this Prime Minister set a different timescale?

**The Prime Minister:** I think the hon. Gentleman will find that the previous Government made lots of promises about lots of things—the only unifying factor is that they met none of those promises at all. We heightened the ambition for the agreement and made it clear that the negotiations would restart early in the next year. Of course there are checks and balances, and discussions to be had on that, but I am pleased that we have raised that ambition. That engagement was constructive and in the best interests of our country.

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford) (Ind): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's comments about the late Lord John Prescott? He was a giant of this place and of the labour movement. My condolences go to his family and loved ones.

The Prime Minister may know that, as the G20 communiqué once again recommitted to advancing the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, a groundbreaking and upsetting BBC documentary aired showing the harrowing experiences of British nuclear test veterans and uncovering vital new information. I know that he has long supported those men and their families, so will he agree to meet them, me, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) to discuss the Government's next steps on securing long-awaited truth and recognition?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank and pay tribute to her for her personal work on that issue, on which she has been pressing for a number of years, with considerable success. As she knows, I have met the veterans myself, and members of the Government will be happy to do so in

future. It is a really important issue. She has been pressing on it for a number of years, and I pay tribute to her again for that.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): On the Prime Minister's plan to decarbonise the grid by 2030, can he guarantee that in that timeframe there will no power shortages, no blackouts and no energy rationing?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks. I remember the late Lord Prescott visiting the Clapham Park Project—in one of the new deal for communities areas—and in true John Prescott style, he turned up on the estate in his Jaguar.

Food insecurity is such a big issue, and floods and drought can cause food insecurity for many countries. Trussell Trust data highlighted in 2023 that 7.2 million people, including 17% of children, faced food poverty. I attended an event earlier this week hosted by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) and Too Good To Go. It highlighted how we can use food surplus and help retailers and consumers. How is the Prime Minister working with international partners to highlight the crucial issue of food insecurity, which is sometimes not talked about?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I raised food security at the G20 summit earlier this week. My hon. Friend also refers to floods. For anybody who is sceptical about COP, there was a very powerful set of interventions by the Spanish Prime Minister about the impact that climate has had recently, with the terrible flooding in Spain. That is a material reminder of why we must never let up, and why we should not be divided, on the important issue of climate change.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): A breakthrough moment at COP28, the previous COP, was the creation of the loss and damage fund, but the financial contributions from each individual country were miserable, including that of the UK. Supporting communities and climate-vulnerable countries is in all our interests, because it prevents large-scale migration when land becomes uninhabitable. Will the Prime Minister commit to an increased financial contribution to the loss and damage fund?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not going to set out financial contributions here. The focus that we brought to COP was on the future action and resilience planning that are needed and being absolutely determined to work with partners to make the transition, for example, to clean energy across so many other countries.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I associate myself with the remarks from Mr Speaker and the Prime Minister about John Prescott. Although I did not know him personally, it is fair to say that he was clearly a phenomenon.

The Prime Minister will be fully aware of the importance of the investments of Jaguar Land Rover and Tata Group here in the United Kingdom and to my constituency



of Warwick and Leamington. Will he give his assessment of UK-India relations following his bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Modi?

**The Prime Minister:** Relations with India after the discussions earlier this week were in a constructive and positive place, which is good for my hon. Friend's constituents and for the country. As he will know and expect, I have separately discussed issues with the Tata Group in relation to its investment into this country.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Obviously, President Lula's Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty is to be welcomed, but such initiatives become mere platitudes if they are not backed up by action and resources. In practical terms, what is the UK's commitment to this initiative?

**The Prime Minister:** It is an important initiative. We backed it earlier this week, and we will support the actions that come out of it; I made that clear in my contribution. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that these initiatives need to be backed up by action to carry them forward, and we will make sure that they are.

**Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): I add my voice to the tributes paid to Lord Prescott. I thank the Prime Minister for his update on COP29. What are his priorities for the UK's international climate leadership in the run-up to COP30 in Brazil? Did he discuss that with President Lula in their bilateral discussions?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I did, because COP next year will be very significant and important, as I think everybody recognises. What is needed more than anything is for other countries to follow the lead of this country in relation to their emissions targets, and I discussed that directly with him.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I add my condolences to John Prescott's family on their loss. I also thank John for his life and, in particular, for the joy of campaigning with him where he was much loved during the 2017 and 2019 elections.

The Prime Minister is right to say that refugee flows are caused in part by climate change, but they are also caused by wars. What did the G20 summit say about the wars in Sudan and Congo, as well as the need for a ceasefire in Gaza? While Russia's invasion of Ukraine is obviously wrong, what pathway does he see to bringing about a cessation of that conflict, rather than putting in long-range missiles, which can only exacerbate the conflict with Russia and lead us to a very dangerous place indeed? Is there a pathway to an end to that war that he or anyone else in the G20 saw during their meetings?

**The Prime Minister:** I did raise both climate and conflict as major drivers of migration across the world, which is why they need to be addressed at the international level. In relation to Ukraine, I was very clear that Russia is in breach of the UN charter. This is Russian aggression against a sovereign country in Europe—the sort of aggression I did not think I would see again in my lifetime—and we must ensure that Putin does not win this war. That is why I have been so clear in standing with Ukraine for as long as it takes, and providing it with whatever resource it needs.

**Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and for his display of unity with the French President Emmanuel Macron on Armistice Day. We have gone from Tory Prime Ministers who question whether France is even an ally, and who leave Normandy early, to a Labour Prime Minister who stands shoulder to shoulder with our French and European allies. Does the Prime Minister agree that strong alliances with our European neighbours are crucial to our peace and security?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I do. To attend the Armistice Day in France was a special and important—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry? I was saying that it was a very special and moving occasion, on which we remembered all those who lost their lives for our freedoms. I am not sure why the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) wanted to chunter through that. We were able to collectively reflect on all those who lost their lives, not only in the first world war, but in every conflict since. We should never lose sight of the fact that many of those whom we lost are buried in France, and it was a very special moment to be there.

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): John Prescott was a remarkable climate diplomat, and a funny, moving, and strangely mesmerising speaker, but he was also aware that while ambitious climate targets are necessary, climate action is essential. On that point, I understand that the hydrogen allocation round 1 agreements are ready to go. Can the Prime Minister commit to getting those agreements issued to companies, so that we can get the hydrogen economy going before Christmas, together with the jobs that go with it?

**The Prime Minister:** I want this initiative to proceed at pace; it is a really important initiative. There is no silver bullet here. We need to work across all areas to reach the goal of clean power by 2030, and we will continue to do so at pace.

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I echo the remarks of the Prime Minister and others about John Prescott. Rarely has there been a better example of the fact that working people are meant to govern, and I hope that John knew what a great example he was to so many of us on the Labour Benches and across this House.

It is clear that we must take a far larger role in international affairs—that is not optional at this time—but that role must translate into greater prosperity at home. Can the Prime Minister expand on how the conversations he had at the G20 and COP will bring more jobs and investment to communities such as mine in Gateshead?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with my hon. Friend that international affairs are probably more important now than they have been for a number of years, because of the volatility, but they are also a great opportunity, because the next generation of jobs is there. There is a race on for those jobs, particularly in renewables, and I want the UK to be not just in that race, but winning it. That is why, in every international engagement that I have had, I have pressed the case for the UK, and I am very pleased with the investment that is now coming into our country. An example I gave was the investment in Hull, which I announced at COP; but at our investment

[*The Prime Minister*]

summit a few weeks ago, £63 billion of investment in this country, which will be measured in good, well-paid jobs, was forthcoming. That is good for our country.

**Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): Given the Prime Minister's optimism on his return from COP29, can he tell the House how the deals that he signed there will uphold his promise to cut energy bills by £300 for constituents such as mine, and when can they expect to see that promise become a reality?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. The direct investment in jobs in Hull to build turbines is obviously really important for that constituency and for the country, and I will continue to make the case for those deals to be done, with those jobs to come, so that we can drive forward to clean power. That will have the effect of protecting energy security, but also of lowering energy bills.

**Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): Last week, I had the privilege of meeting some Members of the Ukrainian Parliament, and I know that they will have been heartened by the leadership that my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister has shown on the world stage this week. Does the Prime Minister agree that there is only one aggressor in this conflict, and that the way to end the war is, in his own words, for Putin to "get out of Ukraine"?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I do. I think we must never lose sight of the fact that this war could be ended today if the aggressor ceased being aggressive—if Russia backed out and backed down. There is no equivalence here. A sovereign country has been invaded, and that is why, across this House, we have stood with Ukraine for as long as it takes, and will continue to do so.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): I am proud that the Liberal Democrats were the first UK-wide major party to call for an immediate bilateral ceasefire between Israel and Gaza, and we continue to push the Prime Minister to honour that position. I am also proud that many Eastbourne campaigners have been calling for that from the get-go, and have come out to condemn the rising tide of Islamophobia and antisemitism across the country. What global efforts to stem this tide of prejudice did the Prime Minister discuss with G20 leaders, and will he congratulate Muslim and Jewish leaders in Eastbourne, as well as incredible neighbourhood policing officers such as Fareed Kamar—you know him too, Madam Deputy Speaker—for uniting to root out hate crime locally?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very happy to applaud anybody who is taking on the fight against hate crime in all its forms. I think one of the sad features of the last few years has been the rise in hate crime in all its forms. I think all of us have a responsibility—a duty—to do everything we can to reduce hate crime, so I am very happy to applaud anybody involved in that, including in the hon. Member's constituency.

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): I associate myself with the tributes to Lord Prescott, and send my condolences to his family.

I very warmly welcome the Prime Minister's statement, particularly on COP. As Members across this House have acknowledged, it is great to see the UK showing international leadership on action to combat climate change once more. Given this Government's mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower, can the Prime Minister tell us how Great British Energy will result in lower fuel bills for my residents in Dartford, Ebbsfleet, Swanscombe and Greenhithe, as well as for those across the country?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. Great British Energy, which will be publicly owned, will drive forward on renewables, towards clean power in 2030. We have to make up time, because of the slowness of the Conservative party, but we are determined to do so. This will be measured in energy independence—so that Putin's boot will not be on our throat, as it was in recent years—in the jobs of the future, and in lowering energy bills.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): We know that one thing the Prime Minister was discussing with President Xi in August was the planning application for the Chinese embassy. He said to the President:

"You raised the Chinese Embassy building...when we spoke on the telephone, and we have since taken action by calling in that application."

What discussions did Downing Street have with the Department about that call-in prior to the Deputy Prime Minister's formal decision to call in the Chinese embassy planning application?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Member will know very well that the application has been in for a number of years. It is something the previous Government were looking at, and it is being dealt with through the usual process.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): May I associate myself with the expressions of condolence to Lord Prescott's family and friends?

Given that this is UK Parliament Week, does the Prime Minister agree that his statement should reassure young people, who need hope that global issues are tackled, and that his and Ministers' efforts at international forums, such as COP29 and the G20, are vital? Does he further agree that it is this Government who are renewing and strengthening our alliances, and demonstrating that greater international co-operation can defend our values and leave a better world for our children?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I think we all need to remind ourselves that it is young people more than any who will live with the consequences of our actions or inactions, and that is why I am very pleased that the UK is leading again on these important global issues. Among other leaders of the G20, the absence of UK leadership in recent years under the previous Government was keenly felt.

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I note the Prime Minister's comments on COP. He will know, of course, that the agricultural industry is one of the most difficult areas to decarbonise; that will require substantial investment. Will his family farms tax help or hinder that?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very pleased that, at the Budget, we put £5 billion over the next two years into farming and food sustainability, which is hugely important to support our farmers. The hon. Gentleman will no doubt have noticed the money allocated to deal with flooding, a constant cause of problems for farmers, and the money put into dealing with the outbreak of disease, which is devastating for so many farmers. He will also know that in an average case of parents wanting to pass on a farm to one of their children, by the time the various assessments are made, it is only those valued above £3 million that will be affected by this, despite the fear-mongering from Opposition Members. That means that the vast majority of farms and farmers will be totally unaffected, as I know the hon. Gentleman appreciates.

**Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about the late Lord Prescott?

Now that the Prime Minister has met the Chinese President, does he believe that we are in a better position to advance UK interests, and to challenge China on important issues such as human rights, than we were in the last six years, in which no UK Prime Minister could even have those conversations, because they did not go to China?

**The Prime Minister:** That is an important point. This is about getting the balance right. That is why I took a pragmatic approach in the interests of this country, in order to further our interests, and decided to have frank discussions where they are necessary. I believe it is better that we meet and engage than that we are absent from the international stage.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): The Prime Minister's focus on fighting climate change on the international stage is a welcome change from the conspiracy theories and equivocation we had under the last Government. One of the simplest ways to generate clean power in the UK is through solar panels, so will his Government take an interest in my private Member's Bill, the sunshine Bill—the New Homes (Solar Generation) Bill, which would mandate solar photovoltaic generation on all new build homes—when it comes to the Commons on 17 January?

**The Prime Minister:** I have had a lot of documents put in my box over the last few weeks, and I will make sure that the hon. Gentleman's sunshine Bill is in there, so that I am able to give him a better answer next time.

**Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): I echo the very warm tributes to Lord Prescott from across the House. One of the warmest tributes to him from outside this House was by former Vice-President Al Gore, who described him as

“an unwavering champion of climate action”.

The Government's global clean power alliance builds on that legacy, uniting countries to accelerate the transition to clean energy, but will the Prime Minister set out how this alliance and action will deliver lower bills for my constituents and deliver UK energy security in the future?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. This alliance will push forward the UK's drive, and that of other countries, towards renewables. That will have an impact on the constituents

of everybody in this House, because it will give energy independence, lower bills and, of course, the next generation of jobs, which will go elsewhere if we do not win these contracts.

**John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): In government, my party championed North sea oil and gas, securing 200,000 jobs, not just in Scotland but right across this country, in every constituency—including mine, rural Dumfries and Galloway. The Prime Minister talks about us having Putin's boot on our throat, but surely pulling the plug on the North sea oil and gas industry, as he is doing, delivers us into the hands of Putin and makes our energy security less viable.

**The Prime Minister:** As the hon. Gentleman knows very well, North sea oil and gas is sold on the international market and therefore is subject to constraints. The proof is there; over the last few years, we have had terribly high energy bills—it was worse in this country than in others. The suggestion that somehow the last Government insulated us from the impact felt by other countries is ludicrous against the evidence.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): Today, the United Nations has said that virtually no aid has got into Gaza for the past 40 days. This winter, hundreds of thousands of people face malnutrition or worse. Can the Prime Minister give an update on conversations he had at the G20 that could help us end this conflict, release the hostages and finally get aid back into Gaza?

**The Prime Minister:** I repeatedly pressed that matter not only at the G20 but elsewhere. That aid into Gaza is desperately and urgently needed, and in much greater volumes than are currently making their way through. I have argued consistently for the release of the hostages—that has to be the starting point—for that aid to get into Gaza and for all of us to work for a long-term solution here. It has to be a peaceful way to the two-state solution.

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. Like the rest of the House, I agree that we must be a leading voice on the global stage. However, I would like to ask the Prime Minister why it was necessary to travel with 470 officials to the G20. Notwithstanding the carbon footprint, there is the cost to the public purse, especially as I will have a lot of cold pensioners this winter.

**The Prime Minister:** The contingent this year was actually fewer than the contingent last year. It involved a wide number of individuals because a lot of negotiation, as the hon. Member probably well knows, goes on at COP, and it is vital that we are there doing that important work.

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): What was clear throughout the Prime Minister's statement was the need for defence collaboration across the world, as we live in a much more unstable global situation. In his discussions with the Australian leadership, was he able to recommit the UK to AUKUS? Can he give us an update on the next steps, please?



**The Prime Minister:** I was able to discuss AUKUS with the Australian Prime Minister in the G20, as I have done on previous occasions when I have talked with him, including our full commitment and pressing on to the next stages.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, may I send our sincere sympathies to the family of John Prescott on his passing? He was indeed a mighty man. He will be missed, but the one thing he has left behind is a legacy, and I think we can all recognise that.

The Prime Minister will be aware that for these summits to be effective, there must be global buy-in. To see world leaders, such as France, among those determining that it was not a good use of time poses a question. If a new format is needed, what discussions has the Prime Minister had with other nations to ensure that meeting environmental obligations is not something to be avoided, but instead is something to get excited about?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments on John Prescott and his legacy. I am so pleased to build on that legacy, both on climate, which John felt passionately about, and with the jobs we have been able to announce going to Hull.

Buy-in is a really important issue. It is why we need to show leadership, because we cannot do it on our own—no country can. With the UK showing leadership, we can get the buy-in of other countries in whatever form and in whatever way we can. That is why I worked so hard at COP on this issue, which was raised again at the G20. It is why I am very supportive of the initiatives for private finance to be leveraged in to help other countries meet the obligations they will have to meet.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I am pleased to note that the Prime Minister had good discussions with Prime Minister Modi and deepened our bilateral ties and unique bonds. Can he assure me that my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal's seven-year arbitrary detention was raised with Modi in those discussions to help bring him home to Dumbarton?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter, and let me give him that reassurance that it was raised. It is an extremely important case, so it was raised by me, and it has been raised by other Ministers, as he would expect.

## Business of the House

11.49 am

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell):** The business for the week commencing 25 November will include:

MONDAY 25 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill.

TUESDAY 26 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

WEDNESDAY 27 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

THURSDAY 28 NOVEMBER—Debate on a motion on the international status of Taiwan, followed by a debate on a motion on freedom of religion in Pakistan. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 29 NOVEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 2 December includes:

MONDAY 2 DECEMBER—General debate on the Grenfell Tower inquiry phase 2 report.

TUESDAY 3 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 4 DECEMBER—Opposition day (4th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 5 DECEMBER—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 6 DECEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

**Jesse Norman** (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I associate hon. Members on the Opposition side of the House with the comments made about Lord Prescott's death.

I am delighted to hear that the House administration is aiming to win the National Autistic Society's autism friendly award. I know that all colleagues will want to join me in wishing the House team good luck with that.

In last week's episode of this long-running saga, I drew attention to the Government's incompetence in having a Budget that managed to raise the rate of national insurance, lower the NI threshold and increase the minimum wage all at the same time. I described that as a "terrible blow" to the retail and hospitality sectors and asked if the Treasury would publish an assessment of the total effect of those measures before they came to the House. Well, I need hardly have bothered, because barely five days later, what did we find? A letter from Tesco, Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury's, all the major supermarkets and many of the biggest names in the retail industry highlighting the Budget's impact in forcing shop closures and job losses.

The sad truth is that there is nothing surprising here. It was completely obvious to everyone except the Government that this unplanned triple whammy was likely to have this effect. I ask the Leader of the House again: will we see an analysis of its effects when the Finance Bill comes to the House next week or alongside the forthcoming National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill?



Otherwise, I think we should turn our attention to energy. The Government have proclaimed their intention to make Britain a 100% clean energy producer by 2030. A couple of weeks ago, the new National Energy System Operator published a report on how that might be done. I must say that I am feeling a degree of embarrassment, as I had been under the impression that the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero was a slightly clownish figure, unable to eat a bacon sandwich without causing an international incident and with a political style closely modelled on Wallace and Gromit, but actually I was quite wrong. In fact, like the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State may need to update his CV. I now realise that he is a heroic figure; the titan of transition.

In fact, I will go further. The Energy Secretary is a modern Clark Kent, whose slightly bumbling, comedic exterior is merely a disguise concealing a range of astonishing superpowers. Think of what he will have to achieve if the UK is, as he promises, to have entirely carbon-free energy in just over five years' time. He will have to build twice as many pylons and cables in those five years as we have built in the last 10. He will have to get all the transmission infrastructure built on time and reshape the planning rules, or the taxpayer will be forced to pay for wind turbines that stand idle. Like the Greek god Aeolus, this great baron of breeze will need to ensure that the winds blow and contract as much offshore wind capacity in the next two years as in the last six combined. He will also need to ensure that the global price of carbon doubles or triples just to make the sums add up. That is before one considers the effects of unexpected inflation, skills shortages, dependency on foreign energy technologies and intermittency of supply. What could possibly go wrong?

Meanwhile, the Energy Secretary's plans for small modular reactors have been delayed while he plunges ahead with his plans to cut off gas turbines and leave us dangerously reliant on expensive foreign energy imports. Those plans are not simply heroic; they are fanciful. They are magical thinking. What is worse, they are likely to be ruinously expensive both for the taxpayer and for the electricity user. It is little wonder that top business and union leaders have come together to describe them as "just not feasible" and "impossible".

We have been here before with the three-day week of the 1970s, and the result was blackouts and energy rationing. Should we expect that again? This is the rub: power reveals. We are seeing not merely a lack of competence but an Energy Secretary who has still not made any statement on the NESO report that I mentioned. He is deliberately refusing to account for his actions to this House on this foundational matter, and he is holding the Commons in contempt. When can we expect a statement from the Energy Secretary on the NESO report? When will he be forced to come to the Dispatch Box to explain and defend this folly?

**Lucy Powell:** First of all, I join Mr Speaker and others in marking the sad loss of John Prescott. He was a true legend, and one of the best campaigners of our movement. He put climate change and real, meaningful levelling up at the top of the political agenda long before they were fashionable. He was groundbreaking and huge fun, and he will be greatly missed. We send our condolences to Pauline and the whole family. As Mr Speaker said, there will be an opportunity for tributes next week.

I am sure the whole House will also join me in marking Parliament Week, when we open our door on how we work in this place. Today is "Ask Her to Stand" day, when we encourage more women to seek elected office.

Let me take this opportunity to point the House to a motion that I have tabled today, which makes some important changes to proxy votes for Members. One of my priorities as Leader of the House is to make Parliament more family friendly. We have more women than ever in this place, and more parents of small children, those with caring responsibilities and disabled Members. We need to change the way that we do things to reflect the times. I have asked the Procedure Committee to continue its wider review of the proxy vote system, and the Modernisation Committee will consider these issues in due course. However, I have heard from Members that the current system has not met some immediate needs, so I am extending the childbirth, miscarriage or baby loss proxy provisions to explicitly cover complications during pregnancy or ongoing fertility treatment. Under this scheme, reasons for proxies remain confidential and are self-certified, requiring no onerous paperwork. I am making the default for all proxies seven months, and I hope the whole House will welcome that.

The right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) raised a number of issues, but I must say I am losing track of the Opposition's arguments. They attack our Budget measures, yet they support all the investment. They do not like our decisions, yet they took many of the same ones in government. They duck the difficult issues, yet criticise us for dealing with them. Yes, we have had to make some big choices, but we stand by them because we are on the side of ordinary people, the NHS and public services. We are operating in the interests of economic stability, unlike his party. We will see the impact of the Budget over time, but the Conservatives really must decide whether they support the investment and the extra spending on our public services, or whether they do not want any of it and are against that support.

The right hon. Gentleman picks on the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, but there is not a more accomplished member of the Cabinet. He is driving forward his agenda. He is forthcoming to this House on many occasions, and every time he appears in this House, he wipes the floor with his opponent. Yet again, the Conservatives are on the wrong side of history. We have a very ambitious mission to become a clean energy superpower by 2030—one that we are driving forward. It is vital that we do that. That means taking on some of the inherent issues that they ducked: our infrastructure; the grid; our planning laws; getting the investment where it is needed, which we are announcing that all the time; unlocking new power supplies in nuclear, solar, hydrogen and elsewhere; and establishing Great British Energy, which is well under way, to ensure much needed homegrown production. Taken together, those measures will lower bills, create jobs, and give us the energy security that the right hon. Gentleman's Government failed to give us.

Is not the truth that Opposition Members are becoming political opportunists? They spent years in government ducking the difficult decisions, leaving a huge black hole and a big mess for us to clean up. Public services were on their knees, strike action was costing £15 billion in lost productivity, pay deals were on Ministers' desks

[Lucy Powell]

with not a penny accounted for, and not a single penny was set aside for the compensation schemes. The reserves were spent three times over, and on their watch inflation was at 11%. Living standards fell for the first time in our history under the Conservatives. Now they want to have their cake and eat it at the same time. They want all the benefits from the Budget, but not the hard calls needed to pay for them. In a few short weeks, they have gone from the party of government to the party of protest.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has illustrated a great many aspects of the mess that this Government have inherited from the last, including longer waiting lists, our crumbling schools and our failing economy, and nowhere is that mess more visible than on the A46 in Warwickshire, between Coventry and Stratford, which adjoins my constituency. Last month, 12 tonnes of rubbish were collected from the roadside because no clearing up had been done for many years—yet another example of the mess that was left behind. May we have a debate in Government time not just on potholes, but on the state of our roads and the mess that the last Government left them in?

**Lucy Powell:** What better symbol could there be of the mess we have inherited than all that mess left on the A46 in my hon. Friend's constituency? We are committed to tackling the plague of fly-tipping and the vandals who are creating a mess in our communities, and that is one of the reasons why we are cracking down on antisocial behaviour and introducing respect orders so that those responsible can clean up their own mess.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): I, too, would like to pay my respects to Lord Prescott. Although we did not serve in this place at the same time, it is impossible to have followed British politics over the past few decades without acknowledging his enormous influence. I also wish to extend my condolences to his family and friends.

I was pleased to note the constructive approach taken in the other place in relation to rail passenger services, including commitments secured by Liberal Democrats to making the delivery of improvements, and the maintaining of high standards of improvement, a crucial part of the Government's agenda.

Earlier this week, I received an email from Essex & Herts Air Ambulance, a registered charity that provides helicopter emergency medical services for the critically ill and injured of Essex, Hertfordshire and surrounding areas. In the last financial year alone, its members attended 2,635 missions. It costs more than £1 million every month to keep the service operational and to cover all charitable costs. That would not be possible without the good will of people in Essex and Hertfordshire, but the recent changes to employers' national insurance contributions will cost the charity an additional £100,000 a year. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on how the impact of the rise in employers' NICs can be mitigated specifically for the charitable sector, recognising the vital, sometimes lifesaving role that it plays in all our communities?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words about John Prescott. I also thank her and her party for supporting the final stages of the rail franchising Bill. The Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill completed all its stages in both Houses the other evening, which means that it will be one of the first Bills to become an Act under this Labour Government. As she said, we are already seeing much-needed increased reliability in our rail services as a result of the Bill coming forward. I thank her for that.

The hon. Lady raises a really important point, and I thank those who support the air ambulance service in her constituency and across Essex. As she knows, the Health Secretary is looking at how the massive increase in NHS funding in the Budget can be used to support other health charities and health services, and we will update the House soon.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): May I join other Members of the House in sending my condolences to the Prescott family? I used to sit with John when we did the prep for Prime Minister's questions, and I now wish that I had taken notes of all the rebuttals and lines that did not make the cut, because they would make one hell of a book.

My constituents in Brent East, one of the most diverse constituencies in the UK, deserve fair pay for a fair day's work. Yesterday was equal pay day, which was two days earlier than normal, meaning that things are getting worse. Will the Leader of the House allow us to have a debate on this issue in Government time?

**Lucy Powell:** Yesterday was indeed equal pay day. For those who do not know, that is the day of the year when the average woman essentially stops earning money—she has earned her full year's pay—due to the gender pay gap. It is a fantastic campaign that is organised by the Fawcett Society, whose representatives I met earlier this week. I am proud that this Government have introduced the Employment Rights Bill, which will support women in work and help them to get a pay rise. I am sure that this issue would make a really good topic for a Backbench Business debate, and we are about to hear about such debates.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the Backbench Business for the Chamber next week. On Thursday 5 December, the business will be a debate on detained British nationals abroad, which is a topical subject, given the Prime Minister's announcements today, and a debate on improving public transport—those of us who were here for Transport questions will know why that is topical. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House could ensure that we get Thursday 12 December for Backbench Business, because we have a queue of debates that need to be held in the Chamber. I give the House an early warning that the annual pre-Christmas Adjournment debate will take place on Thursday 19 December.

In addition to the business in the Chamber that the Leader of the House announced, there will be a full three-hour debate on the fishing industry in Westminster Hall next week. With your permission, Madam Deputy

Speaker, there will be a debate on the domestic production of critical minerals on Tuesday 3 December, and a debate on pelvic mesh and the Cumberlege review on Thursday 5 December.

On Sunday, I was proud to be at the Cenotaph, where more than 3,000 members of the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women paraded to commemorate those who gave their lives in the great war, world war two and subsequent conflicts. I am grateful that Lord Coaker was there on behalf of the Government to lay a wreath, which demonstrates the Government's commitment to the movement. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Community Security Trust, the police and the security services on enabling AJEX to hold the parade and to commemorate all those who have given their lives in the service of this country?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for announcing those debates. It sounds like they will attract a great deal of attention, and I know that many of the new Members will be really keen to stay here right to the very end for the Adjournment debate before the Christmas recess, which we are not looking forward to at all, because we are desperate to be here as long as possible.

I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the Jewish community for all that they did for this country and others during the second world war and many other conflicts since. I also pay tribute to AJEX, CST, the police and others for keeping the community safe and enabling them to continue to pay their respects.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): In 2020, Andrew Rowlands tragically lost his life in my constituency after getting into the car of a driver who was under age, uninsured and unqualified. Yet the driver was still able to purchase a vehicle without proof of identity, relevant insurance or experience. This event was truly heartbreaking for Andrew's family and friends, so can we have a debate in Government time on how we can prevent such accidents and situations in future?

**Lucy Powell:** I express my deepest sympathies to all those affected by that tragic case. The issue of people acquiring and driving vehicles without insurance or a driving licence is often raised in this House. I will ensure that it is raised with the Secretary of State for Transport and that my hon. Friend gets a full reply. I am sure that this would make a good topic for a debate.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I have been impressed by the courtesy and assiduousness with which the Leader of the House sends those of us who ask a business question in which we request a statement or debate a copy of the letter she sends to the appropriate Department. She would impress me even more if she instituted a requirement that the Ministers who receive those letters must respond, so that she can send us some feedback on why they do or do not intend to give us the debates or statements we have requested.

