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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 25 November 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Serious and Organised Crime

1. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to tackle serious and organised crime. [901391]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): The Government are increasing funding for the National Crime Agency by £58 million next year, with £150 million over the next two years for the Border Security Command to tackle organised immigration crime. The whole House will welcome the recent action by the National Crime Agency to arrest major suspects in people smuggler gangs.

Paul Waugh: I applaud the work of the Border Security Command and the NCA in those operations. Will the Home Secretary join me in thanking Greater Manchester police for their work in tackling organised crime groups, particularly the notorious Adam OCG in Rochdale, whose drug dealing, modern slavery and child exploitation make life such a misery for my residents? Will she particularly applaud Chief Superintendent Danny Inglis and his team, not just for their superb detective work but for their engagement with schools?

Yvette Cooper: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Greater Manchester police and the National Crime Agency on that operation, which has made people safer on the streets of Rochdale. Tackling organised drug crime means action stretching from international work by the NCA right through to neighbourhood police on the streets, and community work to prevent young people from being drawn into organised gangs.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Home Secretary knows that rural areas are not immune to county lines activity. Will she put on record her thanks for the excellent work of West Mercia police, who recently arrested quite a few people on charges relating to drugs and firearms? What more can the National Crime Agency, and particularly the multi-agency co-ordination centre, do to support rural forces and smaller forces such as West Mercia?

Yvette