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words. It is important to me that Members get responses from Ministers. I thank my fantastic civil service team for ensuring that all those letters are sent. I get replies to those letters from some Ministers, and those who do not reply are strongly noted. I do follow

up, and I have my own internal league table. It is important to me that Members who raise issues, either with me or in the House, get a thorough response from Ministers. I shall certainly do that.

**Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Communities across the country are badly affected when local banks, such as the Bank of Scotland branch on Portobello High Street, close. Such closures have a huge impact on those who are digitally excluded and on access to cash. Communities are told that they can bank at the local post office, but we are finding that post offices, like the Waverley post office in my constituency, are closing too. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time so that we can discuss these serious issues affecting high streets across the country?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend raises an important issue that has been raised many times, particularly in the last couple of weeks, as we have heard about possible further post office closures. The Post Office contacted me after last week's business questions to make it clear that no decisions have been made, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right to continue raising these issues on behalf of his constituents. We need banking hubs in our communities, and the Post Office is a vital partner in delivering them.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Yesterday, Ford announced that it is pulling 4,000 jobs across Europe, including 800 in the UK, mostly in Essex. On top of that, Nissan has announced big job cuts in the UK, and workers at the New Holland tractor plant in Basildon are concerned about the impact of the family farm tax. With vehicle excise duty now going up on both internal combustion engine vehicles and electric vehicles, with the lack of demand and infrastructure for EVs and with the national insurance hit on UK business, can we have a debate in Government time on the impact of Government policy on the UK automotive and vehicle manufacturing sectors?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising the decision made by Ford in his constituency. As he knows, this Europe-wide decision was taken for commercial reasons, but we have asked the company urgently to share its plans so that we can think about the impact on the UK. I do not agree with his analysis of this Government's policy in relation to manufacturing. We now have a comprehensive industrial strategy for the long term. Such a plan occasionally appeared under his Government, but was more recently completely deleted. For the first time in a long time, our industrial partners feel they have a long-term partnership with a Government who are on their side.

**Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): This week, the Home Secretary spoke of her shock on taking office at how little the Home Office had been doing under the previous Government to prevent violence against women and girls. This week, a local women's running group in my constituency, These Girls Can Run, is partnering with the Rising Sun country park's park run for its annual takeover to mark White Ribbon Day. Can we have a debate on how we challenge and change attitudes to violence against women and girls and domestic abuse?



**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend raises an important issue, and next week's White Ribbon Day is an important opportunity for us to continue highlighting the issues and violence that women and girls face. She will know that this is a top priority not just for this Government but for the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary. Over 10 years, we want to halve violence against women and girls, which is a hugely ambitious mission that we are determined to meet.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** I add my condolences to the family and friends of Lord Prescott. I was occasionally in the same room as John Prescott when I was a councillor in the north, and he was indeed pugnacious and fun, even for those who happened to be a target of his remarks.

Dorothy House and many other charities in my constituency have contacted me with concerns about the increase in national insurance contributions. To cover the extra costs, they will need to reduce services or lay off staff. Some charities may even go under. I join the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for an urgent statement from the Chancellor on how the third sector will be supported so that it can continue to provide the same level of services.

**Lucy Powell:** Further to the reply I gave a few moments ago, the hon. Lady will know that our tax regime for charities is the most generous anywhere in the world and was worth just over £6 billion in the last year. We hear what she and others are saying, and we will continue to support charities. There will be Treasury questions in early December, and she might want to raise the issue with the Chancellor then.

**Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab):** Almost one in five of my constituents work in the freight and logistics industry. These hard-working people deliver Christmas. On Tuesday, I launched a report by the Road Haulage Association and the all-party parliamentary group on freight and logistics that made shocking revelations on the frequency and seriousness of freight crime, including at crime hotspots such as Corley services in my North Warwickshire and Bedworth constituency. The true cost of freight crime exceeds £1 billion, so can the Leader of the House facilitate a debate in Government time on tackling freight crime and keeping our drivers safe?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to our road haulage community. In recent times, we have really understood the value of their contribution to keeping our country and our economy going. She is absolutely right to highlight the haulage crime raised with her by the Road Haulage Association. Home Office questions are next week, and she might want to raise these important matters then.

**Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con):** The Leader of the House will have surely seen the thousands of hard-working farmers who came to Whitehall on Tuesday to protest against the cruel family farm tax. While he was at COP29, the Prime Minister tried to defend his policy by quoting BBC Verify, but BBC Verify has now deleted its comment supporting the Government. Likewise, *The Telegraph* has reported this week that a Treasury source has told it that no impact assessment will be

published on the family farm tax until just before the next Budget. Will the Leader of the House get the Chancellor to come to the Dispatch Box, so that we can have an informed debate about the actual impact the family farm tax will have on the constituents of all Members of the House, including her own Back Benchers who represent rural seats? Her colleagues can then decide whether they stand with their party or with the farmers.

**Lucy Powell:** We are absolutely clear and the figures are absolutely clear, because they are based on actual claims for agricultural property relief that have been made in recent years. Those figures show that around three quarters of claims would be unaffected by the changes we have made. Does the Conservative party accept the principle that 40% of the total value of agricultural property relief comes from ownership of the top 7% of claims by land value? Do Conservative Members think that is a fair system? Is that fair to young farmers trying to get into the industry? Do they support the additional £6 billion we have put into farming as a result of the Budget? They cannot support the funding going in if they do not support the measures needed to raise that investment in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

**Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab):** I echo and add my condolences to the family of the late Lord John Prescott: one man, two Jags, three election wins.

While COP29 in faraway Baku may make environmental problems seem far away too, climate change is very real: rising tides mean the legendry beach runway on the isle of Barra now has limited use; storm surges regularly cut off Baleshare from neighbouring North Uist; and crofters in my constituency now over-winter their stock on the mainland. Will the Leader of the House find some Government time for a debate on how climate change affects our coastal communities?

**Lucy Powell:** John Prescott was at the vanguard of the issues my hon. Friend raises. It was thanks to him that the Kyoto agreement was agreed all those years ago. He was far-sighted about the need for international collective agreement to tackle climate change, a legacy that this Government are proud to take forward at COP. My hon. Friend is right to identify the issues climate change raises for his constituency, for which he is a great champion, and I am sure they would make a good topic for a debate.

**Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con):** The Leader of the House will know that Queen's Hospital is based in Romford. It serves the boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge. I was proud to visit the hospital recently to see its amazing work around the clock with people who have suffered a stroke, who come from a huge radius, from the midlands to the south-east. The one problem with our local hospital is that the A&E department is completely overstretched. People are waiting on trolleys, sometimes for 24 hours, which is unacceptable. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Minister responsible for hospitals to visit Queen's Hospital with me, and will she arrange for a debate in the House in Government time on that vital topic, which really affects my constituents?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issues facing Queen's Hospital in his constituency, particularly the A&E department. My husband is an

1.[*Official Report*, 4 December 2024; Vol. 758, 4WC.] Correction

A&E consultant, so I hear most evenings about the crisis facing our accident and emergency departments. That crisis has increased exponentially over the past 14 years, I am sorry to say, and he and other doctors working on the frontline would contrast that starkly with the situation under the last Labour Government, which provided support to accident and emergency. I am sure the Health Secretary would be delighted to debate those issues with the hon. Gentleman and the Opposition, because A&E needs some serious investment, which is what this Government are all about.

**Kirith Entwistle** (Bolton North East) (Lab): I rise to point out the recent changes to the proxy voting scheme. As a member of the Modernisation Committee, can I ask for a debate in Government time about further changes to the procedures and working practices of the House, so that we can create a more accessible and family-friendly culture?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for all her fantastic work on the Modernisation Committee. She has been a really good member of the Committee; in fact, all the members of the Committee, including those from Opposition parties and the shadow Leader of the House, have been very good and there has been consensual work towards the endeavour of modernisation. The proxy voting change that I have just announced will be on the Order Paper for consideration by the House next week. I hope we can have many opportunities to discuss further issues in the coming months.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): Following the Budget, Matthew Clover, from Salisbury Orthodontics, wrote to me. He said:

“The recent Budget will hit dental care across this constituency. Dental practices are small businesses...The cumulative changes to National Insurance and the National Minimum Wage will add tens of thousands to the wage bills of a typical practice.”

The Budget brings a huge increase in overheads, but offers nothing by way of support. When can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about what ameliorating interventions will be introduced to assist dentists who are trying to do their best to fulfil their mandate on NHS dentistry, as well as other work?

**Lucy Powell:** The subject of dentistry is raised a lot in business questions. The right hon. Gentleman may not like to hear it, but our woeful inheritance means that the accessibility and provision of NHS dentists is poor in many communities. We are committed to creating an extra 800,000 dental appointments and we will work closely with the sector to transform NHS dental care in this country. As I have previously said, the Health Secretary will be coming to the House to explain how he will use his budget to support social care, dentists and others who have been affected by some of the changes in the Budget.

**Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): The Leader of the House will remember that she brought the Labour party battle bus to Redditch. Thankfully, she did not need to hit any of the voters when she met them, but she will know that tempers are now fraying in Redditch because of the proposed closure of our post office. *The Redditch Standard* and its editor, Tristan Harris, are leading the campaign to persuade the Post Office to

change its mind. However, Post Office officials are refusing to meet us, so will the Leader of the House suggest to them that, if there are no decisions to be made on closures, they should be happy to meet local MPs and campaign groups?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend should be standing steadfastly at the front of the campaign to save his local post office, because such local post offices provide vital services for constituencies such as Redditch. I know that Post Office officials closely followed much of what I said in business questions last week, so hopefully they will have heard what he said today. As I said last week, the Post Office is in need of serious cultural change and it has not been fit for purpose for some time. I do not see the case for closing Crown post offices as part of that change.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The shocking arrest of Allison Pearson, *The Telegraph* journalist, has caused outrage, as the Leader of the House knows, and as most recently expressed by her distinguished Back-Bench colleague, the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer). Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Home Secretary to come to the House to address this attack on free speech, which is wider and deeper than Allison Pearson's arrest? The Director of Public Prosecutions has said that he “had no idea” what non-crime hate incidents are and that he had “to look them up” in the light of her arrest, and yet 11,600 such “crimes” have been recorded. Does the Leader of the House understand that, far from being the antithesis of a civilised society, the right to alarm, to disturb and, yes, to offend is the essence of an open society? If I did not alarm, disturb and offend every Maoist, Marxist, Bolshevik and belligerent Islamist, I would feel I had failed.

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. The offences he talks about were actually introduced a couple of years ago under the previous Government—not by the current Government—by the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) who is now the shadow Home Secretary. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) is absolutely right that we have to consider the balance between free speech alongside protecting people who suffer from the wrong end of abuse and misinformation and disinformation online which, as we saw over the summer, can cause real damage in our communities if left unchecked. That balance is one I am sure the police and others are grappling with on a daily basis.

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I also offer my condolences to the family of Lord Prescott. He was a true inspiration and example to those of us from ordinary working-class backgrounds.

Following on from the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray), last week saw the closure of the Royal Bank of Scotland in Bathgate, leaving the town with one remaining bank, the Bank of Scotland, which is due to close next June, along with the Bank of Scotland in Linlithgow. Across the UK, high streets and communities have been losing their bank branches. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on the steps being taken to ensure that communities and businesses are not being left behind?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question and for her words about John Prescott. Many Members of this House are here today because of the encouragement and inspiration they got from John Prescott. She raises an issue, which is raised regularly, about access to cash and the need for vital banking and post office services on our high street. The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), is still in his place. I am sure that were colleagues to come together on this matter, we could have a good and robust debate on the need for banking hubs, which the Government are committed to rolling out.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): A week on Saturday is Small Business Saturday. In my constituency, there are so many wonderful places to visit, whether in Stone, Great Wyrley, Penkridge, Brewwood—I could list them all and, Madam Deputy Speaker, you would always be welcome to visit yourself. But so many businesses are incredibly worried. They have been contacting me since the Budget not just about the increases in national insurance and not just about the cumulative impact of the changes to employment rights and the increases in the national minimum wage; they are now also incredibly concerned about the scrapping of business inheritance tax reliefs, which will stop them being able to pass on their businesses to their children. May we have an urgent debate in Government time about the cumulative impact of those changes on so many private businesses?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point ahead of Small Business Saturday. I gently say to him, as he was a Minister in the previous Government, that the previous Government increased national insurance contributions not just on businesses but on workers as well. They did so at a time when inflation was at an almost record high of 9%. It is funny that they did not seem to worry about that at the time. They also—I supported them in doing so—increased the minimum wage on many occasions in their time in office. I am proud that this Government are giving a pay rise to some of the lowest paid in our society and economy. We are bringing in changes to business rate reform, which will support many of our small businesses on the high street. Treasury questions are coming up, where I am sure he will want to raise business tax relief reform with Treasury Ministers.

**Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Communities are really suffering with the increasing number of short-term lets in the Cities of London and Westminster. Local authority time is being used up to clean the mess, and the availability of genuinely affordable homes is being eroded. Landlords are sometimes struggling to evict tenants who are illegally sub-letting into the short-term let tenure. Will the Leader of the House ask a Minister to update us on the Government's plans to tackle the rise in short-term lets? This affects not just the west end, but communities across the country. We need the registration scheme to come forward quickly, alongside licensing and the ability of local authorities to plan for short-term lets.

**Lucy Powell:** This is a really big issue in city centre constituencies like mine, as well as in rural areas. We are committed, as my hon. Friend says, to introducing the registration scheme for short-term lets, and we will be

removing the furnished holiday lets tax incentive that short-term let owners have had recently. Those measures will be introduced as soon as possible, and I will make sure the House is updated. We have also announced a 2% increase to the higher rates of stamp duty on those types of properties. I hope that, taken together, they will reduce the blight of short-term lets on many of our constituencies.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): First of all, I thank the Leader of the House for mentioning Ask Her to Stand Day. Despite the progress that has been made on women's representation in politics, it is shocking that we are still not where we should be in terms of having a 50:50 Parliament and full representation at all levels.

It has already been mentioned this morning that Monday is White Ribbon Day, a crucial day for raising awareness of the terrible problem of male violence against women and girls. The case of Harshita Brella, which came to light in the past week, highlights how vital that work is. West Mercia Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre has been in touch with me this week to highlight the fact that funding in this area is still not sufficient and is not fairly distributed according to need and population. Although we have a Westminster Hall debate next week, does the Leader of the House not agree that this issue is so important that it needs to be debated in Government time? May we have that debate?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising White Ribbon Day next week and the 50:50 Parliament. Other Members have called powerfully for Parliament to become accredited as part of the White Ribbon campaign, something I am sure she will want to support. She is absolutely right that the funding for the many rape centres, shelters, charities and support centres available for women fleeing domestic violence or having had the horror of being raped, is really woeful and poor. In the Budget, we increased some of the support going to those vital services. With the introduction of future legislation, there will be plenty of time to discuss these issues.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): A constant theme in my casework inbox is rogue private parking companies and their intimidating behaviour. Just this month, my constituency office has returned over £200-worth of fines to my constituents. Will the Leader of the House advise me on the best possible way to put the issue on the record and get the Government to take action on this behaviour?

**Lucy Powell:** In the previous Parliament we had many debates on rogue private parking enforcement companies. I am sure that the Backbench Business Committee would consider a debate. My hon. Friend could also apply for an Adjournment debate. I think they would be well attended.

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on water recycling projects? The project at Havant Thicket is of great significance to my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak), but it is also of national significance. The technology is novel to the UK and it is important that this House has the opportunity to debate aspects around safety, the environment and public confidence.



**Lucy Powell:** The right hon. Gentleman raises what sounds like a really important technology. We need to make a lot more of the circular economy. Whether it is water or other aspects, that is a real priority for the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. He will be here for questions soon, but I will certainly consider a future debate.

**Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): As we have heard, post office closures threaten to cut off essential services, particularly in rural areas such as mine, and could have a significant impact on South East Cornwall. Will the Leader of the House indicate when we might expect space in Government time to debate the importance of post offices, including the Liskeard branch in my constituency?

**Lucy Powell:** As was the case last week, the proposed closures of post offices are a massive point of concern for many Members across the House. I encourage any Member whose constituency is affected by a proposed closure of their Crown post office to take a leadership role in that campaign and raise it in the House. I will continue to do so, and were people to club together, I think there would be a lot of support for a debate on the future of our post office services.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Last week at my surgery in Barton-upon-Humber, two constituents, the parents of a young man who died suddenly from a cardiac arrest, pointed out that between 12 and 20 young people under 35 die in similar undiagnosed circumstances each week. Screening would play a major part in dealing with such tragic situations. Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time when we can look at the whole screening programme for serious diseases?

**Lucy Powell:** That is a shocking statistic that his constituents shared with him about the effect of cardiac arrests on young people. He and they are absolutely right that screening and getting a preventive health programme into our communities is vital if we are to address some of those issues and make sure people do not die or suffer unnecessarily from those sorts of diseases. That is what this Government are committed to doing.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I want to associate myself with the condolences for Lord Prescott. He was a true giant of our movement.

Last week, more than 450 people from across Renfrewshire gathered for the 20<sup>th</sup> annual ROCCO awards, run by the Renfrewshire chamber of commerce to celebrate businesses. Will my right hon. Friend assure businesses in my community of the Government's support and will she join me in congratulating all the winners of this year's awards, including Renfrewshire's favourite business, the Paisley Pie Co., which resides in my constituency?

**Lucy Powell:** One of the great joys of my job is that I get to hear about all the great catering outlets in colleagues' constituencies. I wish I could visit them all. The pie company that my hon. Friend describes sounds like a particularly good one, and I join her in congratulating it. This Government continue to support businesses such as those in her constituency and all those involved in the ROCCO awards.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I am sure the Leader of the House will agree that we will happily take some samples.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): In a week when we have seen temperatures plummet to below zero, leaving pensioners in my constituency and across the country worrying about heating their homes, the Department for Work and Pensions has finally issued its impact assessment on the Government's disgraceful decision to scrap the winter fuel payment. Can we have a statement on why the Chancellor took the decision to cut the winter fuel payment without knowing all the facts about pensioner fuel poverty?

**Lucy Powell:** The right hon. Lady will be aware that the published impact assessment does not take into account all the mitigations that the Government have also put in place. We have seen a 150% increase in those claiming pension credit support—her Government completely failed to do that—we have the £150 warm home discount, and I know from my own area that the £1 billion for the household support fund budget is now being paid directly to those on council tax support, which is just above the threshold for pension credit. I am really not clear whether the Conservative party supports means-testing; it has a long history of doing so, both on child benefit and in its 2017 manifesto, which called for means-testing of the winter fuel payment.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): Residents in Sheffield are fed up with the dire pothole-ridden state of Old Bridge Way. A public highway in all but legal reality, this unadopted road is now ownerless after the previous private owner transferred it to a new company that was promptly liquidated, thereby side-stepping any repair obligations. I understand that this may not be the most glamorous backdrop to suggest a constituency visit. Instead, will the Leader of the House potentially back my campaign calling on Central Bedfordshire council to act on the road and can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Transport on how local authorities can be supported to adopt roads in such crucial parts of the public highway?

**Lucy Powell:** This is an important matter for my hon. Friend's constituents, so he is absolutely right, as the diligent campaigner that he is, to continue to raise such issues in the House. I will make sure that the relevant Minister gives him the substantive reply he needs on the matter.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The right hon. Lady will be aware that it is some considerable time since cannabis was legalised for medicinal use, but the number of people who have been able to obtain an NHS prescription for medical cannabis is minuscule. Will she bring forward a debate in Government time that allows us to discuss the obstacles to people, particularly children with severe conditions, obtaining those prescriptions?

**Lucy Powell:** I know that the right hon. Gentleman has campaigned on these issues for a long time, and he is right to raise them. I am sitting next to another campaigner on medicinal cannabis use, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Withington (Jeff Smith).

[Lucy Powell]

We know that this is a good treatment; I shall certainly make sure that the relevant Minister gives the right hon. Gentleman a full response on progress in making sure that it is available to children and those who desperately need it.

**Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): This week, shipping company Maersk announced that it will divert operations away from Felixstowe in my constituency and towards London Gateway. That comes after years of complacency about investing in the right transport infrastructure around Suffolk Coastal and the eastern region, despite the port of Felixstowe being the busiest and largest in the UK. I wrote to the Secretary of State this week setting out the urgent need to invest in transport infrastructure. Can we have a debate in Government time on the future of rail and road investment in the UK?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issues facing Felixstowe in her constituency, and she is spot on when she mentions linking our ports with our rail and road infrastructure, so that we can take advantage of our unique aspects as a trading, island nation. I will make sure that the Secretary of State responds to her letter forthwith.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Those who follow international violations of freedom of religion or belief will note the tragic death last week of Shahriar Rakeen, a 16-year-old Bangladeshi who was brutally assaulted during extremist attacks on Ahmadiyya Muslims on 5 August. During those attacks, Rakeen was beaten on the head with lethal weapons. In efforts to save his life, he was treated in several hospitals, but he passed away on 8 November. This heartbreaking case illustrates the importance of impressing on the Government of Bangladesh their responsibility to provide effective protection and freedom of religious practice to Ahmadis and other persecuted religious minorities. Will the Leader of the House join me in raising concern about such egregious violations of the freedom of religion or belief, and will she ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to revisit this issue with counterparts in Bangladesh?

**Lucy Powell:** I am really saddened to hear about the death of Shahriar Rakeen in Bangladesh. The hon. Gentleman highlights a devastating case; he highlights a different case every week. The British Government are supporting the interim Government in Bangladesh as they work to restore peace and order to the country. We will work closely with them to ensure a peaceful pathway to an inclusive and democratic future. I am glad to see that the hon. Gentleman has been so successful in getting debates on these important matters, through the Backbench Business Committee and elsewhere.

**Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): Tomorrow night at 6 pm, hundreds of people will take to the streets in Northampton for our Reclaim the Night march. Marches of this type take place across the country, and show the national support for this Government's mission to halve violence against women and girls. Will the Leader of the House assure me and campaigners that the Government will make available a suitable amount

of Government time for debating the issue, and will continue to push hard to halve violence against women and girls?

**Lucy Powell:** I remember as a young woman going on a number of Reclaim the Night marches, and it saddens me that although I am in my 50s, we still have to have such marches to highlight the issues. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Ending violence against women and girls has been raised a number of times today. It is a massive priority for this Government and for the Prime Minister personally, and I will ensure that it is properly debated.

**Anneliese Midgley** (Knowsley) (Lab): Tonight I am off to see China Crisis play at the Knowsley music festival in St Chad's church. It is a great initiative by Knowsley council. My constituency has a rich musical heritage. As well as bringing people together, these festivals support local talent, our economy and businesses. Can we have a debate in Government time on ways to support and grow these local creative festivals and events?

**Lucy Powell:** Knowsley music festival sounds like it will be a really good night out, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will have a great evening. As she knows, this Government continue to support the grassroots music fund, which helps festivals like the one that she mentions. I am glad that she shared that with the rest of us.

**Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I wish to associate myself with all the warm tributes paid to John Prescott today. He really was an inspiration to so many of us.

A great many residents in my constituency rely on bus services, so I very much welcome this week's statement by the Secretary of State for Transport announcing an additional £1 billion of bus funding. This new funding represents a great opportunity for our local authority to address long-standing gaps in our bus networks. In Rossendale and Darwen, these gaps often occur where routes cross local authority boundaries. In the past, a lack of joined-up thinking has meant that those routes have been the first to be restricted or cut. In my constituency, that has seriously impacted the residents of Edgeworth, Bacup and Whitworth. Does my right hon. Friend agree that to make the most of this new funding, we need transport authorities to work together, think beyond their boundaries, and recognise the wider benefits of connecting people? If necessary, can she give us time to debate this?

**Lucy Powell:** Yet again, my hon. Friend raises the important issue of transport connectivity in his constituency, which, as I well know, desperately needs more funding. He will remember that over the 14 years of the previous Government, vital bus services all but disappeared. This new funding is really welcome, but as he says, it needs to come alongside reform, so that areas can work together. We will imminently bring forward the bus reform Bill; he might want to raise those issues in debates on it.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Hope4 charity in Rugby on receiving the King's award for voluntary service? I have seen on numerous visits the incredible

work that it does to end homelessness and poverty in Rugby, through its Hope Centre and the Rugby food bank. Will she consider a debate in Government time to explore what further support the Government can give to volunteer groups, and how it can enable people to volunteer more, given the positive effects on their mental health and on wider society?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating and thanking the charity in his constituency for all the work that it does to end homelessness in Rugby. He points out the vital role that volunteers play in supporting our communities, and also the reward and recognition that their volunteering endeavours bring them. I am sure that would make a really good topic for a debate.

**Mr Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): One of my constituents, Nikki Allan-Dan, has been attending Leeds United games for more than 60 years. Nikki is disabled and uses one of the seven blue badge coaches that Leeds provides to get to away games. However, Nikki tells me that no matter what the league, access for disabled fans across the country is shocking; provision is not being made for them. She gave me a few stories at my surgery in Lofthouse. She told me that she has been dropped off half a mile from the stadium, and has had to make her way to the stadium through traffic in her wheelchair. She has also been told that she had eight minutes to leave the stadium and get to her coach, which was not even parked in the correct place. Given that Nikki tells me that these experiences are typical for disabled fans up and down the country, please can we have a debate in Government time on meeting the essential needs of all disabled fans, so that they can access and enjoy the beautiful game?

**Lucy Powell:** In the interest of transparency, and as we were talking about league tables earlier, I just want to put record that apart from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend is my top attender at business questions. He is here every week, raising really important issues on behalf of his constituents. I am really appalled to hear of the treatment of the Leeds fan in his constituency. He will know that our Football Governance Bill is about putting fans back at

the heart of football, and ensuring that clubs such as Leeds United make sure that disabled fans and every other kind of fans can access their games.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Tuesday of this week was International Men's Day. In West Dunbartonshire, we have wonderful organisations such as Mentor Scotland and the Men's Shed doing incredible work to help men across West Dunbartonshire who are struggling with their mental health. Can the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent debate in Government time on the Government's work to better support men's mental health, and to encourage men to talk more openly about their mental health and wellbeing—a cause that the late Lord Prescott championed?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He will know that we have a debate on International Men's Day today, I think. *[Interruption.]* Yes, as soon as I finish speaking. He is absolutely right that men's mental health is a serious issue facing men and this country. I hope that the debate this afternoon will highlight some of those issues.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We have been saving the best till last. I call Paul Waugh.

**Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The Rochdale diversity awards, now in their 12th year and run by the brilliant Kashmir Youth Project, are taking place this weekend. Will the Leader of the House congratulate all the nominees, who promote not just the rich diversity of our town, but its community cohesion?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is another very good attender at business questions, always raising issues facing Rochdale. I am of course pleased to join him in congratulating all the nominees for diversity awards this year. He has put that on record, and I am sure that everyone will appreciate it.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** That brings business questions to a conclusion. Thank you to everybody who participated. We got close to 50 questions answered today.



## Backbench Business

### Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Before the debate begins, I remind the House of the application of the sub judice rule. It is extremely important that we respect the function of the courts. It is also important that we are able to discuss important matters. In civil cases, which are the subject of this debate, the rule applies only when arrangements for a hearing have been made; for appeals, it applies when an application for leave to appeal has been made. I note that the motion refers to matters that do not reach the courts. In such cases, the sub judice rule does not apply. I remind Members that they should not refer to cases if they are aware that arrangements for a hearing have been made, as the sub judice rule does then apply.

12.57 pm

**Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House recognises the impact of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) on the publication of stories in the public interest; acknowledges that most cases of SLAPPs do not reach the courts, but are blocked or changed at an earlier, unseen stage; further recognises the importance of disclosing suppressed stories under parliamentary privilege in order to highlight the broader impact of legal threats on free speech; further acknowledges efforts made to tackle SLAPPs through the Economic Crime and Transparency Act 2023; and calls on the Government to introduce comprehensive anti-SLAPP legislation that provides swift dismissal of such cases, protects those targeted from prohibitive legal costs, and ensures that SLAPP filers face significant financial deterrents.

I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for speedily granting this important debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), who has long campaigned on this issue and worked closely with me to secure today's debate.

I open this debate by outlining the nature of the problem that we face in our legal system. SLAPPs are considered an abuse of the legal process—an abuse in which the primary objective is to harass, intimidate, and financially and psychologically exhaust one's opponents via improper and costly legal intervention.

SLAPPs are just another name for lawfare, legal threats, intimidation or—simply put—bullying, and this form of bullying has been going on for years; however, it is a tool that is available only to those with deep pockets. Too often, wealthy individuals, white-collar criminals, oligarchs and kleptocrats use their financial might to muzzle free speech, launder their own reputation, and prevent journalists, whistleblowers and campaigners from shining a light on corruption or foul play. Those who seek to challenge these powerful individuals face the prospect of bankruptcy if they choose to engage in legal proceedings. In that way, a select few can abuse our legal system to evade scrutiny and stop important information ever reaching the public.

My constituents in South Dorset certainly do not have the means or motive to envisage engaging in such bullying tactics, but it is my constituents, and the public at large, who pay the price. Legal intimidation is routinely used to silence public participation. As a consequence, important investigations that are in the public interest

are blocked from ever seeing the light of day. Why are we allowing our legal system to be hijacked in that way? These legal threats effectively stifle debate around a wide range of issues of significant public interest. They often significantly alter or even prevent the publication of information. In doing so, I fear they shield misconduct and conceal wrongdoing in such a way that the powerful individuals behind the legal threats, and those who are hiding from scrutiny, can get away scot-free.

This foul play is simply unacceptable. What matters here is not just the subject matter of the information that has been suppressed but the manner in which journalists, campaigners and whistleblowers have been silenced. In most cases, the stories have been legally challenged long before they ever reach the courts. Through endless aggressive and intimidating legal letters, powerful actors are able to delay, and often halt entirely, the publication of a story. Such bullying tactics can even derail or shut down investigations at an earlier stage, and often result in our news outlets and journalists self-censoring.

In order that the House might better understand the current legal mess in which we find ourselves, I will use parliamentary privilege to describe a number of stories that have become silent stories. I will first talk about one SLAPP case of acute and enduring public interest. Professor Kristian Lasslett, a professor of criminology at Ulster University, wrote an article for openDemocracy raising concerns about a construction project worth around half a billion dollars that was under development in Uzbekistan. His research probed exactly why the project was costing hundreds of millions of dollars, and he raised concerns about the due diligence procedures of Government officials, questioning links between the property developers and a family sanctioned for corruption.

Lasslett's article focused on the links between the developers in question and a family known as the Guptas, who have been accused of systemic corruption in South Africa—corruption so severe that members of the family were slapped with sanctions by both the United Kingdom and the United States. It is clear to me that the activities of the Guptas are of significant national and international public interest because of their position on those sanctions lists. Lasslett also uncovered documents that seemed to show that the proposal document for the development was substantially plagiarised, raising concerns about both the integrity of the project and the procurement checks performed by the Uzbek Government. In a country that is widely criticised by reputable news outlets and civil society for widespread corruption, this story speaks directly to the challenges that the Uzbek people face in holding their elected officials to account.

Importantly, the company's ties to the Gupta family raise questions about the provenance of the huge sum of money used to fund the project. The findings may point to attempts by the Guptas, through their associates, to integrate their ill-gotten wealth into the Uzbek economy. The public interest merits of the investigation are, in my view, undeniable, but the story was never published. The information that it contains, linking potential procurement corruption to the looting of billions of dollars from South Africa's state coffers, was effectively blocked. The Uzbek people were deprived of information that speaks directly to their Government's propriety in the award of enormous contracts.

The story was silenced in a way that follows a pattern that I am sure is all too familiar to Members present. Lasslett received a legal letter from a boutique law firm on behalf of the developers. The lawyers' letter provided some meaningful factual information, but tried to obfuscate important issues and outright denied any "relationship, business or otherwise" between the developers and the Gupta family, despite clear evidence to the contrary. Now, openDemocracy routinely faces legal threats, but following the correspondence a decision was made that the benefits of publishing the story would be outweighed by the time and financial expense of facing down a deep-pocketed litigant. The media outlet decided against running the story, despite believing in its credibility and appreciating the public interest in asking questions about a country mired in decades of corruption allegations at the highest level.

When even a highly respected academic with extensive expertise and a reputable news outlet decide to censor themselves following legal intimidation, we can only wonder what other cases of egregious misconduct have been uncovered only then to remain hidden—but we need not wonder for too long. Occasionally, public interest stories threatened with legal action have still found their way into the public domain—for instance, the investigation into the tax arrangements of the former Chancellor Nadhim Zahawi, which later partly contributed to his dismissal. Dan Neidle, a tax lawyer, researcher and commentator, had been investigating the then Chancellor's financial ties to the data firm YouGov. There were concerns about whether Zahawi was benefiting from tax codes that he had had a hand in shaping. In a lengthy and detailed thread on Twitter, setting out his evidence, Neidle alleged that Zahawi had avoided almost £4 million of capital gains tax.

In response, Zahawi's lawyers sent Neidle two letters, which not only asked him to retract his accusation by the end of the day but suggested that it would be a "serious matter" if he published the legal letters. Neidle did not submit to those threats. Instead, he set out his research findings, and the conclusions that he drew, in more detail. Moreover, believing that the assertions of confidentiality were false, and that the letters were rather an attempt to intimidate him, Neidle chose to publish the letters, and drew the public's attention to the use of legal threats to silence research. After he went public, Neidle reported hearing from many others who had been intimidated in a similar way. He stated:

"Silence is integral to the SLAPP strategy. A small-time blogger says something you don't like. You get your lawyers to write them a letter warning them off. The blogger deletes their blog, and nobody has any idea what happened".

It is not just the odd former politician who uses legal threats to avoid scrutiny. Sadly, Britain has become a go-to destination for lawfare tactics. Our courts have become the playground of the super-wealthy. The UK is by far the most frequent country of origin for SLAPPs. According to the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition, around 31% of lawfare cases originate from here. We are almost as frequent a source as the European Union and the United States put together. London is an international hotspot, with lawfare tourists travelling from far and wide to get in on the action. Aside from the powerful individuals and entities directly benefiting from the protection afforded by such threats, sending legal letters is also a lucrative business for the lawyers who write them. The legal professionals who knowingly engage in

this abuse of the legal process are the product of a culture in which client choice is based on profit over professional ethics.

The Solicitors Regulation Authority, which is tasked with holding the profession to high standards, is not equipped with the right tools to hold lawyers to account. Of the 71 SLAPPs reported to the SRA over the past two years, 23 cases were closed with no further action, and of the 48 remaining live, only two were ever referred to a disciplinary tribunal. What is more, the financial penalties at the regulator's disposal fail to match the deep pockets of the individuals and law firms that engage in these tactics. The SRA has a paltry fining power of just £25,000 for traditional law firms, which pales in comparison with the firms' resources. In effect, the fines are likely priced in by the offending law firms.

At present, we simply do not have a proper deterrent, or the ability to impose real financial penalties on the lawyers and firms that knowingly engage in legal intimidation. Our legal framework also fails the minority of lawfare cases that eventually make it to the courts, meaning that those legal cases cannot be thrown out by a judge at an early stage.

I welcome the measures enacted by the recent Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 that ensured that cases of legal intimidation that relate to economic crime can be tackled. However, as we have heard in past debates in both Houses, those measures do not go far enough. We urgently need to update our legal framework to ensure that all SLAPP cases that reach the courts can be thrown out at an early stage if a judge deems it appropriate. Only then can we level the playing field and ensure that those with deep pockets are fairly scrutinised, just like everyone else.

I pay tribute to the former hon. Member for Caerphilly, who brought forward a private Member's Bill that sought to fill this gap in our legal framework. His Bill was due to come back to the House when the general election was called, so it sadly went no further. We can re-examine much of that Bill as we seek to tackle the lawfare scandal engulfing our country. We urgently need to take seriously the risk that legal threats pose to the health of our public debate. I know the Government will listen to the powerful stories brought to light today and will seek to answer our concerns about the inadequacy of our regulatory and legislative framework. I look forward to hearing from the Government exactly how we can challenge the scourge of lawfare once and for all. We are surrounded by silent stories—it is high time they were heard.

1.11 pm

**Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for obtaining the debate, which is on an important subject. I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom, and am delighted to see the vice-chair, the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), attending the debate.

The UK has a proud record of defending and promoting media freedom in this country and across the world. In 2019, the UK established the global Media Freedom Coalition, which now has 51 members. During my time of involvement in the media, which goes back quite a long way, I always paid careful attention to the annual publication of the world press freedom index. I am pleased that the UK's ranking has risen substantially in

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

recent years. We now stand at No. 23—still some way to go, but nevertheless an improvement. The reason we have improved is that a lot of other countries have gotten considerably worse, so we have risen as a result of their demotion.

The hon. Member for South Dorset is right that the phenomenon of SLAPPs has been a blot on our record for a considerable time. I chaired the Culture, Media and Sport Committee for 10 years. In 2009, we carried out an inquiry into press standards, privacy and libel. In particular, we saw the phenomenon of libel tourism, which, to some extent, continues to this day.

We heard about, for instance, the case of Dr Rachel Ehrenfeld, a US academic who had written the book “Funding Evil: How Terrorism is Financed and How to Stop It”. The book appeared in the United States; it had no British edition. Twenty-three copies were obtained in the United Kingdom by ordering over the internet. Despite that, a Saudi businessman named in the book took legal action against Dr Ehrenfeld in the UK courts. He was awarded considerable damages on the basis that Dr Ehrenfeld did not defend the action in a court that she saw as having no jurisdiction over the matter. That led to the introduction of the Libel Terrorism Protection Act 2008 by the New York state legislature, which basically said that residents of New York did not have to abide by foreign courts’ judgments in this particular area. Since that time, the situation has much improved and, of course, the Defamation Act 2013 sought to address the specific issue of libel tourism and raised the bar for claimants in libel cases. Nevertheless, there has still been a chilling effect.

We also heard from the author Tom Bower, who was subject to a legal action over a very small reference to Richard Desmond in his book about Conrad Black. Mr Desmond lost the action, but was prepared to pay a huge amount to bring it about. Certainly, it was Mr Bower’s view that he did so to demonstrate that he was willing to spend a large amount even on a small and relatively minor accusation. The result was that Mr Bower’s plans to write a book about Mr Desmond did not proceed because the publishers were too afraid of potential legal action.

As the hon. Member for South Dorset recognised, further measures since the Defamation Act 2013 have been introduced, primarily through the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, which focused specifically on the issue of SLAPPs around economic crime or allegations. When I returned to the position of Minister responsible for the media—in my second incarnation—we were nevertheless aware that it remained a problem. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport had established the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, which I hope is still in existence. The committee was originally set up to look at the physical threat to journalists and attempts to intimidate them through harassment—sometimes online but occasionally through physical aggression—and a lot of work was done on it. We then agreed that the issue of SLAPPs represented an attempt to prevent media freedom and to close down legitimate public interest journalism, so the committee extended its work to cover SLAPPs.

I remember that we heard from Catherine Belton, the author of “Putin’s People”, and Tom Burgis, who wrote “Kleptopia”, both of which revealed corruption, in one

case on the part of an ally of President Putin in Russia and, in the other, on the part of some individuals in Kazakhstan. Both were subject to legal action against them personally as well as against their publishers.

Perhaps the most appalling example, which was debated in this House at length, was the discovery that Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder and leader of the Wagner Group, had been allowed to circumvent the sanctions placed on him to bring a legal action against the director of Bellingcat, who had rightly identified him as the leader of the Wagner Group. That was a scandal, and I am glad to say that the decision was subsequently reversed. Again, it was interesting that somebody as notorious as that had chosen to bring an action in the UK.

The hon. Member for South Dorset suggested that it is a matter of shame that the UK is seen as the centre for such actions, and I share his concern to some extent. It is also a tribute to the strength and independence of the UK judicial system, which is admired around the world. The reason why so many people wish to pursue actions in the UK courts is normally that they have greater confidence in UK courts than those in many other places. It is right that we should take action where the motivation behind those actions is more to do with preventing legitimate inquiry.

As I say, the DCMS National Committee for the Safety of Journalists established a SLAPPs taskforce in 2023—I think that was in my third incarnation in government with responsibility for the media. The taskforce brought together Departments, such as DCMS and the Ministry of Justice, representatives of campaigning organisations, such as Reporters Without Borders and Index on Censorship, and publishers and journalists, including the News Media Association and the National Union of Journalists. The taskforce was chaired by Janis Makarewich-Hall, the excellent DCMS official. Its initial meeting was attended by the then Secretary of State Lucy Frazer, and I attended as many meetings as I could. That led to a lot of work on trying to understand the prevalence of SLAPPs, producing guidance for journalists, examining the legal ethics and what more might be done—both by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Bar Standards Board—to ensure that law firms did not take on cases for which there was no real justification other than an attempt to shut down journalism, and raising awareness. Four meetings of that taskforce took place—I do not know whether it still exists, but I very much hope that it does. I would be interested to hear what work has continued under this Government, as a lot was done under the last.

As the hon. Member for South Dorset rightly recognised, Wayne David introduced a Bill that was prepared in government to tackle the issue of SLAPPs, and it was amended during its passage to strengthen it. It reached the House of Lords but it did not reach the statute book because of the general election. A lot of work has been done, and I hope that we can build on and learn from it.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism has sent a number of cases as examples of SLAPPs—the hon. Gentleman quoted one of them. I do not want to use privilege to cite individual cases, but there is concern that it is happening in a number of areas, and we need to address it through legislative change. At the same time, it is important to recognise that individuals have a right to defend themselves against untrue and unfounded accusations. That is as much a fundamental part of



liberty as freedom of speech. Not all cases claimed to be SLAPPs are SLAPPs, in my view—particularly those in which the claimant has subsequently proved successful in the action that they have brought in the court. That almost disproves the claim that it was a SLAPP to begin with, so we do need to be careful.

I have also had correspondence from the Society of Media Lawyers, which suggested that there is a lack of empirical evidence and that campaigners ignore existing legal and regulatory tools. It also suggested that this is an area that the Law Commission should perhaps review, but I have a concern that such a review is a way of pushing the matter into very long grass and would unnecessarily delay measures on which a great deal of work has already been done. Rather than doing that, I urge the Government to consider the work done in DCMS and the Ministry of Justice, and in particular the debates that took place during the Committee stage of Wayne David's private Member's Bill, and to introduce legislation to deal with the chilling of media freedom in the UK, which I absolutely recognise is a legitimate concern.

1.23 pm

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for his passionate and eloquent speech, and for securing the debate.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation, or SLAPPs, are essentially a misuse of the legal system through threatening claims that are brought to stifle lawful scrutiny and publication. They have been used to silence public participation by and suppress information from activists, environmental campaigners, non-governmental organisations, whistleblowers, victims of sexual assault and even people just posting negative product reviews online. The list of journalists who have faced SLAPPs simply for reporting in the public interest grows by the day. Of course, receiving a SLAPP causes immense mental and financial concern and distress. It is clear that most people targeted by SLAPPs cannot afford the legal costs of defending the claims against them.

Without effective anti-SLAPP legislation, everyone in the UK remains at risk if they choose to speak out on matters of public interest. That is why having an effective anti-SLAPPs regime in the UK is so important. Failure to have one essentially undermines democracy. It is certainly welcome that the Government are pushing for greater transparency in public life through enhanced reporting, updates to the ministerial code and changes to Government contract awards, but focusing solely on the public sector is not enough. The consequences of focusing only on the public sector could be chilling: at one end of the spectrum, the public may be denied knowledge about issues of public interest, and at the other end, the exposure of corruption and other forms of wrongdoing in many areas will be limited. That would continue to leave the most powerful with the ability to manipulate the legal system to conceal wrongdoing across the UK.

I agree with what others have said about the need for anti-SLAPP laws to balance access to justice for those who have a right to defend themselves, but in reality, SLAPP victims—journalists, campaigners and abuse survivors—often lack the resources to defend themselves against aggressive legal tactics designed to intimidate them and suppress the publication of their information. That is why a comprehensive anti-SLAPP Bill—which

would balance access to justice for those who have a right to defend themselves against the pernicious use of SLAPPs—would help to ensure that justice is accessible to all, not just the wealthiest. It is important to stress that the EU passed anti-SLAPP directives earlier this year.

I have a few questions that the Minister can perhaps answer in her closing speech. I know that she welcomes a lot of what has been said today. The Justice Minister in the Lords said that the Government are undertaking a review of SLAPPs policy. What are the parameters of that review, and how can parliamentarians and civil society engage with it? Do the Government recognise that, although claimant lawyers of course have expertise that is useful to this debate, we should be sceptical about letting those who have a direct financial interest, and who deny the very existence of SLAPPs, have such a substantial influence on policy-making? Do the Government agree that we will have a hope of stamping out SLAPPs only with a comprehensive and robust anti-SLAPP Bill, and is there a realistic prospect of one appearing in the next King's Speech or of another legislative vehicle being used in this Parliament? Is it not the case that, far from restricting access to justice, anti-SLAPP legislation will ensure that justice is accessible to all, not just to a privileged few who seek to manipulate the UK legal system?

SLAPPs essentially undermine the very nature of the UK legal system and the freedom of speech and expression that our country is so proud of. I hope that the Minister will address my concerns and those of colleagues in closing the debate.

1.27 pm

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): In an ideal world, there would be a limitless supply of lawyers who would provide their services to victims and defendants alike, free of charge. Then, the issue of SLAPPs could never arise. We are not talking here about trying to restrict the right of individuals to seek the protection of a court and clear their name of defamatory claims about them.

If that was what we were seeking, I would be something of a hypocrite, because 30 years ago, I had to pursue such a libel action against an impecunious magazine that thought it could get away with saying anything about public figures, no matter how baseless, because it had no assets, so if someone pursued a libel action against it and won, they could never recover the tens of thousands of pounds in costs. That is when the boot is on the other foot: a person who has no assets therefore uses the costs of lawyers against the person they wish to defame.

However, what has happened in more recent times, particularly since the demise of that magazine, because there were other ways of dealing with it, is precisely what the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) said in his excellent introduction was an abuse of the legal process—and in particular of the huge costs that apply to hiring lawyers to defend oneself—by what I believe he described as a very small number of very rich people. The solution to this type of problem is therefore for the courts to be able to deal with it at such an early stage that, even though some costs will be unavoidable, the huge threat of unbearable costs will be removed, because a worthless libel claim against an

[Sir Julian Lewis]

investigative reporter whose story is well founded will be thrown out before the vast bulk of the expense can be incurred.

Some hon. Members who were here in the previous Parliament may remember that we had a brief debate on 20 January 2022 dealing with the question of lawfare. I made a couple of interventions on behalf of a former Member of the House, Charlotte Leslie, who faced what was certainly a SLAPP as a result of her not even having published anything, but having privately contacted a number of people, including me, given my then position as the Chair of a Committee that she regarded as relevant to her concerns. She wrote to us to try to do due diligence on an individual who proposed getting involved and investing money in an organisation by which she was employed. Fortunately, in the end, the case failed utterly in court, but only after she had been put through a nightmarish ordeal. I pay tribute to her resilience in coming through that ordeal.

We are of course particularly concerned about vulnerable individuals, but sometimes even large organisations can be subject to the SLAPP technique. If hon. Members look on the internet, they will see that on 12 January this year—on the BBC website, no less—a story headed, “Post Office lied and threatened BBC over Horizon whistleblower” begins:

“The BBC can reveal that in the period leading up to the broadcast of *Trouble at the Post Office*, the 2015 Panorama programme featuring the whistleblower testimony:

Experts interviewed by the BBC were sent intimidating letters by Post Office lawyers about their participation in the programme

Senior Post Office managers briefed the BBC that neither their staff nor Fujitsu—the company which built and maintained the Horizon system—could remotely access sub-postmasters’ accounts, even though Post Office directors had been warned four years earlier that such remote access was possible

Lawyers for the Post Office sent letters threatening to sue Panorama and the company’s public relations boss Mark Davies escalated complaints to ever more senior BBC managers”.

The article also states:

“The Post Office’s false claims did not stop the programme, but they did cause the BBC to delay the broadcast by several weeks.”

As we all know, the BBC had the resources to resist a major legal action had one ensued.

Only three days earlier than that article on the scandal, there was an article on 9 January 2024 on the website of the *Press Gazette*, which is the industry-representative body. It commented on the way in which the ITV drama about the Post Office scandal had brought to a wider audience the shocking story of the hundreds of postmasters who were wrongly prosecuted and, indeed, the four who committed suicide as a result.

The article is headed, “Attention to Post Office Horizon IT scandal follows 14 years of dogged journalism”. It rightly pays tribute to the freelance reporter Nick Wallis, who wrote the famous book “The Great Post Office Scandal”, and to two other reporters, Rebecca Thomson and Karl Flinders, who both wrote numerous articles for a much smaller enterprise, a journal called *Computer Weekly*. In fact, it can be said that the first investigation into Horizon, which was published in 2009, was carried out by *Computer Weekly* after a year-long investigation by Rebecca Thomson. The investigations editor of *Computer Weekly*, Bill Goodwin, is quoted as saying

that the magazine persisted despite “bullying letters” from the Post Office demanding to know its sources. He said:

“We ignored them. Reaction was muted when the story first appeared but it initiated a slow-burn chain of events that lead to the uncovering of a scandal of enormous proportions.”

I am very grateful to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which has already been mentioned in this debate, for providing a little more detail on what *Computer Weekly* faced. It has supplied me with some further embellishment, as it were, of what I have already recounted. It tells me that the general counsel for the Post Office sent threatening legal letters to *Computer Weekly* and that the trade magazine’s brave campaign, which continued regardless of the threats, often left it as a lone voice, with other outlets seemingly very reluctant to pick up on the important reporting with which it persisted. One legal letter from 2015 shared with the Bureau of Investigative Journalism threatened *Computer Weekly* over an article that said the Post Office closed a working group responsible for looking into claims against the Horizon software. The general counsel claimed that the article included a “significant number of inaccuracies” and “damaging errors” and argued that the reporters had acted improperly, stating:

“We are most concerned that *Computer Weekly* chose to publish this highly damaging article without taking the proper steps to verify the information.”

The letter acknowledged that *Computer Weekly* had amended its article to include Post Office comments, yet it persisted with the threats:

“You should not underestimate the seriousness with which the Post Office views the publication of such damaging and inaccurate allegations. The steps taken by you in response to this letter may well influence Post Office’s decision as to any further steps it may take to protect its reputation.”

It has now emerged that the Post Office took multiple aggressive actions to shut down the story about its failures over prosecutions that were sparked by the faulty Horizon software. The scandal only really spread into the mainstream press after the breakthrough moment in 2019 when Alan Bates and 554 litigants took a civil case against the Post Office to the High Court, which they won a couple of years later. Even then, as was said earlier, the full story was not widely known until the 2024 ITV drama was broadcast.

In response to what the Bureau of Investigative Journalism stated, the Post Office now sings a welcome different tune. It says that the organisation is committed to supporting the ongoing public inquiry and that it is fair and right for the Post Office to be held to account by journalists. It says:

“The approach of the Post Office today regarding communications is based on the knowledge that we must apologise sincerely, learn from the past, be transparent with stakeholders, and support justice and redress for those who have been impacted.”

It also says that it is actively exploring additional ways to strengthen transparency.

That is all well and good, after the Post Office fought so hard to cover up what had happened and close down the story of the scandal, but I will close as I began by saying that any SLAPP legislation is not meant to give anybody carte blanche to say anything they like on the basis of no evidence—to smear, belittle or denigrate people simply because they wish to target them for whatever reason. The purpose of such legislation is to stop people who know perfectly well that the accusations

against them are well founded, as the Post Office knew, but who nevertheless persist in abusing the legal system because of the horrendous threat of costs that will drive people to bankruptcy or to surrendering in the face of possible bankruptcy before the issue ever gets resolved in court. Central to any SLAPP legislation must be a simplification process that ensures that a worthless case—a case with no evidence; a case that is truly a SLAPP—is thrown out at the earliest possible opportunity before unbearable costs are incurred.

1.40 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing this debate. It is good to see some newly elected Members taking up this issue—I include in that my neighbour and hon. Friend, the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell)—as well as some of those who have been around for a while and trying to champion it. I am sure the right hon. Members for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) will not mind my describing them in that way. We are missing the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne) today, but I pay tribute to all the work they have done on this issue over many years.

I am not going to speak for very long, because I am not going to say anything that I have not said before. I think I replied for the Opposition in the January 2022 debate that the right hon. Member for New Forest East referred to, and the Justice Select Committee held an evidence session in May of that year under its previous Chair, Sir Bob Neill KC. The transcript of that session is very interesting to read, but what struck me is how little has actually been achieved, even though the issue has been debated many times. It is not true that nothing has been achieved since then, however. As has already been mentioned, the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 includes some measures to tackle SLAPPs, but relating specifically to economic crime; I think there is general recognition that that does not go further.

We have also heard about the Bill introduced by Sir Wayne David, which sadly did not become law because of the general election. Even that Bill took quite a lot of negotiation in order to get any meaningful provisions into it, against some resistance from the previous Government. That is not a terribly good record over the past few years, given the importance that many Members attach to this issue, so I will be interested to hear what the Minister says about this Government's future legislative intent when she replies to today's debate. The Justice Committee may well want to return to this issue at some point, but for today's purposes, I am speaking on my own behalf and repeating arguments that have been around for some time.

There are many reasons to be concerned about SLAPPs. One of them is highlighted in the long title of today's debate—freedom of speech—but as has already been mentioned, SLAPPs can also have a pernicious effect on the justice system, to which I particularly want to speak. SLAPPs is now the accepted terminology, but they were previously called lawfare. That term was very appropriate, because it is continuation of litigation by inappropriate means. It is clearly bad for victims, but it

is also bad for the justice system. It allows bad actors to take action in the courts, and although we have a very robust judiciary in this country who are quite capable of making their views felt, without recognition of SLAPPs in law, under the rules of court and given the clearly stated aims of all parties, particularly the Government, SLAPPs are going to continue.

SLAPPs are typically brought by people of unlimited resources to deter publication. That is why, as the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and others have pointed out, most SLAPPs never reach the litigation stage. They are intended to have a chilling effect, not only on the specific, immediate target but on the wider press and media, particularly those who do not have deep pockets. They can tie individual journalists and publications in knots for years and can subject them to a huge amount of stress and risk. We can think of examples going back to *McLibel*, what happened to Tom Burgis and to Catherine Belton, or indeed—as the right hon. Member for New Forest East mentioned—the appalling way that Charlotte Leslie was treated. SLAPPs are used to protect people such as Mohammed al-Fayed who wilfully and knowingly use the court system to hide their misdeeds. It is undoubtedly true that such people introduce vexatious litigation into the courts, distorting their function and operation and misdirecting the purpose of justice.

If Members think I am exaggerating, whether or not it is a SLAPP in the classic definition, the action taken by ENRC against the Serious Fraud Office—which effectively has turned the hunter into the hunted—is an example of how even the institutions of state can become the victims of SLAPPs. This is a very insidious trend within litigation. It may not be widespread, but it has a hidden hinterland, and despite the best efforts of the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism—which I have mentioned—and Sir Wayne David in his Bill, we now really need the Government to take up this cause.

There is one other issue I want to deal with—one that I always mention, and that will not find favour with some Members of this House. If we are serious about dealing with attempts to use financial strong-arming to prevent justice taking its course, we also have to think about our attitude to the Leveson reforms. The aim of Leveson was to protect small publishers against litigants with deep pockets, but also individual citizens who have been misrepresented by large media organisations and are unable to take action, or are discouraged from doing so.

The victims of intrusion and vilification, particularly by the tabloids, also deserve the protection of the law. Leveson provided a solution through low-cost arbitration that would be fair for both sides—that protected publishers in the same way as individuals. It was not a form of state regulation, but a method of independent and fair determination of issues that restored equality of arms. If it is right for us to legislate on SLAPPs and stop the pernicious influence of the oligarchs of the steppes, we should also prevent the misuse of the courts by the oligarchs of Fleet Street.

1.48 pm

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): I begin by declaring an interest, in that I am an unpaid trustee of the Index on Censorship and write a weekly column for *The Daily Telegraph*.



[Nick Timothy]

We are all here for this debate because we share a belief that free speech is the bedrock on which free societies are built. The right to voice one's conscience, criticise those in positions of power, share inconvenient truths and promote new knowledge allows us to protect and enjoy the other freedoms that define our way of life. However, we find ourselves in a crisis of free speech in this country, and this debate is an opportune moment to consider just one part of that crisis by examining how the wealthy can use and abuse the court system through the SLAPPs process, which many hon. Members have already described.

I am no libertarian, and all good conservatives know that liberty cannot endure without order. That is why I am not a free speech absolutist. There must always be a balance in the law to ensure that free speech does not allow defamation or the incitement of violence, to name two examples. However, with SLAPPs the law has definitely become unbalanced, creating a chilling effect on free speech that gives a powerful advantage to the wealthy and creates lucrative opportunities for claimant lawyers.

This is not just a serious problem for journalists and news organisations. SLAPPs have been deployed by those with deep pockets against company employees, non-governmental organisations, campaign activists, survivors of abuse and people from many walks of life. London continues to be known as a global libel hotspot. Nearly a quarter of cross-border SLAPP cases between 2010 and 2021 were in the UK, and a record number of 14 SLAPP cases were filed in England and Wales in 2021. The lack of comprehensive data on SLAPP cases—many are settled out of court, so this can be difficult to measure—has been exploited by claimant lawyers, who argue that there is no such problem. However, the evidence we have, and we have heard such evidence from Members on both sides of the House, is incredibly strong.

SLAPPs have been used to shut down research publications and investigations before they can even see the light of day. There are journalists who have been able to expose the use of SLAPPs covering high profile cases, sometimes including powerful actors. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) referred to the Russian businessmen who attempted to sue Tom Burgis over the publication of his book, *"Kleptopia: How Dirty Money is Conquering the World"*. HarperCollins helped to shine a light on SLAPPs, but the issue has not gone away since then.

Many others in this debate have shared similar stories about the use of lawfare to control what can and cannot be said in public. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) raised the case involving a SLAPP against Charlotte Leslie, the former Member for Bristol North West, deployed by Mohamed Amersi. After carrying out due diligence on Mr Amersi and sharing her findings with senior members of the Conservative Middle East Council, Charlotte was subject to allegations regarding data protection in 2021 and defamation in 2022. She had serious and legitimate concerns about Mr Amersi taking over CMEC, and those concerns were suppressed by his abuse of the court system.

Last year, after a great deal of time and money, and no little stress for Charlotte and her family, the Court ruled that "no serious harm" had been done to Mr Amersi's

reputation and that both allegations were unnecessary, and they were struck down. However, it was only the good fortune that CMEC had insurance that allowed Charlotte to continue that fight her case, against a wealthy businessman intent on using his power to damage her and to take over her institution, that she was able to win. We should remember the consequences had Mr Amersi succeeded in controlling an important institution in our politics that seeks to shape the foreign policy of this country.

Most victims of SLAPPs are not able to resist as Charlotte did because they are so often outmatched by people with superior financial and legal resources. News organisations can sometimes fight their own corner, but local and regional media do not have the same option. This is very worrying and concerning for the health and independence of the press at all levels. The status quo also benefits claimant lawyers, who collect enormous fees for litigating on behalf of the powerful. As a result, journalists, news organisations and others too often no longer publish information that could serve the public interest and hold the powerful to account.

SLAPPs turn the principle of innocent until proven guilty on its head, and the existing system gives added leverage to people who already enjoy the advantages of their wealth and knowledge of how best to exploit the court system. This power imbalance makes it very important for us to know the true cost to the taxpayer of taking these cases through the court system. A public service should not be manipulated by the powerful to serve their own interests.

The UK is not alone in grappling with the issue of SLAPPs. As has been noted, the European Union has introduced its own anti-SLAPPs directive that, though not perfect, does show a clear change in direction. The Council of Europe, of which the UK is a member, has also called for more comprehensive anti-SLAPPs legislation at the national level. Its report, to which the previous Government contributed, explicitly states that SLAPPs "impede individual rights to expression whilst undermining the free exchange of ideas and information essential in a pluralistic society."

In Canada, British Columbia and Ontario have successfully implemented and tested anti-SLAPPs legislation.

It is with good reason that the UK is known for its fair and impartial judiciary, free speech protections, free media and democratic governance—one of our country's great contributions to civilisation—but that should not cause us to be in any way complacent. We must remain vigilant in the defence of our freedoms.

The previous Government made some welcome progress in this area. As the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) said, anti-SLAPP measures were enshrined in law under the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023. While that legislation is narrow in scope and could have been tougher, it still recognised that we have a problem with SLAPPs, and we should continue this conversation and find a comprehensive solution. As has also been said, towards the end of the last Parliament, Sir Wayne David, with Government support, introduced a private Member's Bill, which would have given the House an opportunity to discuss practical legislation. The Ministry of Justice launched non-legislative initiatives on training and guidance to help people to fight SLAPPs in the courts, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport established a SLAPPs taskforce.

This is a challenge that commands the attention and support of Members across the political spectrum, and this debate allows us all to put our party colours to one side and to speak up for a vital freedom and for the common good. I was pleased to hear the Prime Minister's comments in October, when he recognised that this is a problem. He said that SLAPPs are used

"to intimidate journalists away from their pursuit of the public interest."

He also said:

"Such behaviour is intolerable".

I agree with those comments.

The Prime Minister promised to act, and it would be welcome, when the Minister speaks, if she confirmed when proposals will be put before the House. I note that there was no mention of press freedom in the King's Speech, and the MOJ and DCMS initiatives have been put on hold. I know they are a new Government and I am not trying to make a party political attack, but it would be good to know the timing of such initiatives, because it would be a shame to see the progress made during the last Parliament undone.

I join other Members from different parties in calling for a comprehensive anti-SLAPPs Bill. I would like to see the parameters for the review of current policy and Ministers starting to work on primary legislation as soon as possible. Equal access to justice and free speech must be the key principles underpinning the Government's approach. The longer we delay, the more lives will be ruined, and we will continue to see free and open debate limited in the interests of the wealthy and at the expense of the public. SLAPPs will just feed into a broader intimidatory culture that deploys hacking, surveillance, smears, bullying and threats to silence critics during an age already grappling with problems of misinformation and disinformation.

I said at the start of my speech that SLAPPs are just one part of a wider crisis of free speech in the UK and across the world. I imagine we all have stories of our own. I experienced it myself after I wrote a column in *The Daily Telegraph* following the murder of Sir David Amess. There was a concerted attempt by some organisations, which I understand have Islamist links, to have me thrown off the organising committee of the Commonwealth games that took place in Birmingham in 2022. Newspapers routinely receive aggressive letters from firms such as Carter-Ruck when they write about some of the same organisations with Islamist and extremist connections.

A censorious culture driven by social media and increasingly ideological dogma is starting to police our language. We have seen public institutions bent to obey the whims of online activists. The latest figures show that police forces recorded as many as almost 12,000 non-crime hate incidents in the year to June 2024. It has been shocking to hear reports of police officers knocking on the doors of journalists to investigate the language they have used in tweets, such as in the case of Allison Pearson. Essex police—the force that turned up on her doorstep—has failed to investigate or arrest people who are undoubtedly using language that should be investigated for incitement to violence, such as Shaykh Shams Ad-Duha Muhammad, who called for Allah to

"destroy the Zionists"

and to

"grant us victory over the disbelieving people".

I think we know whom he means by the Zionists. The Metropolitan police has been unwilling to arrest protesters who have chanted for jihad and have intimidated British Jews on the streets of London over the last year or so.

All this occurs while free speech is under sustained assault by authoritarian regimes in other countries. Just two days ago, a Hong Kong court used the national security law to convict pro-democracy activists for subversion. The Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran has been brutally suppressed through threats, beatings, imprisonment and executions. Russia has continued its crackdown on free speech, arresting US journalist Evan Gershkovich on bogus espionage charges. We heard many other such examples at the freedom of expression awards last night organised by Index on Censorship. These authoritarian regimes use propaganda and media manipulation to hide their actions, but we must not turn a blind eye. It is critical that we do not allow free speech to be weakened in our country.

As I said at the start of my contribution, I am not a free speech absolutist, and I doubt many Members here today really are either. As with any freedom, there must be limits to ensure that the common good and public safety are served, but we are now at risk of destroying the foundation upon which all our freedoms rest. From SLAPPs to non-crime hate incidents, a bureaucratic legal quagmire threatens to consume our freedoms, to the detriment of our national stability and cohesion. I will always stand with colleagues in this House to defend the right to free speech, and I hope the Government will work constructively with Members of all parties in this House to resolve the broader crisis in our political culture.

2 pm

**Apsana Begum** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): Democratic and press freedoms are fundamental to our rights. That is why many of us have been campaigning on changing the law to provide meaningful protection against SLAPPs, and I welcome the opportunity the debate offers in that regard. As the re-elected chair of the all-party group on domestic violence and abuse, I want to particularly raise the need to tackle the ability of abusers to weaponise litigation.

I am obliged to highlight a personal interest given my own experiences of lawfare being used against myself. The House will be aware that I was completely cleared and vindicated in Snaresbrook Crown court after what I and many in my constituency and around the UK viewed as vexatious litigation pursued with the purpose of shutting down my public participation as a democratically elected Member of Parliament and as a survivor of domestic abuse. In the end, the local council, where my ex-husband was a councillor at the time, spent more money trying to pursue me in the courts than the amount it alleged it was trying to recoup. I want to place on record that I have never received any recognition, never mind an apology, from the institution and people who did this to me.

Still to this day, I am seeking answers so that something like this cannot ever happen again, because the use of lawfare by abusers to pursue a current or ex-partner is increasingly coming to light. The most common proceedings we see are brought by those accused of sexual and/or domestic violence launching vexatious cases in relation to defamation, libel, misuse of private information, harassment, and press injunctions. However, they can

[Apsana Begum]

also include the family courts, the criminal justice system and other areas of law. The purpose of these proceedings is to silence, intimidate, discredit and further disempower survivors.

Likewise, there is no doubt in my mind that there is clearly a bias in and pressure on media outlets when reporting on issues relating to domestic abuse and violence against women. To explain what I mean, I need to update the House on the extraordinary situation I continue to face. After I survived a full term as a Member of Parliament facing onslaught after onslaught, my ex-husband was finally expelled from the Labour party for his treatment of me at the beginning of this year. However, that did not stop the relentless attempts to unjustly remove me as an MP by a clique of his associates still in the Labour party. Having survived this, I then had the shock that he then stood against me at the general election as an independent with the stated aim of exposing “who I really was” and getting even with me. On election day itself, my security situation was so serious that I was literally bundled away from polling stations due to the risks. I remember the car he was in driving well over the speed limit past the polling station I was at, and my security support took it on themselves to increase their resources, all the way to the election count and even inside the building.

I am still reeling from what happened, and I am enormously proud of the positive and vibrant campaign I ran despite this situation. I am so moved that the people of Poplar and Limehouse have stood by me. But they are struck, as am I, by how lawfare has been used, albeit unsuccessfully, against me and how my ex-husband’s right to pursue me, including publicly slandering me, seems to be protected. When I continued to raise this with a range of authorities and people, seeking support, I was repeatedly given the impression that very little could be done. And where has this been reported in the media? It is not as though the safety of Members of Parliament has not been of public interest or indeed newsworthy lately. What is it about me that evokes this deadly silence in this regard, and why are women’s experiences of domestic abuse treated so differently?

It might seem strange to some that I raise this while advocating for press freedom, but this is clearly not press freedom, and of course it is obviously connected to the fear of litigious perpetrators and the law around defamation. Indeed, the National Union of Journalists is warning of the current threats to press freedom posed by the use of litigation or indeed the threat of litigation. I have even had contact with journalists from mainstream outlets investigating my situation, who I understand in some cases have even drafted full articles which were then blocked by their editors on what was referred to as “legal grounds.” Yet invariably no such care is taken when it comes to printing smears about me; and what a strange world we live in that accusing me of lying, and indeed all sorts, is not viewed as a damage to my reputation.

Further to this, the growing trend of journalists being targeted directly when receiving threats of legal action instils fear that deters any future journalistic content on an issue. Yet the free expression of survivors sharing their truth is, in my view a matter of public interest that outweighs the private interests and right to reputation of an abuser.

Preventing the misuse of litigation and the use of the law to silence survivors of domestic abuse and violence is central to freedom of speech. The United Nations and others have warned about gendered censorship taking place around the world and that there is clearly imbalance in the system between “his” right to reputation and, usually, “her” right to free speech. As Jennifer Robinson and Keina Yoshida, authors of “How Many More Women?”, succinctly put it:

“Legal change is possible. And fight back we must. Because if we don’t, how many more women will be silenced?”

It is vital that legislators consider this, so that certain types of public interest speech are not privileged over others. It is also vital if we aim to have a future free from perpetrators being able to abuse the courts and pursue litigation in this way, because supporting survivors in speaking out is crucial in envisaging a world where no one is forced to endure domestic abuse. Because at the core of the debate around SLAPPs are questions of democracy, accountability and justice. As I have set out in terms of my own situation, SLAPPs are being used to silence public participation and suppress the provision of information by activists, environmental campaigners, non-governmental organisations, whistleblowers, and even people posting negative product reviews online.

I would like to highlight another example raised with me by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. Freelance journalist Tom Latchem was investigating a foster care home run by reality show star Ampika Pickston, the fiancée of billionaire owner of West Ham United, David Sullivan. Mr Latchem published a story with the outlet *Byline Times* about the home having its licence suspended by Ofsted due to reported serious safeguarding failings. I understand, however, that Mr Latchem believes he has been prevented from further reporting on the care home. He wanted in particular to be able to investigate an incident in which Ms Pickston allegedly took a child from the care home to her private residence, but was sent a letter by lawyers for Ms Pickston warning in essence that they would review any published material and if they considered anything to be defamatory or libellous they

“will advise our client to sue both the newspaper and any individual author or journalist for libel, seeking damages and costs”.

I am told that Ms Pickston’s lawyers said their communications with the journalist were “courteous and cordial” and did not prevent him from any reporting. Nevertheless, it will surely be understandable to the House that Mr Latchem feels he cannot afford to face down someone with such resources. It is obvious who loses out if accountability and transparency on the treatment of children in care homes are thwarted.

In conclusion, it is clear that we need a concrete action plan to stop abusive lawsuits silencing those who speak out in the public interest. We only have a hope of stamping out SLAPPs with a comprehensive and robust anti-SLAPP Bill. As such, it would be helpful to hear from the Government whether there is a realistic prospect of that appearing in the next King’s Speech or any other legislative vehicle in this Parliament.

2.10 pm

**Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for securing this debate, and I thank everyone who has taken part so far. I particularly thank the hon. Member



for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), who laid out precisely how abusers can benefit from abusive lawsuits, which continue, with a growing impact in silencing those who speak out in the public interest. I also thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) for mentioning the McLibel case, which is a classic of the genre of using legal might against the smallest and most local publishing operations in an effort to stop grassroots public-spirited campaigning.

As the Anti-SLAPP Coalition says:

“Without a dedicated anti-SLAPP law, everyone in the UK remains at risk if they choose to speak out on matters of public interest, undermining the democratic health of our society.”

The case I will talk about today is that of Ben Jenkins, a citizen who made critical posts and comments in various forums about GreenSquareAccord, the housing provider with which he co-owns his home as a shared owner. In my work as an elected representative—as a local councillor, as a London Assembly Member, and now as an MP—I have often met, worked with and supported people like Ben. These campaigners speak up when their housing provider fails, when their complaints disappear into the system and when their attempts to work with others to show the patterns in the impacts on fellow residents are delegitimised.

We have all seen how those dynamics worked around the disaster at Grenfell and how the residents were treated before the fire in relation to the ongoing issues in the building. Such situations are all too common, and it is exactly the kinds of concerns that local grassroots campaigners bring out that the big, powerful companies and organisations that operate these homes most want to suppress. We can see why the dynamic of SLAPPs comes into play in such cases.

Ben Jenkins has faced a series of serious legal threats from his social housing provider. He spoke out about the company’s inadequate response to residents’ concerns, including drug taking in corridors, poor quality repairs and safety risks. It is very much in the public interest for Ben to speak out freely on such issues, because safety in housing completely depends upon maintaining good standards and public accountability. Ultimately, that depends on this kind of whistleblowing. Residents in his block had tried to raise the issues through official channels, but had not been adequately listened to, so taking things to a higher level was legitimate in this case.

No one is saying that Ben did not send a lot of communications and did not publish negative information about his housing provider, but people should be free to do that, and Ben’s activities have been vindicated in their substance. The evidence of the issues in his block is well documented. Images and video footage were published by ITV, which reported the issue based on Ben’s public campaigning. There were also many complaints by other residents posted to Facebook. Those have since been taken down, but there was an admission by the housing company in response to ITV that residents’ complaints had not been adequately handled.

Jenkins and numerous other residents have now received payouts, and the Housing Ombudsman has found that the housing provider had failed to adequately respond to a series of serious complaints, including a rat infestation, a broken boiler, a burst toilet cistern, noise complaints and a roof that needed to be repaired. By speaking out about these issues that needed to be dealt with, Ben faced a series of legal threats for his campaigning.

He was accused by GSA’s lawyers of harassment, of copyright infringement for using the logo on his blog and of putting himself forward to complain on behalf of tenants who should have contacted the company directly. I have heard that familiar phrase many times before.

GSA claimed that Ben Jenkins’s criticism was excessive and targeted individual employees, who he named on social media. GSA also said that the criticism was so frequent that it prevented the company from being able to respond to other residents’ issues, which obviously GSA was clearly doing. It demanded in its legal threats that Jenkins sign undertakings to avoid legal action himself, including a commitment to refrain from

“any conduct that causes or is likely to cause a nuisance or annoyance to any of the Claimant’s employees, agents or contractors”.

That condition was so broad that Ben Jenkins felt he had no choice but to refuse. The letter itself threatened that failure to sign these undertakings could incur

“legal costs which are likely to run into thousands of pounds”.

That phrase is clearly a threat to someone living in affordable housing. Ultimately, Ben Jenkins signed a more limited series of undertakings, but he refused to take down his website criticising the housing provider.

The battle with GSA has had a serious ongoing effect on Ben’s mental health. He hopes that by shedding a light on these matters, the wellbeing and safety of residents will be protected and the proper upkeep of homes across the UK will be ensured. He wants to contribute to the raising of awareness about the challenges faced and ensure accountability. I hope that the Minister will look at this case, these issues and abuses of legal proceedings and the use of bullying lawfare, where money and resources are used to shield the powerful from proper public scrutiny when they should be held to account. Will the Minister look at bringing in new action to put in a robust, broad and compressive Bill to prevent it from happening?

2.16 pm

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for securing this important debate. I declare an interest, as I spent more than a decade working on open government transparency and accountability around the world, supporting journalists and civil society to hold Governments to account, often in countries where people could be locked up for speaking truth to power. Indeed, I worked as an investigative journalist reporting on corruption in Uganda many years ago, standing up to people who wanted to silence our stories.

I begin by recognising and paying tribute to the brave reporters, investigative journalists and victims of SLAPPs in the UK and around the world. People look to us to lead by example on democracy and free speech—I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for all his work on media freedom—but our leadership is undermined by the use of these lawsuits to harass, intimidate and silence critics of the corrupt and powerful in this country.

As we have already heard, the UK legal system has become fertile ground for SLAPPs, particularly for those who wish to conceal money laundering and economic crime. A survey by the Foreign Policy Centre, to which my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset referred, found that international reporters on financial crime and corruption face as many threats of court action in England as they do from all other European countries and the US combined.

[Joe Powell]

Other Members have mentioned the case of Catherine Belton, the investigative journalist who received multiple legal threats following the publication of her book, “Putin’s People”. Four oligarchs, including Roman Abramovich, who owns frozen assets in my constituency, and a Russian state oil company launched lawsuits against her and her publisher HarperCollins. Abramovich sued over a number of claims, including that he bought Chelsea football club on Putin’s orders. That libel was settled, but had that trial gone ahead, the legal bill would likely have exceeded £10 million.

Similarly, the journalist Tom Burgis faced legal action for his book “Kleptopia” from the mining company the Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation. ENRC sued Burgis personally and also targeted his publisher, again HarperCollins. It even went so far as suing the *Financial Times* over an article related to Burgis’s book. The defence for Burgis and his publisher cost nearly £340,000. As the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) mentioned, many organisations without that financial firepower would never be able to fight those lawsuits as the *Financial Times* did. That claim was dismissed by the judge, but had the case gone to trial and been lost, the estimated costs including ENRC’s legal fees and damages would have risen to £1.5 million. For these journalists, the mere threat of losing their home or public disgrace shows how SLAPPs are not just about winning cases in court; they are about silencing dissent and a chilling effect on free speech.

It is welcome that there is support from across the House on this topic. Provisions introduced through the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 were a welcome step. However, those measures apply only to cases involving economic crime and have not yet been fully implemented in the civil procedure rules. We must move swiftly to enact those provisions so that, in cases around corruption and kleptocracy, people cannot exploit the UK legal system to silence those who seek to expose their crimes.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) mentioned, we must go further. I warmly welcome the Prime Minister’s pledge just last month in an article in *The Guardian* that the Government will

“tackle the use of Slapps to protect investigative journalism”.

I turn to perhaps the most harrowing recent example of the danger posed by SLAPPs: that of Mohammed al-Fayed, the former owner of Harrods, which is in my constituency of Kensington and Bayswater. In September, the BBC aired allegations that al-Fayed raped five women and sexually assaulted over a dozen others while they worked for him. Since then, over 200 women have come forward with allegations, but, for decades, efforts to hold al-Fayed accountable were thwarted by legal threats and intimidation. As far back as 1995, *Vanity Fair* published an article about al-Fayed that detailed how he had sued *The Observer* over a story about the sources of his wealth. Other journalists were also threatened or sued. At the time, the journalist Maureen Orth wrote:

“All critical reporting outside *The Observer* virtually stopped”. Allegations in the press of sexual abuse were suppressed.

In 2008, *The Mail on Sunday* prepared a report stating that al-Fayed was under investigation for sexually assaulting a 15-year-old. Legal threats forced it to remove

his name and refer instead to a “senior Harrods executive”. That is how SLAPPs work—they do not just protect reputations; they shield individuals from accountability and allow abuse to continue unchecked. Al-Fayed died before he could face justice. Imagine how many women’s lives would not have been ruined if anti-SLAPP legislation had been in place and journalists had been able to report freely on the case. My thoughts are with all the victims of Mohammed al-Fayed; I am sure the whole House will join me in that. Their bravery in coming forward now deserves our utmost respect. It is not least for them that we must ensure that men like al-Fayed can no longer use these lawsuits to conceal their horrific crimes.

I ask the Minister: how can we ensure that this Parliament will act decisively to finish the job, following the Prime Minister’s commitment? As I mentioned, the current economic crime legislation is a step forward, but the existing SLAPPs provisions must be implemented swiftly and the scope of provisions must go further to cover other forms of wrongdoing, including sexual misconduct, war crimes and harassment, as we have heard from Members across the House.

First, further legislation in this Parliament will be needed to ensure that, for example, we have a filter mechanism that empowers courts to dispose swiftly of SLAPPs without the need for a subjective inquiry into the state of mind of the SLAPP filer. Where there may be ongoing abuse, there must be a very high threshold.

Secondly, there must be penalties that are sufficient to deter the use of SLAPPs and provide full compensation to those targeted. Those penalties should take into account both the harm caused to the defendant and the conduct and resources available to the claimant. The level playing field argument needs to be made clearly. Finally, there must be protective measures for SLAPP victims, including cost protections, safeguards and measures to reduce the ability of SLAPP claimants to weaponise the litigation process, including against investigative journalists.

SLAPPs are not just a legal tactic; they are weapons against transparency, accountability and justice. We have the power and the responsibility to ensure that the UK legal system cannot be hijacked by the corrupt and powerful. We must ensure that those trying to uncover crimes and corruption of the wealthy and powerful—journalists, academics and whistleblowers—are protected and not persecuted. Let us send a clear message today as a united House that the UK will no longer be a safe haven for those seeking to silence their critics.

2.25 pm

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing the debate. I have listened with interest to all hon. Members, and it is a welcome exception that we are speaking in the House with unity and with one voice, from a shared sense of the value of free speech, to stop the bullies who use SLAPPs to intimidate people so horrifically.

I too have a story. It is about a lady called Carrie Jones, who received a legal letter from a “wealth creator”, Samuel Leeds, after she raised concerns about Leeds’s interactions with her brother, who had died of suicide after spending thousands on Mr Leeds’s controversial courses. Carrie lost her brother Danny, who was an Army reservist, to suicide in 2019. Before his death, he had attended a course run by Samuel Leeds, who still

offers controversial courses on achieving financial freedom through property investment. Danny, who was vulnerable and in debt even before joining Mr Leeds's course, attempted to secure a refund from Mr Leeds before he took his life.

Carrie attempted to contact Mr Leeds after her brother's death to understand the effect that the course had had on him, but she never received a satisfactory response, so she spoke to some journalists and others who had handled Leeds's courses—which sister would not? She wanted answers for her family, but she also felt that there was a serious public interest concern about Mr Leeds's business, not least because his courses did not appear to be regulated by any professional or governmental body. A trading standards authority had ignored her attempts to raise concerns about wealth creators such as Mr Leeds.

Shortly after Carrie spoke to her Member of Parliament about Mr Leeds's courses, she received a legal letter from Ellisons, a firm of solicitors representing Leeds in numerous legal disputes with his critics. That legal letter suggested that she had been participating in a campaign of harassment against Mr Leeds. It did not immediately threaten her with a lawsuit, but it warned that legal action could follow if she suggested that Mr Leeds and his course had had any influence on her brother's suicide. Carrie responded firmly that she would not retract her criticism and would continue to raise awareness until her questions were answered. What a very brave woman! A YouTube channel on which she had featured asking questions about Mr Leeds's involvement with her brother was subject to legal threats and closed down.

It will not surprise the House to hear that this is not the only instance of Mr Samuel Leeds sending threats. *The Guardian* has found some 15 individuals subject to legal threats from Mr Leeds, while *The Economist* has reported on the despair of attendees, who felt the course was a scam.

Another man, who asked to remain anonymous, attended a course run by Samuel Leeds and was dissatisfied. He later posted on the Facebook page of Mr Nick Fletcher—a former Member of Parliament—asking whether there were any safeguarding measures to protect vulnerable people from wealth creation schemes, which was not an unreasonable request. He wrote that he lives with disabilities and had seen people trying to manipulate the vulnerable into paying for these courses. That is all he said; he did not mention Samuel Leeds.

Despite not naming Mr Leeds, the man received a letter from Ellisons Solicitors, on Mr Leeds's behalf, citing the Facebook comment and warning:

“Any mention of our clients may be perceived as harassment and/or defamation.”

A spokesperson for Mr Leeds has commented:

“Danny Butcher's death in 2019 was a tragedy. Your account of the relevant events is one-sided and misses important context, which we have no confidence you will fairly represent”—

to fellow MPs. He continued:

“Our business and founder were subjected to a campaign of abuse and sustained attacks, including unwarranted defamatory and even obscene and deeply personal publications.”

What a sensitive soul. Along with Members of all parties, I, as a Liberal Democrat, resoundingly request that the Government build SLAPPs into any legislation that is coming forward, because it is desperately needed for this country, our citizens and our legal system.

2.30 pm

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing this vital debate. I declare an interest, which I have raised with the Speaker's Office and parliamentary authorities, as I am currently the defendant in a lawsuit. I will refer not to that but to general concepts.

We pride ourselves in this country on free speech—the quality of our campaigners, our journalism, our broadcasters and our investigators—so how ironic, embarrassing and frankly humiliating that we should be the global epicentre of SLAPPs designed to prevent exactly that. As the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) said, there is a crisis in free speech now in this country, and a crisis of fear among journalists, authors, writers and broadcasters about what they can and cannot say.

How have we got to this situation? Surely, if we are a beacon of free speech around the world, with the greatest Parliament and the greatest legal system, we should be able to preserve and protect free speech. We have heard lots of shocking examples and evidence, but there are examples elsewhere in the world—states in America, for example—where anti-SLAPP mechanisms have been introduced.

As a new Member of this place, I was surprised to hear how long we have been talking about this—years and years. This Government have been elected on a mandate of change, so now seems to be the moment for them to grasp that mandate in this vital issue and say, “Yes. It's now time to stop talking about this and do something about it with concerted action.” I just hope that the Minister and the Government will find time in this Session to bring forward anti-SLAPP mechanisms in legislation to preserve what we cherish so dearly: free speech.

2.33 pm

**Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing this debate. It has been an education for me.

I want to refer to a constituent of mine by name. I heard the cautionary remarks at the start of the debate, so I will not name any other individuals. None of these matters is sub judice. Jan Cruickshank has consented to the use of her name today in the sharing of details of her case. She is a devoted mother of three and has been in a committed relationship with her husband Rob since meeting as childhood sweethearts. Many of the cases we have heard about today involve mega-wealthy, high-profile individuals. Jan is not such an individual.

Jan faced a problem with her employer, the Construction Industry Training Board. In 2015, she was allegedly sexually assaulted by a co-worker at the Construction Industry Training Board. Upon reporting the assault to CITB, Jan unfortunately suffered a nervous breakdown and had to take sick leave. The person against whom the complaint was made was put on gardening leave. He returned after a week, even though he had been told to take at least a month. On returning to work, he began propagating false narratives, suggesting that Jan was falsely accusing him. Jan had reported the assault while in a vulnerable state, having recently suffered a significant house fire. The conditions of a subsequent police interview, which lasted approximately 10 hours, in a damaged environment compromised the integrity of the process.



[Seamus Logan]

A senior whistleblower at CITB has revealed that its legal team had indicated a substantial potential liability should Jan's case come to trial. The whistleblower confirmed that there was a targeted campaign to discredit Jan over several mediums. CITB misused the false narrative to depict Jan as a home-wrecker, subsequently initiating a predetermined human resources investigation focused on facilitating her exit from the company. A second whistleblower has corroborated that management planned to exit Jan from the business a month before her HR process was complete.

Following the assault, Jan was placed in the untenable position of having to confront her alleged attacker daily on her return to work, amid ongoing HR investigations. Let us bear in mind that this was 2015—someone had to face that situation because a large employer had failed to take proper steps to separate those two individuals and allow them to work freely. Jan's employment was terminated after what she describes as a warped and unprofessional HR investigation. CITB later communicated to the police that the situation stemmed from a consensual relationship, and further lied to the police, suggesting that Jan had been sending explicit pictures to the offender, dismissing the severity of the allegations. That submission had a severely negative impact on her case and does so to this day.

Jan pursued matters to an employment tribunal, with the support of her union, but she faced significant challenges. Here is the rub, which is relevant to the debate today: she was pressured into accepting a settlement far below the realistic sum that she should have been entitled to. Furthermore, she was asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement, so she could not speak freely about the case. This is why I believe that Jan's case falls into the category of a SLAPP. She is determined to seek justice, so that the alleged attacker is prosecuted and she receives just compensation. This will enable her and her family to move forward.

The term SLAPP is often employed to describe legal actions aimed at harassing, intimidating, or exhausting victims' resources. A broader understanding of SLAPPs emphasises the need for protective measures for individuals seeking justice. Jan should not have been subjected to a HR investigation or an employment tribunal. Rather, she deserved time off work for recovery and support following the trauma that she had experienced. Worst of all, the Police Scotland interviewing officer lacked the requisite training to handle such a sensitive sexual assault case, resulting in the premature conclusion of the matter. It was later discovered that this was the officer's first interview of that type, and she should have had supervision to guide her.

I could wax on about many more aspects of this case, but I will bring it to a close at this point, because Jan's situation starkly illustrates the extreme harm that can be inflicted by behaviours classified as strategic lawsuits against public participation. These tactics not only target individual victims but create a pervasive ripple effect that extends to their families, communities and the broader public. I ask CITB to consider issuing a public apology to Jan; I ask the police to consider re-looking at the whole way that the case was handled; and I ask the Minister to meet me to discuss this situation further in more detail.

2.39 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank all the Members who have spoken for setting the scene so well, and for giving so many personal examples in explaining where we are at the moment. It is nice to see the Minister back in the House, and it is also nice to see her elevated to her present position. I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) in particular for presenting the case so well and so succinctly.

I speak as someone who was named in a civil litigation High Court case involving the covid vaccine, of all things in this world—my goodness!—along with the Northern Ireland Minister for Health and other representatives from our area. We were named collectively by someone who had decided to do it. The case had no foundation whatever, but I nevertheless had to appoint a barrister and prepare to defend something that needed no defence, along with many other Members of the Legislative Assembly and civil servants. Although this was litigious and unnecessary and had no legal foundation, the stress and the time that it took up were terrible. Those with few means or moneys pursued a SLAPP against others who were totally innocent. The judge struck out the case of one defendant straight away, and the domino effect was that the rest of us received the same treatment by right. I was very thankful for that approach when I was having to pay legal fees from my own pocket for discussing and voting for Government policy—which was a bit hard to comprehend.

We live in an increasingly litigious society. Defence can cost everything to many people, and although in many cases costs will be awarded, that cannot compensate for the sleepless nights and the levels of stress, and give back the peace that was taken away and replaced by a dark, weighty cloud of uncertainty.

We have seen a number of SLAPP cases recently in Northern Ireland; they seem to be happening regularly. In January, Northern Ireland's High Court dismissed a "scandalous, frivolous and vexatious" defamation claim brought against the Belfast journalist and author Malachi O'Doherty by the Sinn Féin politician Gerry Kelly. The foundation of the SLAPP was that the journalist had dared to talk about the Maze prison breakout that had been detailed in Gerry Kelly's own books, and about the fact that he had shot a prison guard.

Mr Kelly tried to silence the reporter, apart from expecting him to offer an apology for stating what everyone in Northern Ireland knows to be the truth. Indeed, the magistrate highlighted the content of those very books, which appeared to make Mr Kelly civilly liable, on the balance of probabilities, for the shooting of Mr Adams, the prison guard. Mr Kelly knows what happened, the prison guards knew what happened, his fellow escapees knew what happened, and—most important—Mr Adams's family know what happened, yet Kelly attempted to silence discussion of it with a lawsuit. The judge was very clear in his ruling that cases could be thrown out, stating that the proceedings

"bear the hallmarks of a SLAPP and have been initiated not for the genuine purposes of vindicating a reputation injured by defamatory statements, but rather for the purpose of stifling the voices of his troublesome critics."

This is why we need the ability for the judiciary to step in at an early stage and prevent the stifling of freedom of speech in such civil cases. It seems to be an

old trick on the part of many people who like to drag up the past of others while silencing the voices that speak about their own past. I read an interesting article published by the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition about another Sinn Féin case, this time involving Gerry Adams, who was attempting to use this method to silence those highlighting the news that he could be civilly sued by victims of the London and Manchester bombings. According to the article, last year 15 organisations wrote to the leader of Sinn Féin, Mary Lou McDonald, to express concern about the use of SLAPPs by party members. The co-chairs of the coalition wrote:

“It is incredibly concerning that efforts to call out legal intimidation are now being subject to legal intimidation themselves. While solicitors do remain independent from their clients, they cannot disassociate themselves from the legal tactics that are deployed in the course of litigation.”

I believe that to be true.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the situation can be addressed, hopefully through legislation in the House. This tactic must be called out for what it is, which is not to say that we should never be able to prevent someone from spreading lies and falsehoods—we, including every Member in the House, must retain the right to defend our character—but that is different from using a legal machine to silence the little man or the little woman. I support legislation throughout this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and I believe we must ensure that it is in place for the judiciary to use as and when it is needed. Freedom of speech is worth protecting in legislation—we all say that—and I believe that this Parliament must send that message today. Legislation is needed, and I look forward to hearing from the Front Benchers have to say.

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

2.45 pm

**Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD):** I welcome this important debate, and I thank the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) for securing time for it.

All of us in this Chamber are interested in the upkeep of our democracy. As part of that, we must be vigilant at all times. We must always work to construct a democracy that enables those in positions of power to be held to account, and then we must do everything in our power here to protect that system. Without it, we are on a slippery slope to tyranny. With that in mind, we must all be clear about the fact that SLAPPs have absolutely no place in our democracy, and I think all Members are clear about that. SLAPPs are intended to censor, intimidate and silence those who challenge powerful vested interests. SLAPPs burden critics of the rich and powerful with eye-watering legal defence costs. SLAPPs prevent the misdeeds of the rich and powerful from being reported publicly, and in doing so they limit the ability of society to scrutinise people in positions of power. Regardless of their protestations, the people who use SLAPPs know exactly what they are doing.

I came to this place to fight for liberal values, but as Members on both sides of the House have said today, this is an issue that commands consensus across the political spectrum. We have heard representatives from at least six party make basically the same points. My liberal values mean that I have a healthy scepticism of concentrations of power, whether it is state power,

private power or, as is so often the case with SLAPPs, the financial power of an individual or a company—which in some cases, as others have said, is unlimited financial power. As a liberal, I feel a strong sense of duty to stand up for the right of all of us to hold those in powerful positions to account. That right is at the very heart of our democracy, and SLAPPs are an affront to our democracy.

We must absolutely secure the rights of critics, journalists and commentators to hold the powerful to account. Failure to do so places the rights of those who already have huge power and money to defend their position, and their corrupt practices and any other wrongdoing, above the importance of free challenge as part of the public debate. Members who have spoken about this subject previously have already said that while SLAPPs are not always applied with the intention to win a case, they are used as a means of deterrence against organisations or individuals who engage in public advocacy or speak out on matters of public concern. Dissent is silenced—including, in so many cases, dissent on the part of investigative journalists—and the impact on our public debate is chilling.

One case that demonstrates the issues raised by these legal processes involves of a story published by *Inside Housing*. This trade publication conducted an investigation of the conditions being endured by homeless people and asylum seekers who had been placed in an office-to-residential conversion in north London. Journalists witnessed a stain on the ceiling apparently caused by leaking sewage. They also found a broken fire safety door, and damp problems risking the health of the vulnerable people living in the building. People placed in the accommodation were funded by taxpayers' money. That clear case of public interest should have involved the naming of the landlords and the building, which would have enabled power to be held to account. However, when the journalists from *Inside Housing* gave those responsible—the landlords—the right of reply, they received a letter from solicitors threatening legal action.

The article stated:

“While *Inside Housing* would be confident of defending its journalism, the cost and time involved in the legal action would be difficult for an organisation of our size.”

Consequently, a landlord who was offering substandard and potentially dangerous accommodation to vulnerable people, and who was taking taxpayers' money, was not named. The threat of legal action meant that even the building could not be named. We do not know whether that landlord is still in receipt of public sector contracts, or whether they are still running buildings that are not fit for habitation, and there is no way for us to find out, as their identity was never published because of a SLAPP. That is just one example of power not being held to account for its misdeeds. Other examples of the impact of SLAPPs that have been raised in the Chamber today have been instructive.

A number of publications have been mentioned today, and I want to do something unusual for a politician: offer thanks to *Private Eye*. It regularly makes brave editorial decisions to give this issue the oxygen of publicity that it deserves, and it names without fear or favour. As a subscriber and a former journalist, I value its contribution. I also pay tribute to other organisations, including those that are part of the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition. Other Members have mentioned the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, too.

[Max Wilkinson]

We on the Liberal Democrat Benches are calling for a comprehensive anti-SLAPPs law to be passed, and we call on the Government to lay a schedule for when it might happen. We hope that when the legislation is brought forward, it will not be stymied by the inclusion of subjective tests that require the court to infer the state of mind of the complainant. That will merely make the situation more complex, and it will further the ends of those who use SLAPPs. Any legislation must be effective in protecting free speech, whistleblowers and media scrutiny. We cannot allow the chilling effect to continue. We must all be vigilant and, in this Parliament, end SLAPPs to protect our democracy.

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

2.51 pm

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I begin by sending my condolences to the family of Lord Prescott, who was the sort of political figure who cut across party lines. As a teenager with just a passing interest in politics, I fondly remember seeing that punch and thinking, “Good for him!” As a shadow Minister, I should clarify that by saying he was exercising his lawful right to self-defence. May he rest in peace.

I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of the Opposition. We are debating an issue that is always a challenge for any democracy: how do we ensure that bad actors do not exploit important protections that have been put in place for our benefit, and how do we prevent measures that are meant to act as a shield from being turned into a weapon? These tensions find sharp expression in the misuse of our legal system through SLAPPs. They are not just frivolous lawsuits or the expected robust exchange between solicitors and their clients; they are a serious, deliberate tactic used to stifle voices that expose wrongdoing or hold the powerful to account. They are designed to intimidate, drain resources and create a chilling effect that suppresses important public discourse.

It has been positive to hear contributions from Members that demonstrate a deep understanding of this issue and its importance. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) drew on his experience of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and of being a former Secretary of State in discussing all the key issues that we have considered today, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy). My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East reminded us of the importance of ensuring that the other side of the debate is remembered when it comes to allowing people to fairly protect their reputation. My hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk talked in helpful detail about what happened to the former Member Charlotte Leslie, reminding us how much politicians are in the firing line. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), who has joined me on the Opposition Front Bench, is concerned about how SLAPPs can be used to stifle debate both locally and nationally.

Of course, all Back Benchers here today want to see action from the Government. Although the tone of the debate has been consensual, it is the job of the Opposition to hold this new Government to account. In what is becoming a familiar pattern, Labour Members, when in opposition earlier this year, supported legislation that would have built on our work in this area. Now that they are in government, however, reasons to delay have appeared. In the other place, the Government have said that they now think a further review is needed. Today, alongside an explanation for this change, I hope that we will hear a more concrete commitment and a clear plan from the Minister.

SLAPPs extend their impact far beyond the courtroom. Investigative journalists, whistleblowers, campaigners and even grieving families raising safety concerns have found themselves silenced. SLAPPs do not defend reputations; they conceal misconduct, shield wrongdoing and erode public trust in our institutions. In the previous Parliament, as a member of the Justice Committee, I had the welcome opportunity to join a one-off session of the Foreign Affairs Committee that did an excellent job of putting SLAPPs in the parliamentary spotlight. I got to hear at first hand from witnesses working across journalism, many of whom have been mentioned today, including Catherine Belton, the author of “Putin’s People”; investigative journalist Tom Burgis; Susan Coughtrie from the Foreign Policy Centre, who is co-chair of the UK Anti-SLAPP coalition; and Arabella Pike, who is head of publishing at William Collins.

I distinctly remember Catherine and Arabella talking powerfully about their experience of the sustained legal attack that “Putin’s People” came under, and it was clear that it took real courage to persevere with its publication. Tom described his experience across Africa, and the wider network of oligarchs and corrupt Governments working together to suppress journalism that would have held them to account. He has direct experience of successfully defeating SLAPPs relating to his own book, as others have mentioned. Susan described how individuals take advantage of good journalistic practices, whereby giving a right to reply is used to start to overwhelm journalists, and highlighted that this sort of activity is undertaken by not just legal professionals but other, unregulated individuals. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism has documented numerous cases where SLAPPs have smothered stories of profound public interest—stories exposing safety failures, corruption and malpractice. Such cases deserved public scrutiny, yet they were buried beneath a mountain of legal threats.

Of course, the right to defend one’s reputation is important. It ensures fairness, prevents the spread of harmful falsehoods, and protects individuals from malicious attacks. Like others who have spoken today, I have first-hand experience of that. A journalistic blogger decided that they had proof that my time spent volunteering as a policeman was made up, and that I had committed a criminal offence in lying about it. At the height of an election campaign, I saw that story spread across social media and reach tens of thousands of people. It was only through my taking the available legal steps that stopped it spreading further. Shoddy journalism should not find shelter in anti-SLAPPs legislation, but when SLAPPs turn the scales of justice into tools of suppression, they undermine the very principles that they claim to protect.



Sadly, the UK legal system is seen by some people as a favourable domain to stifle debate. Although it is not a watertight source, a 2020 survey by the Foreign Policy Centre revealed that the UK was the most frequent single international origin of legal threats against journalists, accounting for 31% of cases. By comparison, 35% of SLAPP threats originated in the US and the EU combined.

Recognising the threat of SLAPPs, the previous Conservative Government introduced important legislation that the current Government said represented a significant step forward in this area. The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 defined SLAPPs in law for the first time, introduced swift dismissal mechanisms and implemented cost protections in claims relating to economic crime, reflecting the then Government's belief that 70% of SLAPPs are linked to financial corruption and the scope of the original Bill. The last Government also established the SLAPPs taskforce, a group of legal and media professionals tasked with improving our understanding of SLAPPs and equipping stakeholders to combat them. As others have mentioned, during the previous Parliament the former Member for Caerphilly, Wayne David, introduced the strategic litigation against public participation Bill, a private Member's Bill that presented further possible steps to address SLAPPs.

**Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I will introduce my own Bill, which is based on that Bill, in early January. Will my Bill have the support of the Conservative party Opposition?

**Dr Mullan:** That is an important point and, notwithstanding my hope that the Government will introduce legislation, I expect that we will be able to support a Bill that is suitably similar to the one originally presented.

Mr David's Bill proposed a robust framework to combat SLAPPs, including a wider early dismissal mechanism, and a requirement on claimants to demonstrate a greater likelihood of success for a trial to proceed. Additionally, the Bill called for new civil procedure rules to protect defendants from adverse costs when SLAPP claims go to trial. Crucially, it would have empowered the Lord Chancellor to extend this framework to other courts or tribunals if SLAPPs were being used to circumvent these protections.

The Conservative Government recognised the Bill's value, supporting it as a complement to the steps we had already taken, and importantly, so did the then Labour Opposition. Unfortunately, despite its potential, the Bill fell away during the wash-up before the general election, as is sadly too often the case.

The proposals had cross-party support. There was no call from the then Opposition for a review or for things to be considered further, which they have now decided is necessary. In a recent article, the co-chair of the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition, Susan Coughtrie, expressed her disappointment that Labour has not developed a clear plan for similar legislation:

"This could have been a relatively 'easy win' not only for the new government, but for the protection of public interest speech and the democratic health of our society."

She is right, of course, and I cannot think of a new Government in more dire need of an easy win than this Labour Government.

With all this in mind, I urge the Minister to address several pressing questions. Given the Government's support in opposition for the private Member's Bill and its measures, why have they now determined that a further, delaying review is needed? When will this review be complete? Even if the review recommends some changes to the approach outlined in that Bill, do the Government commit in principle to introducing comprehensive anti-SLAPP legislation next year? If not, when will they bring forward legislation?

Will the Government commit to further and ongoing work with the Solicitors Regulation Authority to see whether its work could be reformed to deter law firms from taking on SLAPP cases? Finally, will the Minister commit to supporting the ongoing work of the SLAPPs taskforce? Ahead of legislation that has been unnecessarily delayed, this would send a strong signal of the Government's commitment on this issue.

The balance we must strike is clear. Our legal framework must protect the right to defend one's reputation while safeguarding freedom of speech and ensuring that public interest journalism can thrive. I urge the Government to pick up where we left off, as they have a detailed and comprehensive private Member's Bill ready to go. The powerful must not be allowed to misuse the legal system to suppress scrutiny and silence critics.

In opposition, Labour Members were clear on what they supported and what needed to be done. Somehow, entering government has brought uncertainty and hesitation to their thinking. At a time when too much of this House's legislative capacity is left unused, and when this Government desperately need a positive story to tell, they have changed course. I encourage them to build on our work and deliver in this area so that we can reaffirm our commitment to justice, accountability and the public interest, and ensure that the UK remains a beacon of free speech and fairness under the law.

3.1 pm

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Heidi Alexander):**

I associate myself with the shadow Minister's lovely remarks about Lord Prescott. John was a political giant, and I am sure I speak for the whole House in sending our thoughts and condolences to his family.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on securing this debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to debate this vital subject so early in this Parliament. We have had a good debate today, and I have always thought that Backbench Business debates lend themselves well to issues where there is general cross-party consensus that a problem exists but where we need thoughtful, forensic consideration about how to move forward with sensible, workable proposals.

I echo the comments of the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), on how good it is to hear the wisdom of long-standing Members, such as the right hon. Members for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), while also hearing powerful contributions from newly elected Members, particularly the hon. Members for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) and for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell).

[Heidi Alexander]

I am happy to meet the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East, although I would also like to discuss with the Department for Business and Trade whether it might be more appropriate for him to meet a Minister from that Department, given that the matters he raised relate primarily to non-disclosure agreements.

SLAPPs represent an abuse of our legal system. They curtail free speech, have a chilling effect on public interest journalism and pose a threat to our democracy. As we have heard today, they are characterised by the use of threatening tactics or actions to silence those who exercise their right to free speech on issues in the public interest. These cases often involve an acute imbalance of power where those with deep pockets use their wealth and influence to silence journalists, academics and others who are committed to raising issues that need to see the light of day. These powerful actors do so by abusing the legal system to suppress information on which we collectively rely. True accountability and transparency in a functioning democracy can be achieved only through free speech and a free press that upholds the highest journalistic standards while challenging abuses of power without fear of financial ruin. As the Prime Minister recently wrote:

“This is a government that will always champion press freedoms. We believe in being held to account.”

That must apply to everyone, irrespective of wealth or position.

The Government understand the profound financial and psychological impact of SLAPPs. Such actions have enormous consequences for the wellbeing and the very livelihoods of those on the receiving end of them, because SLAPP conduct is not about winning a legal argument or remedy. Instead, a SLAPP seeks to exhaust a defendant so that they withdraw their investigation or public commentary. That was very clear in the responses received to the 2022 call for evidence run by the previous Government.

SLAPPs also impact the standing of our legal system. That system, underpinned by the quality of our legal services and independent judiciary, is held in the highest esteem internationally. The legal services sector contributes £34 billion to our economy each year. We must not allow our world-renowned system to be abused for improper purposes. I must emphasise that the vast majority of legal professionals in this jurisdiction operate with the utmost honesty, professionalism and respect for the rule of law. However, the small minority who abuse our system by bringing SLAPP claims risk undermining its integrity and reputation.

By their very nature, SLAPPs rarely reach court. Claimants ensure that by racking up pre-litigation costs so as to make defending the case beyond the reach of those targeted, often journalists investigating wrongdoings in the public interest. There are detailed accounts of how aggressive letters put pressure on targets to remain silent, proceedings are brought in multiple jurisdictions to ramp up risk for defendants, and disproportionate costs are claimed in relation to the remedy sought. Apart from the distress obviously caused to those exercising their right to free speech, in media cases resources are diverted as press outlets' in-house lawyers are forced to spend hours poring over a defence, instead of publishing material of real interest. In the case of freelance journalists

without insurance or academics, there is often no legal resource at all for them to get advice from when a threat from a SLAPP claimant comes in.

Defendants are often unable to take on the risks associated with fighting the lawsuits in court, usually because of the exorbitant costs they would have to pay to the claimant if they were unsuccessful in defending their case. Time-sensitive reporting is also hindered when a SLAPP is issued, as it prevents the journalist from revealing critical information while the case is ongoing. We cannot accept that chilling effect on public interest journalism and the prevention of other information in the public interest seeing the light of day.

To their credit, the previous Government introduced legislation to tackle SLAPPs that relate to economic crime in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, which received Royal Assent towards the end of last year. We supported the SLAPPs provisions in the Act in opposition, and I am proud that we are the first country to legislate against SLAPPs at national level. The Act introduced a statutory definition of a SLAPP and required the Civil Procedure Rule Committee to develop a new early dismissal process to strike out SLAPPs without merit, and to develop rules providing cost protection for defendants who are subject to a SLAPP.

I thank the CPRC's SLAPPs sub-committee, which has been working hard on developing these rules. We expect its work to conclude early next year. The CPRC will then consider the matter, and once recommendations are adopted there will be clear court procedure in place to deal with these abusive lawsuits where they relate to allegations of economic crime. The measures will go some way towards tackling this abusive practice.

The Government understand that SLAPP claims are used to suppress public interest information beyond just economic crime. We have heard many examples today that illustrate the range of subjects they can cover. The right balance has to be struck between access to justice and the right to free speech. There will always be legitimate defamation claims, and any intervention must be proportionate and targeted appropriately. I am clear that this is a complex area and we should not legislate in haste, only to find ourselves with unworkable legislation with unintended consequences. We do not currently intend to legislate in this parliamentary session, but we are continuing our work to consider how best to tackle wider abuses of the system in the longer term.

**Dr Mullan:** I welcome that general commitment. Apologies if the Minister was going to come on to it, but could she explain why, when Labour was content with the legislation drawn up in the private Member's Bill, it now feels it is too complicated and unbalanced, and cannot be implemented?

**Heidi Alexander:** The hon. Gentleman pre-empts the next section of my speech. We saw, during the passage of the private Member's Bill before it fell on Prorogation, that there are strong and differing views on SLAPPs. I understand that there were still unresolved issues before Prorogation. The former Member for Caerphilly, Wayne David, the promoter the Bill, was a very good friend to me when I was previously in this House. I know there are current Members who would like me to just pick up where he left off, but I do not think it is quite as simple

as that. I have read *Hansard* carefully and deliberately to ensure that I am aware of views across the House on this topic. I will also be meeting colleagues from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Home Office shortly to ensure we have a robust and joined-up response across Government.

This is an important and complex issue, where fundamental principles of free speech and justice are at play, so it is imperative that we take the time to get this right. Our immediate focus, therefore, will be on the implementation of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act provisions. Our future approach to SLAPPs reform will be informed by monitoring the operation of the new procedural rules when they come in. We continue to build our evidence base, taking into account the views of stakeholders that were raised during debates on the private Member's Bill. I also invite parliamentarians to continue engagement with us as we consider longer-term options to tackle SLAPPs beyond economic crime.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** As well as the legislative measures that were to be taken forward through Wayne David's Bill, non-legislative measures were being developed through the SLAPPs taskforce. Could the Minister say whether that is still continuing?

**Heidi Alexander:** The right hon. Gentleman also pre-empted the next part of my speech. I am very happy to tell the House that I am keen to consider a range of non-legislative measures—procedural measures in the court—while not ruling out the possibility of legislation in future, but I want to take time to look at what options will work best.

As I said, we are also paying close attention to evolving approaches to SLAPPs in other jurisdictions, notably following the adoption of the Council of Europe's recommendations on SLAPPs, which were concluded last year.

Legislation is not the only weapon in our arsenal to deal with abuse of the system. The Solicitors Regulation Authority has already taken action. Its updated warning notice on SLAPPs in May this year reminded solicitors and law firms of their duties and the serious consequences of breaches of those duties, with new fining powers of up to £25,000 when a regulated firm or individual does not meet its professional standards. The SRA also published guidance for members of the public who may have been targeted by a SLAPP, including details of how to report the activity so it can be investigated and dealt with promptly. Up until May this year, the SRA had received a total of 71 reports on SLAPPs, and two cases have been referred to the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal. We remain engaged with legal service regulators on this important subject. I am clear that where UK law firms or practitioners are accused of breaching their duties, it is important that regulators can hold them to account and tackle poor conduct. I therefore welcome the work of the SRA in doing that.

The SLAPPs taskforce, referred to by the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), was, as he will know, launched in September last year to support journalists who are working to investigate and publish stories in the public interest. The taskforce sits within the framework of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, and has worked on non-legislative measures

to protect public interest journalism from SLAPPs, alongside the measures in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act. The DCMS is engaged on this issue. The Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), will be meeting members of the SLAPPs taskforce later this month to discuss progress, including how data collection and sharing has improved understanding of the prevalence of SLAPPs experienced by the media profession.

I am confident in the careful and considered approach that this Government are taking to the issue of SLAPPs. It is important that we listen closely to the differing views on this topic and that any action we take is proportionate. That involves considering a range of options for longer-term reform that accounts for the diversity of views expressed by stakeholders and those targeted by these abhorrent actions.

To echo the Prime Minister, behaviour that makes use of SLAPPs is intolerable and we will tackle it to protect investigative journalism and free speech, while also ensuring access to justice. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset for championing this critical issue and all those who tirelessly campaign against abuse of our legal system and for freedom of speech. Nothing could be more important.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** To wind up this afternoon's first debate, I call Lloyd Hatton.

3.15 pm

**Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): I want to wind up the debate by thanking the many Members on both sides of the House for their thoughtful and constructive contributions. I thank the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), the hon. Members for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy), for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry), for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan).

It was clear from all those contributions that in this House there is a broad consensus about the need for an overhaul of our approach to SLAPPs, in both a legislative and a regulatory sense. Indeed, for once, there appears to be an outbreak of agreement in the Chamber that something must be done. It was useful to hear from the Minister, therefore, that she and the Prime Minister understand that this is important. We cannot allow the scandal of SLAPPs to go unchallenged any longer. Sadly, things have moved too slowly for too long. This is an opportunity for us to work together, on both sides of the House, to finally put the issue to bed, once and for all.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House recognises the impact of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) on the publication of stories in the public interest; acknowledges that most cases of SLAPPs do not reach the courts, but are blocked or changed at an



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earlier, unseen stage; further recognises the importance of disclosing suppressed stories under parliamentary privilege in order to highlight the broader impact of legal threats on free speech; further acknowledges efforts made to tackle SLAPPs through the Economic Crime and Transparency Act 2023; and calls on the Government to introduce comprehensive anti-SLAPP legislation that provides swift dismissal of such cases, protects those targeted from prohibitive legal costs, and ensures that SLAPP filers face significant financial deterrents.

## International Men's Day

3.17 pm

**Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Men's Day, issues affecting boys' and men's health and wellbeing and gender equality.

I thank members of the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and the 22 Members across five parties who supported the application. I have a confession to make: being new to this place, I did not know when I applied for the debate that the convention was that I would be the first speaker. However, it is an honour to open this debate marking International Men's Day, which took place on Tuesday of this week. I hope that I am able to give a voice to some of the men and boys in the area that I represent, who may feel powerless and unheard.

My second confession is that this is the first time I have ever spoken publicly about the health and wellbeing of men and boys specifically. I am unashamedly feminist. My work before coming to this place was in international development, including supporting women's empowerment projects in northern Ghana and research on gender and education in Rwanda. On a recent International Women's Day, I was in the Central African Republic to meet and seek international support for women leaders of the interfaith platform, who courageously work together to promote peace. In the UK, I have supported initiatives to break down barriers to girls entering science, technology, engineering and maths, and I am proud to belong to a party that is working to close the gender pay gap and setting a national mission to halve violence against women and girls.

Gender inequality, as we all know, has long been seen through the lens of women's struggles, and rightly so. Women have fought tirelessly for equality of opportunity and freedom from violence and discrimination, but when I meet and listen to my constituents, there are also undeniable challenges that specifically impact the health, wellbeing and life outcomes of boys and men. These are raised with me by women as well as men, because nobody fights for their sons more than mums.

May I be clear at the outset of this debate that International Men's Day is not a call to diminish the importance of women's rights, nor to overshadow the progress made in gender equality for all? Rather, it is about recognising that gender inequality harms everyone—men and boys as well as women and girls. Men are more likely to die prematurely, more likely to develop alcohol addiction, more likely to be homeless, more likely to take their own life, more likely to be sent to prison and more likely to be a victim of violent crime.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for securing this debate. He is right to highlight the issue of suicide. More young men under the age of 18 commit suicide in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Over the past five years, suicides of young men number almost 5,000. That is worrying and very concerning. I have a quick question for the hon. Member. Men's sheds across the country are a great help. The one at the Glen community association in Newtownards directly helps young men and teenagers—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. Mr Shannon, interventions must be shorter than that. There will be plenty of opportunity to make a contribution, should you so wish, during the debate.

**Sam Rushworth:** I welcome the hon. Member's intervention. I will come on to talk about men's sheds—I met representatives of the Men's Sheds Association on Tuesday in Speaker's House.

Men are, indeed, more likely to take their own life. Boys are more likely to be excluded from school, and they are underachieving compared with girls at every level of education. That is because gender inequality is not only structural—by which I mean an unequal division of power and resources as assigned through our rules and institutions—but cultural. It is embedded in social attitudes and expectations around manhood and womanhood. It is here where gender inequality really harms men and boys.

I also recognise, as I attempt to frame this debate, that men, like women, are diverse. There is more than one way of being male. I refer here not only to sexuality, but to binary ideas of how men should behave. If Members were to visit my home on a summer night, they might find Mrs Rushworth in the garden lighting the barbecue and me in the kitchen preparing the salad. If they were to visit in the winter, they might find her bleeding the radiators while I am singing a lullaby to settle one of our children in bed. International Men's Day is an opportunity to celebrate male diversity and to promote kinder, more emotionally connected and liberated versions of masculinity as positive male role models for boys.

I wish to focus the rest of my remarks on two concerning by-products of gender inequality that are prevalent in my constituency of Bishop Auckland—men's mental health and the concerning rise of male suicide, particularly among young men, and boys' underachievement at school—and why we must tackle those issues head-on for the benefit of both sexes.

The crisis in men's mental health is one of the most significant issues of our time. It negatively impacts not only on the individuals concerned, but on their relationships with family, friends and work colleagues and, tragically, it is increasingly leading to suicide. In the UK, men are three times more likely to die by suicide than women, and it is now the leading cause of death of men under 50. The contributing factors are multiple and include debt, addiction, family breakdown and unfair deprivation of access to children, but what seems to compound all of them is loneliness and a sense of being trapped carrying burdens alone. Too often, the societal expectation that men be stoic, strong and emotionless leads to a suppression of feelings. From a young age, boys are taught to man up, to hide vulnerability and to suppress their emotions. That is a damaging narrative that not only impedes emotional wellbeing, but stifles open conversations about physical and mental health.

I pay tribute to the excellent organisations that are working to provide men and boys with the tools and space to talk openly about their feelings, without fear of judgment or stigma. One of them was mentioned a moment ago: this week, I met Rob Lloyd and John Latchford from Men's Sheds, which provides spaces for men to come together and work on crafts, while developing friendships and a mutual support network. Another great example, which I am sure all Members will be familiar with in their constituencies, is Andy's Man Club, which

has groups all over the country that are helping to end the stigma around men's mental health through the power of conversation.

A similar organisation in my constituency in south Durham is ManHealth, which works to raise awareness of and improve men's physical and mental health. It organises men's walks and peer support groups, which meet weekly. I attended one recently in my constituency, and found a group of men from all walks of life sat together in a circle. The session started with each man taking it in turns to update the group on their week, beginning by saying how they felt on a scale of one to 10. I sat listening, touched by the openness of those who were sharing, and the non-judgmental kindness of those listening and offering support.

Then the group leader came to me and asked, "Well, Sam, where are you this week?" I froze briefly, contemplating how I should respond. Do I quickly say something positive and move on, or should I be honest and make myself vulnerable? Do I tell the truth, that this week I am a five—not quite rock bottom but feeling little joy in life? Do I admit how anxious and out of place I have felt in my new role, how the online abuse that all MPs receive secretly gets to me, and how I lie awake at night feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge of meeting my voters' expectations? "Five." I did it—I shared. And although I had feared that these men might struggle to relate to me, as a Member of this place, I found understanding nods and expressions of appreciation. It also lifted my spirits to be able to visit each of them one by one, and listen to the particular stories that they wanted to share with me. That is the thing about peer support: it is in the giving as well as in the receiving that people feel empowered.

**Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab):** On behalf of the whole House, may I say that my hon. Friend is doing an exceptional job? We should acknowledge the importance of men being positive role models for other men. Does he agree that some of the situations he describes leave young men vulnerable to nefarious role models—online role models, and so on—and that all of us older men have a duty to provide opportunities to talk, and positive role models for younger men?

**Sam Rushworth:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Before coming to this place, I used to tutor for the Brilliant Club in several schools in the north-east and would often have conversations with my students. One course that I taught was about the prevention of genocide, and it touched on issues of identity-based violence and discrimination. Very often, the girls would enter a conversation about the sorts of misogynist comments that they received, and their experiences of sexual assault by boys in their class who were influenced by so-called online influencers—to name and shame one, Andrew Tate seems to be having a really pernicious influence on many boys, and seems to promote a version of masculinity that I believe is deeply harmful, both to boys and to the girls whom they then interact with. That was an excellent intervention.

The crisis in men's mental health and wellbeing has its roots in the crisis in boys' mental health and wellbeing. In 2020, 122 boys aged 10 to 19 died by suicide. An analysis by Childline found that, despite having more than double the suicide rate, only one boy for every five girls talks about mental health to Childline, and they

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are even less likely to contact the service when they have suicidal thoughts. Boys as well as men appear to be suffering in silence.

Health and wellbeing are intrinsically linked to the ability to learn. Nationally, girls are outperforming boys at every level of education from primary school through to university. In the north-east, we have the lowest GCSE grades anywhere in the country, particularly among boys. Of course, it did not used to be this way. Back in the '70s, it was the other way round, and there was alarm at the fact that boys were outperforming girls. Significant studies done at that time explored things such as language and space in the classroom and the way that boys would dominate conversation. When I visit schools today, I see the reverse: boys who are suppressed and do not feel able to speak freely. There is much evidence that that is not a uniform picture, and there are examples of schools where boys are not underperforming, so we know it is avoidable and preventable.

To pick up the point we heard a moment ago, research shows that boys need to have positive role models. That does not just mean fathers and male teachers, although that is important; it could mean older boys in the school being given responsibility to act as peer mentors to younger boys. There is evidence of unconscious bias in teaching staff, which we need to get rid of. We need to raise expectations, because the schools that do well establish a culture of high expectations among boys.

We need to take seriously who and what is influencing boys. When I was growing up in the '90s, it was more or less taken for granted that we were in an age of progress, where our generation of young men were growing up with more respect for women and with more progressive values. Again, to reference the growing move to the far right and the misogynistic values being spread online, that progress is now in reverse. We need to guard against those behaviours by boys online.

Another significant intervention that I will promote in other parts of my work in Parliament is a much earlier focus on social emotional learning in schools. We need children to grow up learning to recognise, understand and regulate their emotions and to find better or appropriate ways to express them. They need to learn greater self-awareness, social awareness and empathy for others. People are not born with these skills; these are skills they develop and from an early age based on the sorts of role models and interaction that children experience at home and in the classroom. The Welsh Government and the Mayor of Manchester are good examples of those actively rolling out programmes in schools that focus on children's social emotional learning.

I will leave my remarks there because I have talked for long enough, and I am conscious of leaving time for colleagues to make their important contributions to the debate and add to the points I have raised. I thank everyone for convening to discuss the issues. I hope that as a House we can take these issues seriously and it will not just be a debate but something that leads to meaningful change.

3.33 pm

**Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) on securing the debate. Madam Deputy

Speaker, where is everybody? Nobody is on the Conservative Benches, besides the Opposition Whip. I am surprised to see empty Benches on the Conservative side of the House. I am sure the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), will give a great speech, but she should not have to hold it all down by herself.

International Men's Day started in 1992 in Trinidad and Tobago, and we started debating International Men's Day in the House in 2015. I thought it was important to attend today, because it is not a competition. I always attend the International Women's Day debate, and my fighting for the rights of women does not in any way negate my fighting for the rights of men. It is important that we campaign, so it would have been nice to see more people in the Chamber. I get a lot of misogynistic abuse online from people who say, "Why don't we have an International Men's Day?" Well, we are having an International Men's Day debate, and the House is not full.

This is a great time to talk about the many men's charities that do amazing work. In my Brent East constituency, we have BoyztoMEN, Moving on Up, 100 Black Men of London, Men United, Making the Leap and the Social Wellness Club. We also have a lot of barbers who do lots of great work. The men and boys who go for haircuts are encouraged to talk and have debates. They are not always great debates—I am not saying that they always make sense—but customers are encouraged to talk and share. There is a particularly good barber shop in Brent called Faisal Barbers. It teaches the young men things such as timekeeping; they have to arrive on time or they cannot get their hair cut. All those kinds of soft skills are important in later life. I like to highlight that shop because even during the pandemic it had debates about covid, keeping safe and getting the vaccination. That was important.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland said, there is a growing range of charities, including Men's Sheds, Andy's Man Club, Prostate Cancer UK, which is doing a lot of work, Harry's Hikes, WalkKing Men and many more. It is important to encourage those organisations. This year, there are three key themes for International Men's Day: making a positive difference to wellbeing and lives, raising awareness of and funds for charities supporting men and boy's wellbeing, and promoting a positive conversation about men, manhood and masculinity.

My hon. Friend mentioned manhood and masculinity. I will talk more about that today. We know that a lot of the way in which society runs is centred on men—from how clothes are made for emergency service workers, to language—so it stands to reason that, for equity purposes, there has to be more of a focus on women. However, as I said, that does not come at the exclusion of men. Being a man is not about being strong and silent—that is very old thinking. We need to encourage more men to speak up and speak out. When it comes to health, 12,000 men die of prostate cancer every year—one every 45 minutes—one in five UK men do not live to the age of 65, and 14 men die by suicide every day. That is an alarming number; there is a continued crisis in male suicide, which is the leading cause of death for men under 50.

I believe that there is a direct correlation between the increase in mental ill health among men and the growth in the number of involuntary celibates, or incels. That growing and worrying underground movement of young men is defined by a misogyny that believes that men



have lost the genetic lottery and are destined to fail with women. Incels are often poorly educated boys and men, and they justify violence against women via their ideological stances. It is important that we tackle that crisis head-on and send a strong message from this House that incels are not in any way a good representation of a good man.

Women are not the enemy. One woman is killed every three days by a man, so we need men to speak up and speak out. We need men to be louder than the toxic men on social media who have huge platforms. We need men to speak louder than the men with power, the men in power and some of the men who are soon to get power. We have a lot of work to do. Some 20% of incels contemplate suicide every day. There are well-documented terrorist attacks and mass killings by incels. International Men's Day is important for everyone. The world will be safer if we all work together to respect each other and make sure that we are all kept safe.

I will end with a quote by Alex Karras, who said:

"It takes more courage to reveal insecurities than to hide them, more strength to relate to people than to dominate them, more 'manhood' to abide by thought-out principles rather than blind reflex. Toughness is in the soul and spirit, not in muscles and an immature mind."

3.40 pm

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I rise to balance the Benches and stand up for men—Members on the Government Benches cannot have it all their own way. Hon. Members may not be wholly surprised to know that I did not originally intend to make a speech in this debate, but I will add a short one in support of the community sheds and men's sheds in my constituency of Broadland and Fakenham. I most recently visited the Aylsham men's shed, about two weeks ago, which welcomes women as well as men.

I have been very interested to hear some of the comments made by hon. and right hon. Members this afternoon, and I have learned a lot. This debate has helped me to reflect on what it means to be a man. I stand before you, Madam Deputy Speaker, comfortable in my cardigan. That is one form of manhood, but that is probably stretching it a little. Slightly more seriously, I look at my relationships with my wider friendship group and compare them with those of my wife, who is brilliant at communicating and at the small acts of kindness and connection that go into making a personal community as well as a corporate community—a community around the village and school relationships.

Compare me with my wife, and I am found wholly wanting; I fit all the stereotypes. Why use a sentence when a single word will do to communicate? Why pick up with old friends when I can ignore them for a few more years? That is fine when things are going well, but as men we are too often found bereft of support when things go badly. Heaven forbid, if my wife were to fall under a bus, I would be devastated—she is the best thing that has ever happened to me—and the community support that I take for granted because of her involvement in my life and my family would be removed. All too often, men are left exposed. I do not quite know why it is, but we seem to be less good at and less prepared to focus on and invest time in the soft relationships that go into making that cobweb and network of community touchpoints that makes us strong. It makes us be here for each other.

I have learned a lot in this debate; I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee and to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for organising it. I have already name-checked the Aylsham community shed, but I will finish by name-checking the Brundall men's shed, which I have visited a couple of times. It is easy to think that these organisations tend to be used by men who are my age and above, but actually they welcome young men and men of all ages. One of their great strengths is that they not only bring men together, but start challenging some of the age exclusions that we have too often in our communities and bring people of whatever age into a comfortable, welcoming and friendly environment. That is exactly what it is about—whenever I go to a men's shed or a community shed, I feel welcome. It feels like a comfortable environment where we are accepted for who we are and what we can bring.

The sheds are a wonderful series of organisations. One of their strengths is that they do not rely on the state for funding; they are community organisations that have come up from below and support themselves in both their direction and funding. However, there is one area in which they really rely on the community, which is quite difficult in some circumstances, and that is in the provision of accommodation. The Aylsham community shed is in a shared space in the high school, which is great but brings challenges, because it has to pack everything away at 3 pm. The Brundall men's shed is in an extra part of a boat shed, which again means that it is forever reliant on the good will of the wider community. While that good will is there, the organisations can flourish. If I have one message for the wider community, it is to support men's sheds, provide them with space and get behind them.

3.44 pm

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) on securing today's debate, and on the tone and sentiment of his message. This is not about undermining International Women's Day; it is a chance to highlight positive images of masculinity and to raise awareness of issues that affect men almost exclusively.

First, I want to talk about a problem that affects many men in every part of our country: the impact of prostate cancer. Last week, I was delighted to join my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary at an event with Prostate Cancer Research, highlighting the vital importance of screening for a cancer that impacts one in eight men and is second only to lung cancer as a cause of death in men. As we know, early diagnosis of prostate cancer is essential. Diagnosis at stages 1 to 3 results in a five-year survival rate of almost 100%, but if a diagnosis does not occur until stage 4—where the cancer has spread beyond the prostate—that rate halves to 50%. At Barts Health NHS trust, 17% of men with prostate cancer are only diagnosed at stage 4. We need to bring that proportion down, both locally and across the country, but sadly, that figure has been going in the wrong direction.

Not all of us face the same risk of prostate cancer. Geographically, late diagnosis is concentrated in some areas, such as Scotland and the north-east of England. Areas of higher deprivation tend to have lower access to diagnosis, and despite having a much higher diagnosis

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rate, black men are 2.5 times more likely to die from prostate cancer than white men. That shows that diagnosis is not the whole story—we need action to improve access to the right treatment as well—so I would be grateful for anything the Minister can say about the Government's plan to improve access to screening and reduce those disproportionate impacts for black men. The need for faster diagnosis and more effective treatment of prostate cancer is a serious problem for men, and I am looking forward to addressing that in the coming months through the newly formed all-party parliamentary group.

I also want to talk about another problem that men do not have, which is worries about equality. Yesterday was Equal Pay Day, the day on which the average woman stops earning compared with the average man. That is something that we should all want to remedy, not just because equal pay for work is a basic fairness, but because our economy and society work much better when all our contributions are valued properly. Sadly, however, teachers in Leyton and Wanstead tell me that male students now regularly question the basic idea of equal pay between men and women. This will be an increasingly familiar point to colleagues across the House, but I believe that as a society, we are only just starting to wake up to the threat created by far-right online influencers who weaponise masculinity.

Positive examples of masculinity are not hard to find. We had plenty of them at the prostate cancer event last week, and I had plenty of them in the Royal Air Force. Many boys and men have no need of masculinity; there is no need to hold a narrow few up as paragons of decency and manliness for all to imitate. Those Members who are not aware should know that I led the evacuation of Kabul—I was in charge of the air forces that flew 14,500 people out of Kabul a couple of years ago. In the documentaries that were made and some of the television interviews I gave afterwards—one in particular—I may have broken down in tears, alongside a friend of mine, a guy called Sergeant Andy Livingstone. He stepped forward to cradle a young child when its exhausted mother collapsed during one of the evacuation flights. What horrified me afterwards was that there were articles and discussions not about “person finds upsetting event upsetting”, but simply about the fact that someone deemed to be in a position of power who was a man had shown some emotions.

It is clear that the challenges faced by young men are exposing them to radicalisation, including misogyny, racism and homophobia.

**Lola McEvoy** (Darlington) (Lab): I just want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for raising this matter and to my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for securing this debate, and to say on record that I, and I am sure the rest of the House, think they are both amazing role models for young men watching this debate.

**Mr Bailey:** That is very kind; I might start crying.  
[Laughter.]

We should all understand that those challenges for young men include the legacy of isolation from the pandemic, a fragmented and divided society, understandably

low trust in our media and social institutions, a lack of hope for the future given the dire economic growth, and the housing crisis they have grown up with their whole lives. Addressing these problems of restoring hope and trust are core objectives of our mission-led Government, and these challenges are faced by all our young people.

Therefore, in my view, the major difference in radicalisation is not a greater gender rift across our society. It is that young men and boys are specifically being targeted by extremists and grifters. We should be clear how pathetic these commenters are: they are parasites and predators who exploit and amplify anxieties that are normal for young people. It is totally normal for teenagers to have some concern about body image, their love lives and how they fit into peer groups and wider society. It is equally normal for young people to rebel, and to want to think for themselves and to establish their own identity. What is not normal is for these anxieties to be fuelled, exploited and channelled into totally unhealthy obsessions and bigotry. Setting men and boys against women and girls, against each other, and against the institutions that hold our liberal democracy together is unacceptable.

As a society, we need to recognise this threat and to defend all our young people from it. We know that young people, but primarily boys, are starting out in entirely benign places such as a history channel on YouTube or a gaming forum, and are rapidly being pushed into spaces where extremist predators dominate. Most of all, we need to get serious about the regulation of the spaces in which these extremist influences thrive. We need to make it clear to social media platforms that if they continue using algorithms that are destructive to our social fabric, fuel violence against women and girls and are harmful to our young people, they will face the consequences.

3.53 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for securing this important debate. As we know, International Men's Day was on Tuesday. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) talked about his service and the horrors of war, and Tuesday also marked 1,000 days since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I want to put on record my thanks to all the men serving on the frontline in Ukraine, and to those who have been injured or lost their lives in that awful conflict.

Many important men's issues have been raised, and I am in agreement with much of the sentiment of the debate, particularly on the issues of health and the dangers of social media platforms. However, this debate should be inclusive of all men, and I want to affirm that trans men are men. I would like to commemorate the Transgender Day of Remembrance, which was yesterday, which is an opportunity for us to honour those murdered as a result of transphobia and the many more who have died by suicide. This includes many trans men, and the issues we have heard debated today, including mental health and suicide, are experienced by trans men.

**Dawn Butler:** Does my hon. Friend agree that trans men are often missed out of the trans debate, that they are also subjected to some really cruel behaviour and often suffer violence, such as rape, and that that is under-reported?

**Alex Sobel:** I absolutely acknowledge that and will be coming on to some of those issues in my speech.

Men and boys face incessant pressures to live up to myths and stereotypes about what masculinity is and what being a man is. There is a fracture between the images we see in films and television of what being a man looks like and the qualities we promote and value in our male role models. As we know, this gap is dangerous: it has made men vulnerable to increased mental health problems and death by suicide. Debates such as ours today help us understand the range of experiences of, and differences between, men across the world. So I thank everyone for being here and for their honesty.

I want to use this opportunity to talk about the unique issues trans men and transmasculine people face in the UK. I am not an expert by any means, but I do know that addressing the significant marginalisation of trans men and transmasculine people benefits everybody. I want to thank all those who have educated me and continue to do so. TransActual, for example, has been doing fantastic advocacy work in Parliament, with a drop-in just last week.

Transmasculine people have historically faced erasure and a lack of representation in society and continue to do so. They are largely invisible in the media, on TV and in films, whereas we see a hyper-fixation on trans women in certain parts of the media. As a result there is a big gap in understanding the material issues that transmasculine people face. It means their access to healthcare is poor, and they face an increased risk of abuse, including domestic violence and, of course, transphobia. In the world of sport, for example, gender-critical feminists are expressing high levels of concern at the possibility of including trans women and are fighting for this same exclusion of trans women across other sex-segregated spaces, but there is silence surrounding the experiences of trans men in these same conversations.

This erasure leads to dangerous myths developing about the experiences of trans men and a reluctance of people to try to access support or feel part of the community. TransActual told me that generally trans men are less likely to respond to surveys, despite the most recent census revealing there are largely equal numbers of trans men and women in the UK. We must really listen to trans men and transmasculine people's needs and feelings to even begin to improve wellbeing and liberation.

Trans men and transmasculine people face a number of barriers in accessing equal quality healthcare on the NHS. Waiting lists to receive top surgery on the NHS are now in excess of four to five years just for a consultation in England, and waiting lists are growing. This leaves a situation where trans men and transmasculine individuals are forced to pay for private care, which not everyone can do, or to put up with dysphoria and the associated mental health impacts, for which there is a sector-wide lack of support and training. Top surgery drastically improves wellbeing and saves lives; it is not just something that is "nice to have" for transmasculine people.

Across the NHS there needs to be a greater awareness of trans men and transmasculine people who have given birth. If, for example, a trans man is not asked whether he could be pregnant before receiving a dose of radiation, there could be serious consequences. We can begin by removing gendered vocabulary from pregnancy care

and parenthood. In the well-known situation of Freddy McConnell, for example, he was unable to be listed as his child's father. The High Court ruled that even though he was considered a man by law and had a gender recognition certificate to prove it, he could not appear on his child's birth certificate as "father" or even "parent".

The same problems occur in access to cervical cancer treatment. Currently, any trans man or non-binary person with a male sex marker on their NHS record will not be included in the recall system. In this area, the law is all over the place, and there needs to be more input from trans people themselves. By moving to a greater awareness, we can significantly improve health outcomes for all men.

Male privilege—patriarchy—is bad for men. By speaking out about the varied experiences of men, we will all become more liberated. Gender diversity is a gift, and to truly expand how society understands masculinity we must bring together everybody's experiences.

3.58 pm

**Lola McEvoy** (Darlington) (Lab): I rise to speak on this issue because my views have evolved, as we are all on a journey. It is because I am a woman and a feminist that I care so deeply about supporting men and boys.

As a woman, I care about women's rights, and I have raised, and will continue to raise, the voices of women who are mistreated. That does not exclude me from caring about the unique set of issues facing men and boys in our society; it drives me to take action on them. The struggle for equality is a struggle for all of us to be treated fairly, with equity of opportunity and access to the support we need for our unique challenges. I am determined to use my platform to improve the lives of men and boys in my community, who are frankly desperately in need of our help.

We have reached a fork in the road, and this new Government can deliver for men and women without competition. It is time to change the conversation to prioritise policy and legislation, based not on what those with the loudest voice want, but on our shared vision for the society we want our children to inherit. In my area, that means tackling the drivers of male suicide. Suicide among men is tearing through my community in Darlington and our wider region. The north-east has the highest rate of death by suicide in England, and it has the lowest wages. Local grassroots groups are doing incredible work in rising to tackle that challenge in the absence of other support.

Just last week, I attended a fundraiser in my community. It was called "Strictly Step by Step", and it was run by lots of grassroots, lived experience charities. They put forward one man from each charity to take part in a "Strictly Come Dancing" tribute. These men were asked to leave their pride at the door and prance about in the name of progress on men's mental health. It was fantastic to take such a difficult subject and turn it into something utterly uplifting, and that was progress in and of itself. However, the message was clear: men need to talk, and when they ask for help, they must be able to receive it, because the lag in them seeking support is so long that it means when they do ask for it, it is at a crisis point.

I want to put on record in this debate how honoured I am to be able to advocate for the memory of so many I have never met and in memory of too many I have known. I also pay tribute to those who are taking their



[Lola McEvoy]

personal pain and turning it into progress for others. I hope that Tracey and David, the parents of Dyllon and Quinn; Hilary, the mother of George; Harvey's dad Michael; and those in ManHealth, Engage and Andy's Man Club, who are leading in our area, can take a small amount of comfort from knowing how much I and our wider community value their work.

I am determined to use my time in this place to improve and drive suicide prevention strategies, employment opportunities in our area, mental health support, paternity rights, online safety and veteran support services. All those issues, if not tackled, will continue to push men and boys into crisis. I finish on this point: as a woman, I know what it is like to have to struggle to get a fair deal, and because of that I am determined that we do not allow a lost generation of our men and boys.

4.2 pm

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): International Men's Day UK seeks to promote a positive conversation about men, manhood and masculinity. I believe that we need to debate definitions of masculinity, because outdated social mores about masculinity still all too often permeate society and influence boys' and men's behaviour. We need to challenge stereotypes. Being a strong male should not equate to being unkind, nor should it equate to eschewing creativity or hiding one's feelings.

I will provide a couple of examples, one from the distant past and one from the more recent past. Perhaps we should remember, as we hold this debate, that knights, princes and kings of old were expected to be poets, musicians, dancers, linguists and much more, as well as soldiers, leaders and so on. It was not one or the other. More recently, not many people know that our current Special Air Service, the best special forces in the world—alongside the Special Boat Service, in case any of them are watching—comprises 21 SAS Regiment (Artists), a regiment of the Army Reserve. The reference to artists is because a volunteer regiment was formed in the 19th century named the Middlesex Rifle Volunteer Corps (Artists). More latterly, it was the Artists Rifles. Formed of painters, sculptors, musicians, architects, engravers and actors, it was tough and creative. Its enlisted men and officers fought in the second Boer war and the first world war. After the second world war, the Artists Rifles was renamed as 21 SAS (Artists) Volunteers.

It is vital that we challenge stereotypes not just as some academic thought experiment, but because the effect on boys and men of misplaced conceptions about manhood can be horrific for their mental health. Men, sadly, accounted for three quarters of suicides in 2023, with 4,506 tragedies—17.4 deaths per 100,000, which was the highest level since 1999. That is horrific. It is tragic for the individuals and their friends and families, and it is also unnecessary.

I want to touch on an example from Rugby where men are getting together to do something about that terrible situation. Back and Forth Mens Mental Health in my constituency was founded in 2023 after the suicide of a friend of one of the founder members. It is based on a simple idea: to organise regular walks for men who are struggling with all aspects of life. It has grown to have 1,700 followers in a year and has achieved charity status. Encouraging communication is at its core, because

the biggest challenge is to break down the stigma of talking about mental health and its associated social anxiety. My constituents in Rugby will benefit from its Christmas breakfast event in December, its social evenings and, of course, its walks. It also has a podcast, which is a good listen. One of its members has said:

"The group has helped me find my purpose in life again."

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for securing this important and timely debate and for his impressive speech. I also thank hon. Members across the House for their thoughtful contributions. There is so much more to do. Within this challenge it is important to redefine masculinity, it is important that we support charities that work to break the stigma around mental health, and it is important that we send a message to boys and men that kindness is a strength, admitting their feelings is a strength and being creative is a strength. Finally, they must always, always seek help—from a friend or, if needed, medical support—if their mental health is ever at risk.

4.7 pm

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for securing this really important debate. I was touched to hear his powerful speech. I want to touch on two points that he so eloquently made. First, he rightly reminded us that there are many ways to be a man and many forms of masculinity. As a young gay man growing up in Berkshire in the '90s, I struggled with that as I grew up. It took me many years to learn and feel comfortable in my own form of masculinity. I thank him for reflecting on that. I also thank him for so powerfully emphasising that gender inequality affects everyone. I do not think there can be any disagreement across the House on that important point.

International Men's Day is an opportunity to remember the dreadful health outcomes affecting too many men in society, particularly when it comes to mental and emotional health. I emphasise emotional health and will come back to that.

Other Members have raised the alarming suicide statistics for men. In England and Wales, male suicide is three times more common than among women. Last year among men aged 20 to 34, suicide was the leading cause of death, and was responsible for over a quarter of deaths of men in that age range. I mention those statistics for England and Wales largely because I could not find regional or local authority data. I am grateful to the House of Common Library for highlighting those figures, but the lack of granular data struck me as something that should be addressed.

As well as International Men's Day, on Monday we will recognise White Ribbon Day. I proudly wear my white ribbon today. The theme for this year's White Ribbon Day is "It starts with men". That is a poignant reminder that domestic violence and violence against women and girls is not just a women's issue; it is also a men's issue, and it is too often rooted in harmful masculine norms. Let me place on record the important point, which cannot be emphasised enough, that domestic abuse affects men as victims, too. It is really important that we acknowledge that.

Bracknell Forest has the highest rate of domestic abuse incidents in Berkshire. For that reason, I am grateful that this Government have set out their mission

to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. What is the connection between domestic abuse and violence against women and girls, and men's suicide? Both are proof that, too often, men do not get the support that they need. In the most extreme cases, this lack of support leads to violence against themselves and against those around them. The two issues are intrinsically linked.

Last week I was privileged to visit a fantastic local charity in my constituency, Youthline, which does amazing work offering free counselling services for children and counselling at a reduced cost for their families. I was fascinated to hear about the support that it offers young people dealing with complex emotional difficulties. I am sure that everyone in this House would agree that even the most loved and nourished child can face emotional difficulties growing up. It is a difficult time for the best of us—I should rephrase that; for those in the best circumstances—but for those facing challenges, it is often a hopelessly difficult time of life. Three quarters of the users of that service are girls. I was told that, too often, boys are referred to that fantastic service not to support their mental or emotional health but because of behaviour issues—because of a perception that they are misbehaving—when the root cause of that is a failure to support them through difficult emotional and mental health.

I was also privileged to visit a fantastic youth club in my constituency, The Wayz. The staff talked to me about the work that they do to support girls and boys to engage with the difficulties of growing up. They poignantly reminded me that, sometimes, boys find it harder to talk, so giving them the space to do so—often through activities rather than direct conversation—can have a real, positive impact on outcomes for young boys.

Prevention is always more effective than intervention—that is such an important point. With that in mind, it is welcome to see the Government's work to bring more mental health services into the community and focus on prevention, with an additional 8,500 mental health workers promised by this Government. I would welcome an update from the Minister on the delivery of those additional mental health workers. Fundamentally, what we must do to support boys and men with their mental and emotional health is provide the spaces for them to talk through their issues in a way that supports them.

Others have mentioned the fantastic work of Andy's Man Club. Very early in my time as a Member of Parliament, I was privileged to be invited to attend one of its meetings, as was my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth). Like him, I was deeply touched and moved by the marvellous work that it did in my community to reach men who have for too long been failed by a system that is not well geared to listening to them and encouraging them to talk about their difficulties. What I found most affecting was seeing that the service was being delivered not by trained mental health professionals, but by other men who had experienced similar difficulties in talking and sharing their emotional problems. They were supporting each other through their mental health struggles. It was a powerful reminder of the need for us all to provide and support the spaces that are needed to allow such important conversations to take place.

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

4.15 pm

**Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) was extremely eloquent, especially at the beginning of his speech when he described the work that he had done in other countries and in the UK to address inequality, acknowledged the gender pay gap and the violence perpetrated against women and girls by men, and explained how that did not undermine the need to discuss male-specific issues on International Men's Day.

There are a great many issues that we could touch on and a number of them have been touched on by various Members, but, as the Liberal Democrat mental health spokesperson, I will focus primarily on that subject. Men are three times more likely than women to die by suicide. Since 1981, the suicide rate among women has approximately halved, but it has fallen by only 9% among men. A related fact is that at any given time, 12.5% of men have a mental health disorder. Men are twice as likely to die of alcohol-specific causes and about twice as likely to have substance abuse problems, they are less likely to have equal access to children, and 82% of rough sleepers are men—partly owing to mental as well as physical health issues.

I want to pay tribute to some amazing charities in Winchester. Emmaus Hampshire, the Winchester Beacon and Trinity Winchester are homelessness charities that work hard to ensure that homeless people have a safe place and support, can get back on their feet rather than being stuck out on the street, and can engage with social services. The staff, volunteers and other supporters—including the council—do an incredible job. Tomorrow I will be visiting Trinity Winchester with another charity called StreetVet, whose vets treat the dogs belonging to homeless people. This is not primarily an animal welfare issue. Homeless people with dogs are much less likely to take part in risk-taking behaviour, much more likely to engage with social services, and much more likely to get off the streets more quickly. These are multifactorial and complex issues, which almost always include a mental health factor, but there are many different ways in which we can come together to address them. One thing that has struck me is the fact that we are all much closer to becoming homeless than we are to becoming millionaires, regardless of our status in life.

Another organisation that I want to talk about is the Farming Community Network. I grew up on a small family farm in a rural area, and I now work as a vet with rural communities. We know that farmers have a very high suicide rate. Although an increasing number of women are becoming involved in farming, which is a very good thing, it is still very male-dominated. The mental health of farmers has been of specific concern for a long time.

About five years ago, I went to a Farming Community Network meeting and met a farmer from Australia who had had a mental health breakdown. He gave a talk about his journey, his mental health breakdown, how he got help and how he got through it. What really surprised me was that several hundred other farmers had turned up to hear the talk, and they all discussed mental health afterwards. A huge majority of the farmers were middle-aged or older, and I remember thinking that this showed how much progress we have made on men discussing mental health. I do not think that my father, who died a

[Dr Danny Chambers]

few years ago at the age of 83, would have ever discussed mental health. He certainly would not have talked to his friends about mental health issues or any struggles that he had. Farming is an industry where people have to be problem solvers, and they work in difficult conditions. It shapes people to be unwilling to show what they see as signs of weakness, but we know that those working in isolation and in tough situations need to rely on each other for help.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) spoke about the 12,000 men who die each year from prostate cancer. We know that mental health and prostate cancer are the two biggest issues that get discussed when we think about men and men's health. There are so many other issues as well, but those two are at the very top. I thank all the women who support men with health issues and mental health issues, because we know that women often ask men to go and get checked out when they have a health issue, and that women urge their partners or sons to go and get counselling. We know that men—I include myself—are really bad at proactively seeking help, and the nudges and support that we get from women must save so many lives.

We have talked a lot about the fact that, compared with women, men and boys currently underperform throughout their educational careers. We have also discussed the huge issues that we have with increasing radicalisation and misogyny, especially online. We have touched on people such as Andrew Tate and the effect that they have on impressionable young men who sometimes feel that they do not have the opportunities that they think they deserve. We know that throughout history, men have had more power, more access to finances and more influence than women.

On International Men's Day, and as a man who is privileged enough to be in this Chamber, I want to take this opportunity to call for more research into endometriosis. It is an underdiagnosed disease of women, and there is often a delayed diagnosis. There has not been a huge amount of research into it, and many women struggle with endometriosis in the same way that men struggle with mental health issues. As the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland pointed out, men's health issues affect women and women's affect men. We should not separate them; we should work together and make sure that we support each other, because that is what we have to do going forward.

Finally, I wish to echo other Members' comments. As someone who was a trustee of a mental health charity for seven years, I know that it is so important to talk to each other if we are struggling. I was really pleased when one of my constituents, Chris North, came up to me in the pub to say hello. He is a trustee of a charity called LooseHeadz, and he came to visit me in Parliament last week with the two founders, Dave and Rob. The charity is primarily based in rugby clubs, and its aim is to have a mental health lead in every single club. A little like farming, rugby is traditionally a fairly alpha male environment, although that is changing. The charity is aware that, if it gets into communities, teams and clubhouses—places where men go anyway—it can encourage them to open up and talk through peer-to-peer support. That is where it can make a huge difference.

Last week I met Sam Burge, a farmer from Winchester who is the local volunteer for the Farming Community Network. He talked about the importance of peer-to-peer

support, and a breakdown of the calls to the Farming Community Network reveals a variety of issues, but mental health support and mental wellbeing are at the top of the list. It is encouraging to see that initiatives such as LooseHeadz and the Farming Community Network are encouraging men to reach out for help with their mental health.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the shadow Minister.

4.25 pm

**Mims Davies** (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): As usual, a Thursday afternoon of Backbench Business debates means that we are more collegiate than ever. The debate on strategic lawsuits against public participation was extremely welcome, and I was surprised to hear how many people have been caught in that process, whether in the political arena or elsewhere.

I associate myself with the tributes paid to that titan of politics, Lord Prescott. He was revered and respected across this House, and he put the fun into politics. We have to enjoy this game occasionally.

**Dr Chambers:** I, too, pay tribute to Lord Prescott. I remember reading a newspaper article a few years ago in which he opened up about his struggle with bulimia, and how he used to eat through an entire restaurant menu, or drink condensed milk, and then go home and vomit. It must have taken a huge amount of courage, especially 15 years ago, for a former merchant seaman and boxer to talk about his struggle with an eating disorder, from which we know men also suffer. This is a good day to acknowledge the impact that his being so open must have had on the many men who have an eating disorder.

**Mims Davies:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. In my 10 years in this House, the men who have been sent to this place have made such a difference through their work in their constituencies and their surgeries. They bring that to the Chamber, and we are all the richer for it.

I thank the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for securing this Backbench Business debate. He made an excellent, thought-provoking and important opening speech, and it is a pleasure to respond on behalf of His Majesty's official and loyal Opposition.

I am pleased to chair the reconstituted all-party parliamentary group on men and boys' issues. Anyone in the Chamber who would like to join us is extremely welcome. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Nick Fletcher, who is no longer in this place. Like all the former Members who have served on the all-party parliamentary group, he really put these issues on the record. I thank the secretariat, Equi-law, for its work. Members should please join us, because there is a clear affinity.

This debate is an opportunity to thank and support our menfolk: our dads; our brothers—I am lucky to have a wonderful brother; our husbands, and sometimes even our ex-husbands—who would have thought?; our sons; our grandsons; our uncles; our grandads; our father figures; our male friends; and our male allies. As the shadow Minister for Women, I should say that our male allies do so much for women's causes, as we have heard this afternoon. Local groups really matter. On Christmas shopping night in Uckfield last year, I saw



the work of the Uckfield men's shed—this year's event is coming up shortly, and I am looking forward to seeing that again—and some of my constituents attend the Burgess Hill men's shed.

As hon. Members have mentioned, the work undertaken by many charities makes a big difference. ManKind supports male victims of domestic violence. We talked about the stigma of such abuse, but domestic violence is criminality in the home, whether the victim is male or female. It is absolutely right that we tackle that violence and criminality wherever it is found. MANUP is a great charity for male mental health. The Campaign Against Living Miserably—CALM—often supports men. Of course, it is now Movember, although I see my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) has gone further than growing just a moustache. The Movember Foundation focuses on men's mental health, as well as on prostate and testicular cancers.

We have heard some excellent speeches. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—he is no longer in his place, so perhaps he has given himself a little bit of time off—made an intervention about the impact of male suicide, especially that of young men. The hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler), who I work with on the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, talked about rights not being a zero-sum game. I am off to the hairdresser tomorrow, so I am delighted to know that the barbers in her patch are great places to share conversation, which is really important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) talked about his cardigan, as well as the importance of groups in his community. He paid tribute to the environment created by Men's Sheds. The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) talked about men's health matters, and about the bravery and powerful importance of men talking about emotion. He said that should be the norm, but it still needs to be challenged. The hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) talked about the men who have stepped up in Ukraine, the work that has to be done during war and the sacrifices that are made. He also talked about the challenges of social media and the importance of tackling transphobia.

The hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) spoke about true equality and valuing the community by the action of men. The hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger) talked about the importance of tackling male stereotypes. The hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) made a thoughtful speech about life as a young gay man. I am proud of the work done by my party, and all parties, over the past 10 years on changes in representation in this place and on equal marriage. We roundly welcome everybody, from every different background, to be part of our great political institutions.

The theme of this year's International Men's Day, on Tuesday, was positive role models. We can all think of a particular male role model in our lives—they may even be the reason we are here today. For most of us, they may be our own fathers. Academic research shows how pivotal an early role model is for children, citing positive impacts on behaviour and cognitive development.

Many hon. Members are wearing white ribbons, because White Ribbon Day is approaching. This year, its theme is preventing men's violence against women and girls—"It Starts With Men." The message is that we can address

attitudes and behaviours together, and we can effect positive behavioural change by promoting true gender equality and working together with our men and boys. Positive role models are important. It is estimated that 1 million children in the UK do not have meaningful contact—described as two or more contacts a year—with their fathers. That is deeply troubling.

It is troubling and tragic that the largest killer of men under the age of 40 is suicide. Many of us will know boys and young men who have been lost. It is important to be there to listen and to give men the opportunity to open up. We encourage and implore men and women to do that. The suicide prevention strategy set out by the previous Conservative Government for tackling suicide is a priority. The then shadow Minister said it would be a priority for any incoming Labour Government and I hope that can be reaffirmed. Will she give the House an update on any ambitions in that regard?

We have also talked today about challenging expectations of manhood. It is important to have that diversity of expectations: men at the nativity, men on the school run and men taking the lead when it comes to childcare, cleaning and household chores. I say to all ladies that that is real equality. Last year, a men's health ambassador was to be appointed to lead a taskforce to continue to look at the health issues faced by men. Can the Minister update the House on that position?

The hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) rightly pointed out the issue of farmers and loneliness. I am very proud that in government we brought forward the role of Minister for loneliness. There is the isolating struggle of working on the land and the tragic impact, when there is no support, of gambling addiction, substance abuse, divorce, relationship breakdown, bereavement and career issues; men's identities are often linked to their careers and employment opportunities. There is also the impact of money worries and job losses, and on top of that, issues around body image.

I agree that we need spaces to talk, such as Andy's Man Club, and the power of men supporting men as equally as women support women. Whether it is prostate-antigen screening and the work around prostate cancer or innovations when it comes to detection and treatment, that is very important. We also know that boys in various cohorts underperform, with low passing levels at GCSE and in higher education. It is important that social mobility and aspiration are tackled—through providing opportunity for all and particularly for white working-class boys. That is still too often left behind.

I am sure I need to close, so I will do so by commending all Members for focusing on improving the outcomes for men across their constituencies. Men and women in this world are a partnership. Our men matter—their dreams, their hopes and their goodness shine through. Their wellbeing is our wellbeing and true equality is a shared opportunity for all. It is about a shared understanding and shared success and choice. I will use my time in the House to help men and boys in my constituency to thrive. That means being able to be understood and valued on International Men's Day and beyond.

4.37 pm

**The Minister for Equalities (Dame Nia Griffith):** Before I start my speech, I would like to pay a huge tribute to Lord Prescott, even though he caused great consternation to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

(Jessica Morden) when she was standing right behind him as general secretary of Welsh Labour during a certain incident in north Wales. I am sure John would have welcomed today's debate, campaigning as tirelessly as he did to extend opportunities, champion worker's rights and, as mentioned by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), open up on his own mental health. My sincere sympathies go to his family at this time. He will be sorely missed, but fondly remembered.

We have had a very positive and constructive debate today, in that lovely consensual way on a Thursday afternoon when we look at the real issues and think how we can tackle them and what we need to do. I am pleased to respond in this debate, celebrating International Men's Day and joining 80 countries in marking the contribution that men make to our world. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) for making sure we have this opportunity. He is the vice-chair of the APPG on men and boys' issues, and now we have found out who the chair is: the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies). I am sure there is a great partnership there and that we will hear a great deal more from them about the priorities and the things that we need to tackle.

I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate. We have certainly had a very thoughtful array of contributions. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland, who opened the discussion today, was man enough and brave enough to open up about his own issues and how he shared those with one of his local groups. So many local groups and the excellent work that they have done have been mentioned in today's debate. As my hon. Friend outlined, some of the main issues are health, suicide, crime—whether it be committing a crime or being a victim of a crime—exclusion from schools, social and cultural expectations, and the need for positive male role models. There was, of course, also a large focus on mental health, education, entertainment and the position of influencers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) mentioned a number of very important organisations in her constituency. She spoke about prostate cancer and that pernicious issue of the subculture, incel, and the harm that it is causing. We then heard from the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) who mentioned his own excellent volunteer groups, including the Aylsham men's shed. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) talked about young men, who, when genuinely considering teenage issues such as body image and relationships in a perfectly normal way, are targeted by extremists with horrendous misogyny, bigotry and homophobia. They are being set against the institutions that keep our society together. There is so much that we need to do in that area. As my hon. Friend mentioned, it is about restoring young men's hope—restoring hope that they have a future—and helping them to achieve their goals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) focused very clearly on the issues of trans men and transphobia. I would just say to him that the Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that trans people can receive the care and support that they need when accessing NHS services.

We frequently engage with a wide range of stakeholders in this area, including the LGBT+ health adviser, Dr Michael Brady.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) spoke about the need for men to talk and to be able to access the services that they need. She talked about a whole range of services, right from the time of needing paternity leave through to the needs of veterans—the whole age range of need for support for men.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) talked about tackling stereotypes. That reminded me of a quite old-fashioned headteacher, who I once worked under in a school in Swansea. She said to the boys, "If you want to be in the rugby team, you must be in the choir." That is the same sort of idea: breaking down the stereotypes that men should not be doing artistic, wonderful and creative things as well as physical things. My hon. Friend also mentioned the tragedy of suicides and again talked about the organisations in his constituency that have done very good work in helping men in that respect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) talked about stereotypes and the pressure of those stereotypes, men's suicide, the need for mental health support for men and the need to encourage men to talk. The spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), talked about farmers and how extraordinary and welcome it is to find middle-aged farmers now opening up. Again, he mentioned the issue of prostate cancer and how, as a doctor, he would advise every man to get checked. He stressed the importance of being open about health and talking about it.

**Dr Chambers:** Just to clarify, I am a vet, not a human doctor.

**Dame Nia Griffith:** I remember the hon. Member's maiden speech. I remember it very clearly. None of us will ever forget it.

**Dr Chambers:** I do not want to be giving medical advice.

**Dame Nia Griffith:** No, but I am sure, that, as a vet, the hon. Member would still urge men to get checked out. Lastly, the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield, talked about the collegiate debate that we have had, how male allies help on women's issues and women allies help on male issues, and the importance of voluntary groups and positive role models, which are so important in this area.

Many men and boys with mental health issues are still not getting the support and care that they need, with men shockingly three times more likely to die from suicide than women. That is why this Government will fix the broken system and ensure that we give mental health the same attention and focus as physical health. We intend to provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school in England, and recruit an additional 8,500 mental health workers across children and adult services. We have already started to make changes. Earlier this month, we introduced the Mental Health Bill, which will modernise the Mental Health Act 1983. The Bill will ensure not only that our legislation is fit for the 21st century, but that men and boys get the crucial support that they need.

Men are three times more likely to die from suicide than women, and this Government are committed to tackling suicide as one of the country's biggest killers. As part of that, the 8,500 new mental health staff we will recruit will be specifically trained to support people at risk, to reduce the lives lost to suicide. The suicide prevention strategy for England published in September 2023 identifies a number of groups for tailored or targeted action at a national level, including children and young people and middle-aged men, and we are exploring opportunities to go further.

Some 79 organisations have been allocated funding from the two-year 2023 to 2025 £10 million suicide prevention grant fund, and are delivering a broad and diverse range of activity that will prevent suicide and help to save lives. The charity Second Step in Bristol, for example, provides men who are in psychological distress or have recently self-harmed but are not in contact with mental health services with short-term emotional and practical support interventions via its Hope Project, including developing support plans that give people hope. Users of the service have said that this work is life changing.

While we know that there are gendered health impacts, there is still much that we do not know; however, we remain determined to reduce health inequalities wherever they fall. As I mentioned, one thing that we can all get behind is working with NHS England, which is partnering with Prostate Cancer UK. I repeat the message of that important campaign: "Use Prostate Cancer UK's risk checker, understand your level of risk, and make an informed choice about whether to have further tests." We are working with Prostate Cancer UK to launch TRANSFORM, a nationwide screening study supported by £16 million of Government funding, so that we can ensure that men receive a diagnosis as soon as possible.

Some illnesses are simply more prevalent among men. Men are more likely than women to consume alcohol at harmful levels. They are also more likely to smoke and suffer from addiction. Ensuring that they have access to help and support that works for them is crucial to breaking the cycle. That is why it is so important that in addition to the public health grant, the Department of Health and Social Care has allocated local authorities a further £267 million in 2024-25 to improve the quality and capacity of drug and alcohol treatment and recovery. Alongside the steps that we are taking to support smokers to quit and to provide gambling support services, that represents a huge commitment to ensuring that men are able to break the cycle of addiction and disadvantage.

We know that the pressure on men, particularly young men, to achieve an idealised body image has increased in recent years. While the impact of body image on girls has been taken seriously, when it comes to boys it can be trivialised, despite having wide-reaching consequences. That is why through statutory health education, secondary school pupils are taught about the similarities and differences between the online world and the physical world. Body image is explicitly covered in the topic of internet safety and harms, but can also be covered in topics such as respectful relationships, online relationships, online media, mental wellbeing, and physical health and fitness. The teacher training modules of those topics are free to download.

In trying to combat some of the online misogyny and undesirable influences that we have heard about, I would like to mention one initiative in Wales, where influencers

and role models from Welsh sports teams, music and popular entertainment streaming, such as reality television, are used to generate a positive response. For example, Ben Davies, Joe Morrell and David Brooks from the Wales football team got together for a locker-room chat on positive masculinity and what men can do to help women feel safe in public. The content was released to tie in with Wales's Euro qualifiers and White Ribbon Day.

We have heard about the many problems, but of course there is hope. I pay huge tribute to all those organisations working hard to make this hope a reality and offering support, whether in a small or more extended way, to men up and down the country. I highlight the work of Llanelli men's shed in my constituency, which recently moved into new premises in North Dock. It is part of Men's Sheds Cymru and the wider Men's Sheds movement across the UK. Men's Sheds and other organisations like it create those important spaces to improve men's health and wellbeing. Last year, I met an inspirational men's support group run by the Stroke Association where men can discuss how stroke has affected them physically, mentally and emotionally.

I assure the House that we as a Government take seriously all the issues raised, and I look forward to hearing many more discussions about the issues and problems men face and the wonderful work being done to help men. Long may we continue to work together to tackle the challenges that men can face.

4.51 pm

**Sam Rushworth:** I thank everybody who has participated in the debate. I wish that every day in the Chamber was more like this Thursday afternoon, where we have practised a kinder, more respectful politics—I appreciate that. I do not have time to do justice to everybody's speeches, but I will probably write to some Members to thank them for the particular comments they made.

I was struck by the number of Members who talked movingly about voluntary work and charities in their communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) mentioned one of them, but I cannot read my writing well enough to know what it was—I will have to check *Hansard*. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) mentioned work with veterans, and we have some fabulous veterans charities in our area in Durham, not least SSAFA, which I have worked with. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) talked about Youthline.

The hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) talked about StreetVet, the Farming Community Network and LooseHeadz. We have a wonderful organisation in my area called UTASS—the Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services—which does important work, including supporting the mental health of our farming communities. There was also ManKind, CALM, Movember, Men's Sheds, Andy's Man Club—I could go on. I mention them because I am always in awe of people who after a long day at work dedicate their time to serving others in their community while asking for nothing in return. That culture of volunteering is one of the things that makes Britain great and for which we can all be proud.

I am also grateful for the tributes paid to John Prescott. His courage talking about eating disorders was rightly mentioned, and I am pleased that other people brought that issue to the debate because it is another emerging challenge for young men today.



[Sam Rushworth]

I am grateful to the Minister for her response, but let me mention briefly a couple more things for her to take away. Social emotional learning on the curriculum is so important, as is work around positive masculinity in the classroom. The Government are committed to important work on mental health workers, and strengthening and supporting the charity sector is important. I hope that the calls for a mental health Minister will be considered. As the shadow Minister mentioned, security for men at work is so important for tackling men's mental ill health. I thank everybody for their contributions.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered International Men's Day, issues affecting boys' and men's health and wellbeing and gender equality.

## Cleat Hill Heat Pump Incident

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

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Before I call the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), I inform Members that the Speaker has granted a waiver to the House's sub judice resolution in respect of the coroner's inquest into the two deaths connected to the Cleat Hill gas explosion. Members may therefore refer to the inquest in this debate.

4.55 pm

**Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con):** I am very grateful to have secured this debate on the impact of the Cleat Hill pump incident on residents, and I welcome the Minister to her place. As she knows, I have a number of questions, some of which she will be able to answer, and a number of which will be for other Departments—although I am sure that she will be able to pass those on to the relevant Minister.

On Tuesday 2 July, during drilling for the installation of a ground source heat pump in a residential neighbourhood back garden on Cleat Hill in my constituency, a reservoir of gas was encountered at a shallow depth of approximately 100 metres. Subsequently, certain discussions, recommendations and actions were made by various parties in response. On Saturday 19 October, an explosion at the property resulted in the death of two people: Paul Swales and Julia Harris. The blast happened close to where gas from the underground reservoir had been venting. By the time of the explosion, gas had been venting from the shallow reservoir for 109 days.

Approximately 50 households were evacuated from their homes on Saturday 19 October, and for nearly five weeks now my constituents have been living with relatives, friends or, in the majority of cases, in temporary accommodation provided by Bedford borough council. I take this opportunity to commend my constituents for their resilience to the disruption caused to their daily lives, and to the anxiety that has been caused and which continues to be felt by many. I also commend the community and spiritual support offered by St Mark's church in Brickhill, which has provided facilities, fellowship, food and a focus for residents over these five weeks. I pass my condolences to the families of Paul Swales and Julia Harris.

There are currently a series of investigations, including by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, regarding the period between the encountering of gas on Tuesday 2 July and the gas explosion on Saturday 19 October. Hence, the focus of this debate is on the circumstances and regulations preceding the earlier date and subsequent to the latter date. However, there are some open questions on the minds of my residents regarding the period under investigation, and I believe that they are worth putting on the record in this debate, although I appreciate the Minister will not wish to comment at this stage.

Which agency was in charge of making my residents safe after the discovery of gas on 2 July? Which agency was responsible for signing off the mitigation of venting gas? Who, if anyone, was responsible for the venting of gas for the period between 2 July and 19 October? Did the responsible entity have the requisite expertise to take on those responsibilities? What procedures were

put in place to ensure that the venting of gas in a residential neighbourhood remained safe? Were the correct responses made when residents provided concerns about the venting of gas? Which regulations guided the response by agencies from 2 July, and were they sufficient? My residents hope that the various investigations will be able to provide answers to those questions and the many others that they have raised.

I turn to the current situation. The British Geological Survey continues to monitor for gas in both the air and soil in and around the 100-metre cordoned-off area. Recent measurements have been consistently at negligible levels, but monitoring continues to take account of various climatic features—

5 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

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

**Richard Fuller:** That may strike some people as odd, but it is the normal Commons procedure.

There will be a further meeting tonight hosted by Bedford borough council. I record my thanks for the leadership shown by Laura Church, the chief executive of the council, and my thanks to Craig Austin and the other staff of the council for their considerable efforts on behalf of residents. The meetings are helpful in addressing immediate concerns, but I will raise some other issues.

First, there is the return of residents to their homes. As might be anticipated, there are differences between residents regarding their confidence in returning to their homes. Many are eager to do so, but many residents have considerable anxiety about a return, with concerns for their safety and that of their children or loved ones. I have spoken to residents, and a major assistance in building that confidence would be an accountable, authoritative voice to underwrite the assertion that it is safe to return. However, it seems that none of the agencies have the combination of expertise and authority to make such a call. In the absence of that, the default may be that the risks of returning will be transferred from a responsible body to each resident, with potential implications for future insurance and other liabilities, which clearly should not happen. What steps can the Minister take to end this Mexican stand-off regarding advice on a safe return for residents to their property? Will she urgently investigate in what form a responsible agency or authority could provide the underwritten reassurance that it is safe for residents to return?

Over this period, Bedford borough council has incurred considerable additional costs and diverted many officers and staff to manage the needs of residents. The exceptional demands for expenditure and human resources came shortly after one of the most significant incidences of flooding in the area; in fact, the Met Office reported that Bedfordshire had its wettest September since records began in 1836. Much of that rain came in the very last part of the month and caused significant flooding. As the Minister is well aware, there is a scheme—the Bellwin scheme—that can be used to support local authorities with covering those exceptional costs. I know that the Department has been in discussions with Bedford borough council and is waiting to hear whether a formal application will be made. I also understand that Ministers are

empowered by section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 to decide whether to activate a scheme after considering the circumstances of each individual case. There is discretion here. Should the council make a formal application, will the Minister ask the Secretary of State to use the powers granted to her under section 155 to approve the application by Bedford borough council?

The incident at Cleat Hill should also stimulate a review of regulations to see whether they are sufficient or should be updated. It may surprise hon. Members, as it did my constituents, that it is permissible to drill a hole 100 metres deep in a back garden without any permit or notification required. Such boreholes are considered permitted development. Will the Minister review whether the drilling of a 100-metre hole in a residential area should continue to be classified as permitted development, or whether there should be a permitting or notification requirement?

The Cleat Hill incident also raises some questions about the regulation of the installation of heat pumps more generally. More than 30,000 ground source heat pumps have been installed in the United Kingdom, and this is the first known incident in which a gas reservoir has been tapped during the drilling for a ground source heat pump. However, the UK currently plans to roll out many more heat pumps—a large proportion of which will be ground source heat pumps—in its effort to achieve net zero.

We must remember that boreholes are drilled for a variety of reasons, not just for heat pumps, and that the incident at Cleat Hill was about the drilling of boreholes, not the heat pump specifically. However, the Ground Source Heat Pump Association, which is not party to the investigation, wrote to me to say:

“While this is the first incident of its kind in the UK, and is extremely unlikely to be repeated, we do not feel it would be appropriate to simply wait until the formal investigation has concluded.”

It went on to say:

“On that basis, the GSHPA has communicated with all its members advising them to procure gas monitoring equipment, if they do not already possess it. As a precautionary measure, we have instructed members to go above and beyond present regulations and guidance and to follow the procedures given in the Borehole Sites and Operations Regulations which apply to Coal Authority Areas when drilling boreholes for ground source heat pump ground loops at all sites.”

In light of this, will the Minister ask the relevant Department to review the geographic scope of the Borehole Sites and Operations Regulations 1995 and decide whether they should be extended to cover a broader part of the United Kingdom? More generally, will she ask the relevant Minister to engage with the Ground Source Heat Pump Association to review and, where necessary, update the regulations and official guidance on the installation of ground source heat pumps?

As you might imagine, Madam Deputy Speaker, my residents who have been out of their homes for five weeks have some practical questions about insurance and the impact on house values. I would like to put those on the record, although I appreciate that there is limited scope for consideration of official support by the Minister. The first question is about the variation between insurers regarding the number of days that a policy holder can be absent from their home. For some insurers, that number is 30 days; for others, it is 60 days.

[Richard Fuller]

I wrote to the Association of British Insurers, which advised me that although those provisions remain in place,

“insurers will take a case by case approach and look to respond sympathetically where customers are likely to remain out of their homes beyond the limits provided for in the policy due to the evacuation.”

The second question is about the impact that the discovery of this shallow gas reservoir and the explosion may have on my residents’ future ability to obtain home insurance, and on the premiums attached to such policies. Again, I put those questions to the Association of British Insurers, and I am grateful for its response. The ABI cannot comment on individual pricing or commercial decisions by its members, but added:

“That said, we have raised the concern with our members, and we are not currently aware of any general issues relating to Cleat Hill that would change the general underwriting approach applied to the area. It will be a commercial decision for individual insurers and a range of criteria unrelated to the incident may impact on an individual household’s future risk. These will continue to be assessed by insurers on a commercial and competitive basis.”

On house values, I am grateful for the response to my question from the Minister’s colleague, which states:

“On your question about the effect on property values, it is possible that there could be some diminution of property values, however our expectation is that property values will return relatively quickly to comparable local levels.”

I am grateful to be able to put those points from the ABI and the Minister’s colleague on the record.

I will close by commenting on the importance of gaining a comprehensive understanding. In July, my residents were alerted to the release of gas, but were content to return to their homes because they believed the situation was under control. Now they face a return to their homes in very different circumstances, with many more questions, much greater anxiety and much less trust in taking people at their word. Currently, the size and scope of the gas reservoir at Cleat Hill is not known. An assessment is being made of the costs of a project to provide this information, but it is likely to be beyond the budget of the local authority.

The central issue remains the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the status of the gas reservoir. How significant is it? What is its geographical scope? Did the period of venting create fissures in the layer of rock that had kept the gas from seeping into the soil? Did the 109-day period of venting release such a proportion of gas as to make the rock layer susceptible to collapse from the downward pressure of the 100 metres of soil above? These are all very important questions to be answered.

There is an emerging plan for the gas monitors and alarms to be available to local residents and connected to a 24/7 response centre. This longer-term monitoring plan is designed to provide an early alert to residents should there be any future change in detected methane levels. However, can the Minister advise us of which agency would be responsible for the ongoing monitoring if such a long-term plan were put in place? Can she assure me that the Department will be able to seek expert advice, so that the correct plan is put in place for both the regularity and duration of testing, including of the stability of the closed borehole and of the rock layer containing the gas reservoir?

To remind the Minister, the incidence of breaking a seal on a shallow gas reservoir is historically extremely rare. It is not exactly comparable, but the drilling in 2007 of boreholes for geothermal energy in Staufen in Germany created significant problems a decade later. In that case, water was released, not gas, but I believe the incident reinforces the need to gather a comprehensive understanding of the situation at Cleat Hill. So will the Minister instruct officials in her Department to liaise with Bedford borough council to assess the proposals to conduct a full survey of the scale and scope of the gas reservoir at Cleat Hill, and see whether the cost of that survey can be borne centrally?

5.13 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** May I begin by paying my tribute to Lord Prescott and sending my deep condolences to his family? Lord Prescott was a great friend of the east end, where I am a Member of Parliament, and we remember the contribution he made to so many lives in our country.

Turning to this very important issue, I commend the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) for securing this debate on the impact of the Cleat Hill heat pump incident on residents. I want to extend my deepest sympathies and those of the Government to the family and friends of Mr Swales and his sister-in-law, Mrs Harris, who died as a result of an explosion in their home in Cleat Hill. Like the hon. Gentleman, I am grateful to the emergency services for their response to this terrible incident. I also thank the other agencies involved both in seeking to ensure a clear understanding of how this incident occurred and in working to ensure the safety of local residents. I know that the hon. Gentleman, as the local Member of Parliament, has been very much at the heart providing support to the residents affected by this incident, and today’s debate is testimony to that work.

As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, on Saturday 19 October an explosion in Cleat Hill, to the north of Bedford, destroyed a house. Tragically, Mr Swales died at the site and Mrs Harris died six weeks later in hospital as a result of the fatal injuries she sustained. In such incidents, the most important consideration for local partners is of course the protection of life. This meant the evacuation of 43 households comprising some 100 individuals. As a result, 26 households remain in temporary accommodation, with 17 households having made their own arrangements such as staying with friends and family. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, that is hugely disruptive to the lives of the residents, alongside the added uncertainty and the ongoing issues with not being able to return home.

The initial investigations by the gas distributor Cadent found that gas was detected at the scene; however, it was not the odourised supply that flows through its network and into people’s homes, but rather odour-free natural gas from a pocket underground. The source of the gas was a 100 metre-deep borehole drilled in July in the garden of the property as part of works to install a ground source heat pump, as has been pointed out. This encountered a pocket of natural gas. Following that, an attempt was made in July to plug the borehole to stop gas flowing to the surface, but this work was evidently unsuccessful as subsequently gas continued to leak. After the explosion in October, gas testing of the soil in



the area conducted by the British Geological Survey found gas leaking to the surface over a wide area, requiring a 150-metre safety cordon and the evacuation of the homes inside the cordon.

Following the explosion, partners have come together to respond to the immediate aftermath, ensure the safety of neighbouring residents, investigate the circumstances of the incident, and put in place a plan to secure the borehole and stop further gas escaping. The site has been the focus of investigations by the Health and Safety Executive to help determine the cause, as well as by Bedfordshire Police in support of the coroner's office. Additionally, as part of the Government's wider response to the tragic events, a number of other specialist agencies, such as the British Geological Survey and the Coal Authority, have been essential in supporting local partners.

There have been several public meetings, attended by agencies, to ensure that residents are informed about ongoing works and the steps being taken to make the area safe. To further reassure residents, Bedford borough council is investigating options to install gas monitors in affected homes. This will allow for early detection of any early build-up of gas in homes. Efforts have been made to support residents affected by the explosion, with Bedford borough council establishing an advice and support centre providing temporary accommodation, emergency financial support, a 24-hour emergency helpline and free office space at Borough Hall to help residents continue to work. I am conscious that the hon. Gentleman, as the local MP, has played an important role in supporting residents. Key partnerships play an important role in such emergencies, as I have experienced in my own constituency, although they were of a different nature.

We understand that residents have faced challenges with insurance and I am glad to hear about the work the Association of British Insurers has begun. I am happy to write to it if further assistance is required. Residents will also be worried about whether this incident will create blight when they sell their home in the future. Local partners are drawing on groups such as the Coal Authority, which has expertise in working with residents to help develop information that can be provided to insurers, mortgage lenders and new purchasers. Our expectation is that property values will return relatively quickly to comparable local levels.

I am aware that such responses mean that local partners incur unexpected costs, creating additional burdens for organisations such as the council. As has been pointed out, the Government's principal mechanism for supporting costs arising from emergency incidents is the Bellwin scheme, which is administered by my Department. Bedford borough council has registered an interest in making a claim under the scheme for the combined impacts of the gas explosion and earlier flooding in September, which we will consider as soon as the application comes in and officials provide advice.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of important questions in his speech. I will address some of them; others, as he understands, are the subject of ongoing investigations. First, in response to his important point about advice on the safe return of residents to their properties, the safety of residents is paramount. Partners are working together, taking into account the technical advice on risk mitigation and the assurances that will support the return of residents to their homes, including the use of gas monitoring systems.

The hon. Gentleman's second point was on an underwritten reassurance. It will be for local partners to determine the conditions that would support residents in getting back to their homes, based on the advice from the technical group advising the strategic co-ordination group. Once the investigation has concluded, we will need to look carefully at the lessons that need to be learned, to help avoid a similar situation arising.

The hon. Gentleman made an important point about drilling a 100-metre hole in a residential area. We must await the outcome of the Health and Safety Executive and police investigations before taking any further action, as we do not know the exact causes of the explosion and the extent of liability or criminality, or what mitigations might be needed to prevent something like this happening again. However, he makes an important point, and we will need to draw on the lessons once the investigations are over.

The hon. Gentleman raised the role of other Departments. We are working closely with the Ground Source Heat Pump Association, which is already reviewing the vertical borehole standard to cover future incidents of gas encounters, and I know that a meeting is planned with the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh), where the hon. Gentleman can discuss the matter further.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of other issues and I would be very happy to continue the discussion with him about those. Following the outcome of the investigations, it is vital that lessons are learned and that we can be confident about safety and security.

I thank the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire for this important debate on the tragic events at Cleat Hill and their impact on residents. Officials in my Department have close relationships with local partners and the local authority. We will continue to work in partnership with those key stakeholders in his constituency, as well as with him. I thank him once again for the debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.24 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Written Statements

*Thursday 21 November 2024*

## ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

### Warm Homes Plan

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** The Government were elected on a promise to deliver warmer homes with lower energy bills for families across the country. Decent homes are the foundation of decent lives, and our warm homes plan is driven by a simple principle: every household deserves the security of a home they can afford to heat.

Today, I am pleased to confirm funding for the warm homes plan that means that next year more homes will benefit from upgrades to make them more energy efficient and cheaper to run—more than double the number of upgrades delivered last year. Next year will see a total investment of £3.2 billion from Government, social housing providers and obligations on suppliers.

As part of the changes we are announcing today, more households will now be able to install an air source heat pump without the need to submit a planning application. The Government are removing the rule requiring heat pumps to be installed at least one metre away from a property's boundary, which was an outdated regulation that prevented thousands of installations.

In addition, the Government are increasing direct grant support for heat pumps through the boiler upgrade scheme, adding £30 million for the rest of this financial year and doubling the budget for the next financial year to £295 million. We are also setting out plans to consult on further increases to energy efficiency standards for both new heat pumps and new boilers, helping households save money off their bills.

We recognise that support for the supply chain will be critical to deliver the warm homes plan. That is why we will be providing investment in home-grown heat pump production through the heat pump investment accelerator competition, and stimulating further investment in the supply chain through the introduction of a reformed clean heat market mechanism, for which we are laying a statutory instrument today. Ministers have been engaging closely with industry on a shared vision for the transition to cleaner, cheaper heating and look forward to continuing that constructive dialogue and partnership during the further development and delivery of the warm homes plan.

Over the coming months, I look forward to building on the announcements made today and publishing our warm homes plan in full. This will detail our new approach to delivering warmer homes with lower energy bills, tackling the fuel poverty currently experienced by too many people, and creating new opportunities for jobs, skills, and investment right across the country.

[HCWS240]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### World Health Organisation Investment Round

**The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds):** I wish to inform the House that the Government have today pledged new support to the World Health Organisation alongside international partners as part of the WHO's first investment round.

Nowhere is multilateralism more critical than for global health security. The WHO is the cornerstone of the global health multilateral architecture, and a vital partner to delivering both our domestic health mission and our global ambitions for a safer and more prosperous world, reconnecting Britain and resetting our relations with the global south.

With a future pandemic a certainty, climate change a fundamental threat to public health, and the rise of antimicrobial resistance-related deaths, the link between national health security and global health security has never been clearer. From surveillance and tackling pandemics to strengthening country health systems ready to address the challenges of tomorrow, the WHO plays a vital global leadership role.

The United Kingdom has long been a champion of global health through our support to the WHO and other global health institutions, recognising that health security transcends national borders. In an interconnected world, health threats do not respect boundaries, as shown by covid-19 and the recent mpox outbreak.

The UK will invest up to £310 million in core voluntary contribution funds in support of the critical delivery of the WHO's 14th general programme of work and its transformation agenda. Our CVC investment recognises the need for flexible, predictable, multi-year support, to enable the WHO to be the strongest, most agile and effective organisation it can be in tackling challenges today and of future health crises.

This investment, alongside other international partners' support, will enable the WHO to prioritise activities that directly contribute to better health outcomes worldwide. Outcomes supported include: an enhanced global health emergency response—better protecting 7 billion people from health emergencies by 2028; ensuring universal health coverage—supporting 5 billion people to access quality health services without suffering financial hardship; combating antimicrobial resistance—accelerating actions to counter the growing threat of AMR; and strengthening climate resilience—supporting adaptation plans to better prepare nations for the impacts of climate change.

Through our investment over 2024 to 2028 we reiterate our commitment both to the WHO and international partners of working together towards the collective goal of a healthier, safer, and more resilient world.

[HCWS243]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Eradicating Modern Slavery: NHS Supply Chains

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):** An estimated 50 million people live in modern slavery across the world. Modern slavery exists in every country, including



the UK, with instances of forced and child labour documented within the supply chain of the health and social care sector.

The UK Government are committed to eradicating modern slavery both domestically and abroad and are clear that the NHS should not be purchasing goods or services which have been tainted by slavery or human trafficking.

DHSC, supported by NHS England, delivered a review in December 2023 into the risk of modern slavery within NHS supply chains. The review showed a significant amount of commitment from our suppliers to tackling modern slavery in their supply chains, and confirmed the important role that regulation would play in this area.

As such, I am pleased to announce that we will be introducing robust regulations to ensure the eradication of modern slavery in NHS supply chains in England.

As required by the NHS Act 2006, we are creating regulations which will place legal duties on public bodies to assess modern slavery risk in procurement and contract activities and take reasonable steps to address, and where possible, eliminate that risk.

These regulations will impose legal obligations on public bodies to assess and address modern slavery risks in their supply chains when procuring goods and services for the purpose of the NHS. Public bodies will be required to first evaluate the level of modern slavery risk associated with a procurement, then take appropriate and proportionate actions to mitigate and, where possible, eliminate that risk. Reasonable actions include ensuring robust selection and award criteria is built into their tenders to respond to identified risks; and introducing specific contract terms to monitor and require mitigation where instances of modern slavery are discovered.

The Department is pleased to announce that public consultation on our draft regulations has now been launched. This marks an important step in our commitment to eradicate modern slavery from our healthcare system. A collaborative approach is necessary, and as such we are inviting the views and contributions from a wide range of stakeholders including public bodies, suppliers, trade associates, interest groups and the public. Subject to the outcome of the consultation we intend to lay draft regulations before Parliament in due course.

Efforts to reform procurement rules in the UK are ongoing. The Procurement Act 2023, scheduled to take effect on 24 February 2025, will establish the new legal framework that the public sector must adhere to for applicable procurements. In January 2024, the Health Care Services (Provider Selection Regime) Regulations 2023 came into forces, outlining procurement regulations for clinical services.

Modern slavery is an abhorrent crime which requires a collective international response. DHSC has a duty to eradicate the use of goods and services tainted by modern slavery in NHS supply chains. This is not something that impacts only the health sector; modern slavery impacts everyone, everywhere. This Government will work to ensure a collaborative Government and cross-sector approach to tackling modern slavery within our regulatory framework.

[HCWS245]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Leasehold and Commonhold Reform

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** Millions of homeowners across the country will remember with fondness the sense of satisfaction, pride and security they felt when completing the purchase of their first home. Given a free choice, an overwhelming majority of families would prefer to own their own home, and home ownership remains indelibly associated in the minds of many with security, control, freedom and hope.

Yet, for far too many leaseholders, the reality of home ownership has fallen woefully short of the dream—their lives marked by an intermittent, if not constant, struggle with punitive and escalating ground rents; unjustified permissions and administration fees; unreasonable or extortionate charges; and onerous conditions imposed with little or no consultation. This is not what home ownership should entail.

Over the course of this Parliament, the Government are determined to honour the commitments made in our manifesto and do what is necessary to finally bring the feudal leasehold system to an end. Given that millions of leaseholders and residential freeholders are currently suffering as a result of unfair and unreasonable practices, we appreciate fully the need to act urgently to provide them with relief. However, we are also cognisant of the significant complexity of the task and the importance of taking the necessary time to ensure that reforms are watertight.

With both of these imperatives in mind, I am today updating the House on the steps the Government intend to take to implement those reforms to the leasehold system already in statute and to progress the wider set of reforms necessary to end the feudal leasehold system for good.

#### *Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024*

The previous Government's Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 was passed in the wash-up period prior to the Dissolution of the last Parliament. In enacting only a select number of Law Commission recommendations relating to enfranchisement and the right to manage, the Act has rendered the process of holistic and coherent leasehold and commonhold reform more challenging.

However, while limited in nature, the Act did introduce a necessary set of reforms that will provide immediate relief to those leaseholders and residential freeholders subject to unfair and unreasonable practices. As set out in the King's Speech, it is therefore the Government's intention to act as quickly as possible to provide homeowners with greater rights, powers and protections over their homes by implementing its various provisions.

However, we must balance speed with care if we are to ensure that the measures brought into force are to the lasting benefit of leaseholders and residential freeholders. The risk of acting with undue haste is not merely a hypothetical one. On assuming office in July, the Deputy Prime Minister and I were informed that the 2024 Act contains a small number of specific but serious flaws

which would prevent certain provisions from operating as intended and that need to be rectified via primary legislation.

These serious flaws include a loophole which means that the Act goes far beyond the intended reforms to valuation and that undermines the integrity of the amended scheme. In addition we must correct an omission that would deny tens of thousands of shared ownership leaseholders the right to extend their lease with their direct landlord, given that the providers in question do not have sufficiently long leases to grant 990-year extensions.

This Government will not make the same mistakes as the last when it comes to reforming what is, without question, an incredibly complicated area of property law. While we intend to continue to work at pace, we will take the time necessary to ensure the reforms we pass are fit for purpose.

That is not to say that progress has not already been made. A number of the Act's provisions came into force on 24 July relating variously to legal costs associated with the remediation of unsafe buildings, the work of professional insolvency practitioners, and removing the remedy where homeowners risk losing their home entirely because of failure to pay an income-supporting rent charge after 40 days.

On 31 October, the Government activated further building safety measures. These help clarify that remediation contribution orders and remediation orders—which require developers and other relevant persons to pay for or fix defects—can be made in respect of interim measures, known as “relevant steps”, such as waking watches and simultaneous evacuation alarms. They also clarify that costs of alternative accommodation, when leaseholders have been displaced from their homes on building safety grounds, and expert reports, can be recovered through remediation contribution orders.

Commencing the remaining provisions in the Act will require an extensive programme of detailed secondary legislation. While we appreciate fully the scepticism that leaseholders feel about yet more consultations, in some cases they will be necessary to determine precisely how certain measures are to be implemented effectively. To our frustration, we will not be able to bring other important measures into force, including the new valuation process, until we have fixed the small number of specific but serious flaws in the 2024 Act through primary legislation. Switching on the Act in full will therefore take time, but it is important that we get it right if we are to avoid the mistakes made by the previous Government.

A good example of why appropriate secondary legislation must be prepared and scrutinised before even seemingly simple measures in the Act are commenced is section 49. This section provides for an increase in the non-residential floorspace limit for right to manage claims from 25% to 50%. This will broaden access to this right for a significant number of leaseholders by allowing those in mixed-use buildings where up to 50% of the floorspace is non-residential to make right to manage claims.

However, the way existing right to manage company voting rights operate means that in some buildings with higher percentages of non-residential floorspace, freeholders not leaseholders will be able to control the right to manage company with more votes. For this reason we must amend right to manage company voting rights via secondary legislation in parallel with commencing

section 49. If we do not do so, and simply activate section 49, new claims for the right to manage could result in these companies being set up only for the building's existing freeholders to have total control over them. This would be contrary to the intention behind the Act. While we appreciate that leaseholders will be frustrated at having to wait for secondary legislation, this Government will not commence the Act in a half-baked or incoherent way that could risk detriment to leaseholders.

With a view to effectively implementing the Act as quickly as possible, the Government's intended sequencing for bringing the provisions of the 2024 Act into force is as follows.

We intend to commence the Act's provision to remove the two-year rule in January next year. This will mean that leaseholders will no longer have to wait two years after purchasing their property before exercising rights to extend their lease or buy their freehold, giving more leaseholders control over their properties from the outset.

We will bring the Act's right to manage provisions—expanding access and reforming its costs and voting rights—into force as a coherent package at the same time, in spring 2025, meaning more leaseholders in mixed-use buildings can take over management from their freeholders, and leaseholders making claims will, in most cases, no longer have to pay their freeholder's costs.

We understand that for many leaseholders the cost of living will be their primary immediate worry. For too long, leaseholders have borne the brunt of opaque and excessive costs being passed on to them. We will go out to consultation very shortly on the detail of the Act's ban on buildings insurance remuneration such as commissions for landlords, property managing agents and freeholders being charged through the service charge and their replacement with transparent and fair fees.

Next year, we will look to consult on the Act's provisions on service charges and on legal costs, bringing these measures into force as quickly as possible thereafter. Once implemented, leaseholders will be able to more easily challenge service charges they consider unreasonable and landlords will be required to apply to the relevant court or tribunal for approval before they can pass legal costs from such challenges back to leaseholders.

The Act includes measures that will make it cheaper for leaseholders to enfranchise—buy their freehold or extend their lease—giving them security over their property in the long term. Next summer we will consult on the valuation rates used to calculate the cost of enfranchisement premiums. Parliament will then need to approve the secondary legislation that sets out the detail, as well as fixing the Act's serious flaws in further primary legislation, before implementing the package.

The Government remain committed to protecting residential freeholders on private and mixed-tenure housing estates from unfair charges. Next year we will consult on implementing the Act's new consumer protection provisions for the up to 1.75 million homes that are subject to these charges, and bring these measures into force as quickly as possible thereafter. These include ensuring that homeowners who pay an estate management charge have better access to information they need to understand what they are paying for, the right to challenge the reasonableness at the first-tier tribunal (in England), and to go to the tribunal to appoint a substitute manager.

It is important that landlords, agents and other key actors in the sector are aware of their responsibilities. As such, we will continue to work closely with delivery partners and stakeholders as we implement the Act, and look to future reform. We also look forward to working closely with the Welsh Government to bring about these much-needed reforms across England and Wales.

It is also vital that as many residential leaseholders and freeholders understand and take advantage of the reforms as they are implemented. The Leasehold Advisory Service will have a crucial role to play in that regard and we will set out further detail in due course about how we believe it can most effectively do so.

#### *Further reform of the leasehold system*

While we must fix the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act and implement its provisions as soon as possible, we have always been clear that the Act does not go far enough. It overlooked a number of Law Commission recommendations relating to leasehold enfranchisement, enacted only eight relating to the right to manage and contained none relating to commonhold.

Moreover, it left untouched serious problems such as unregulated and unaffordable ground rents; the poor quality of service provided by some managing agents; the threat of forfeiture as a means of ensuring compliance with a lease agreement; and the prevalence of “fleecehold” private and mixed-tenure housing estates.

As part of our commitment to finally bring the feudal leasehold system to an end in this Parliament, the Government are determined to take action to address Law Commission recommendations omitted from the 2024 Act, to resolve a range of problems that legislation failed to grapple with, and to enact key pledges in our manifesto that it did not even engage with, such as making commonhold the default tenure.

In the King’s Speech, the Government made clear we would publish an ambitious new draft Leasehold and Commonhold Reform Bill in this parliamentary Session that would be subject to broad consultation and additional parliamentary scrutiny. Our intention is that it will be published in the second half of next year.

A central focus of the Bill will be reinvigorating commonhold through the introduction of a comprehensive new legal framework. To set out our thinking in advance of the Bill and invite consultation and discussion about how we finally transition away from leasehold, we will publish a White Paper on reforms to commonhold early next year.

Alongside setting out our plans for a comprehensive new legal framework for commonhold, we will take decisive first steps to making commonhold the default tenure by the end of the Parliament. To that end, we will consult next year on the best approach to banning new leasehold flats so this can work effectively alongside a robust ban on leasehold houses. We will seek input from industry and consumers on other fundamental points such as potential exemptions for legitimate use and how to minimise disruption to housing supply. We will also engage on the conversion of existing flats to commonhold.

The draft Bill will also consider a number of vital reforms to the existing leasehold system. The Government remain firmly committed to its manifesto commitment to tackle unregulated and unaffordable ground rents, and we will deliver this in legislation. We will remove

the disproportionate and draconian threat of forfeiture as a means of ensuring compliance with a lease agreement. And we will consult on new reforms to the section 20 “major works” procedure that leaseholders must go through when they face large bills for such works.

We also intend to act to protect leaseholders from abuse and poor service at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents. The previous Government committed to regulate the property agent sector in 2018, even asking a working group chaired by the esteemed Lord Best to advise them how to do it. Yet, over multiple years they failed to take any action.

Managing agents play a key role in the maintenance of multi-occupancy buildings and freehold estates, and their importance will only increase as we transition toward a commonhold future, and so we are looking again at Lord Best’s 2019 report on regulating the property agent sector, particularly in light of the recommendations in the final Grenfell inquiry report. As part of our response to that report, I can confirm that we will strengthen regulation of managing agents to drive up the standard of their service. As a minimum, this should include mandatory professional qualifications which set a new basic standard that managing agents will be required to meet. We will consult on this matter next year.

Finally, we are determined to end the injustice of “fleecehold” entirely and we will consult next year on legislative and policy options to reduce the prevalence of private estate management arrangements, which are the root cause of the problems experienced by many residential freeholders.

[HCWS244]

## JUSTICE

### Whiplash Injury Regulations 2021

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood):** I would like to announce that I have completed my report of the first statutory review of the Whiplash Injury Regulations 2021.

Part 1, section 3 of the Civil Liability Act 2018 provides for the Lord Chancellor to set a tariff of damages for whiplash injuries of up to two years in duration and to make regulations to do so. Section 4 of the Act requires the Lord Chancellor to review regulations made under section 3 within three years of implementation.

In summary I have decided to:

- maintain the existing split structure of the tariff (whiplash only and whiplash plus minor psychological injury) and to provide additional guidance on defining minor psychological injury;

- uprate the tariff by around 15% to account for actual consumer price index inflation to May 2024 and for forecasted inflation to May 2027—the likely date of the next review;

- keep the allowable judicial uplift for exceptional injuries or circumstances at its current level of up to 20% of the tariff award; and

- make no changes to the definitions on what constitutes appropriate medical evidence and who may provide it for the purposes of the ban on seeking or making an offer to settle a whiplash claim without evidence.

As per the requirements of the Act, I will today lay a report in the Libraries of both Houses with more information on the review, its conclusions and the next



steps. I will also shortly commence a consultation on these decisions with the Lady Chief Justice and will provide further information on the implementation timetable in due course.

[HCWS241]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Healthy Start: Uptake

#### *Background*

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western):** Healthy Start is a passported scheme with eligibility being derived from certain qualifying benefits, such as universal credit. The uptake percentage for the Healthy Start scheme is calculated by comparing the number of potential eligible people with the number of beneficiaries—individuals who accessed the Healthy Start scheme. The NHS Business Services Authority publish the data on their website where it is publicly available.

Eligibility and take-up numbers have been used in numerous parliamentary questions and debates. A previous source data issue that affected eligibility statistics resulted in a written ministerial statement being laid in Parliament on 26 March 2024.

I regret to inform the House that a further issue has been identified with the statistics on the number of those potentially eligible. This dates back to January 2023. This means that uptake and eligibility data used in 15 parliamentary questions and eight debates under the former Government was inaccurate.

It is important to state that this issue has not impacted any Healthy Start applications, existing beneficiaries, or live claim processes. This issue has only affected reported uptake statistics.

#### *Issue*

Healthy Start uptake percentage statistics are calculated using information provided by Department for Work and Pensions. DWP generates potential eligibility figures using the universal credit assessed income period. Unfortunately, this period was calculated incorrectly meaning the monthly figures reported were based on a longer period.

This means that the potential eligibility figures provided by DWP from January 2023 to June 2024 were inaccurate.

#### *Impact*

The error means that the number of those potentially eligible has been overestimated. This in turn has led to an underestimated uptake percentage since January 2023.

It should be noted that while these statistics are a key element for reporting uptake of the Healthy Start scheme, this has not impacted any Healthy Start applications, existing beneficiaries, or live claim processes. The scheme continues to be promoted by the NHS Business Services Authority, which administer the scheme on behalf of Department of Health and Social Care, through a variety of publications, social media, exhibits, etc.

#### *Corrective action*

DWP has corrected the calculation of the assessed income period from July 2024. Cross-departmental testing is being conducted to provide assurance before any further data is shared with NHSBSA.

The incorrect statistical data has been removed from the NHS Healthy Start website.

Unfortunately, we are unable to publish corrected historical figures as the number of recipients of universal credit changes daily, meaning the data is only fully accurate at the time it is produced. We will seek to restore fully accurate uptake data as soon as we are able.

[HCWS242]



## Written Corrections

Thursday 21 November 2024

### Ministerial Corrections

#### EDUCATION

##### Topical Questions

*The following extract is from Education Questions on 4 November 2024.*

T6. [901032] **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The teachers and staff at Hornsea school and language college do a fantastic job for their 1,300 pupils, including 90 with SEND, but they do so in crumbling buildings with leaking roofs. With the news in last week's Budget that this Government will continue the Conservative's school rebuilding programme, will the Secretary of State prioritise Hornsea school?

**Stephen Morgan:** I note the hon. Member's point on that specific college. As he will know, the Chancellor committed £1.4 billion at the Budget to drive the delivery of the current school rebuilding programme for next year. Over the coming weeks and months, we will work with trusts and local authorities to identify which schools will be in scope.

[*Official Report*, 4 November 2024; Vol. 756, c. 19.]

*Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan):*

**Stephen Morgan:** ... Over the coming weeks and months, we will work with trusts and local authorities to **confirm** which schools **in the programme** will be in scope.

#### Young Carers: School Absence

*The following extract is from Education Questions on 4 November 2024.*

**Bobby Dean:** One thing that might be driving absences from schools for young carers is long-term mental health conditions. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health says that as many as one in five young carers could be suffering from long-term mental health conditions. Can the Minister explain what measures the Department is taking to ensure that sufficient help is in place for people suffering from those conditions?

**Janet Daby:** We want to ensure that we support young carers in school, as well as other children who may be suffering from mental health conditions. This Government are entirely committed to supporting young people with mental health conditions, and we are making sure that there will be mental health support in every school up and down the country. **For young carers who may be experiencing increasing mental health conditions**, we are expanding the attendance mentoring programme to ensure that around an extra 10,800 **young carers** are supported, **especially** in the area of mental health.

[*Official Report*, 4 November 2024; Vol. 756, c. 15.]

*Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby):*

**Janet Daby:**... This Government are entirely committed to supporting young people with mental health conditions, and we are making sure that there will be mental health support in every school up and down the country. We are expanding the attendance mentoring programme to ensure that around an extra 10,800 young **people** are supported, **including** in the area of mental health.

#### DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

##### Prime Minister's Questions

*The following extract is from Prime Minister's questions on 23 October 2024.*

**Helen Morgan:** Shropshire's farmers have been suffering from flooding following 18 months of incredibly wet weather, topped off last Wednesday by a month's worth of rain in 24 hours. They were not eligible for the farming recovery fund, and a freedom of information request by *Farmers Weekly* found that only £2.1 million of that £50 million has been handed out to farmers. Will the Government consider extending the eligibility of that scheme so that we can keep farmers going when they are deluged by floodwater?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I am really sorry to hear the plight of Shropshire farmers. We inherited the flood defence programme in disrepair, and thanks to 14 years of mismanagement and failure, communities are unprotected and families and businesses are forced to pay the price. We launched a flood defence taskforce to turbocharge the delivery and co-ordination of flood defences, and we are investing £1.5 billion this year to scale up flooding national resilience. I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets a meeting with the Minister.

[*Official Report*, 23 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 276.]

*Written correction submitted by the Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner):*

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I am really sorry to hear the plight of Shropshire farmers. We inherited the flood defence programme in disrepair, and thanks to 14 years of mismanagement and failure, communities are unprotected and families and businesses are forced to pay the price. We launched a flood defence taskforce to turbocharge the delivery and co-ordination of flood defences, and we are investing **£1.25 billion** this year to scale up flooding national resilience. I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets a meeting with the Minister.

#### HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

##### Infected Blood Inquiry

*The following extract is from the debate on the Infected Blood Inquiry on 19 November 2024.*

**Andrew Gwynne:** Turning to a question raised by the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire about the independence of IBCA, it is rightly operationally independent. Parliament would clearly expect the



Government to have oversight of a scheme of this size and for there to be proper management, given the amount of public money going into the scheme. It is true that there are only two non-departmental public bodies that are independent of the Government: one is IBCA and the other is the National Audit Office. It is absolutely right for IBCA to have that independence.

[*Official Report*, 19 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 234.]

*Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne):*

**Andrew Gwynne:** Turning to a question raised by the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire about the independence of IBCA, it is rightly operationally independent. Parliament would clearly expect the Government to have oversight of a scheme of this size and for there to be proper management, given the amount of public money going into the scheme. It is true that there are only two non-departmental public bodies that are independent of the Government: one is **IPSA** and the other is the National Audit Office. It is absolutely right for IBCA to have that **operational** independence.

# ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than  
Thursday 28 November 2024**

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**Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation [Col. 411]**  
*Motion—(Lloyd Hatton)—agreed to*  
**International Men’s Day [Col. 448]**  
*Motion—(Sam Rushworth)—agreed to*

**Cleat Hill Heat Pump Incident [Col. 472]**  
*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Written Statements [Col. 21WS]**

**Written Corrections [Col. 3WC]**  
*Ministerial corrections*

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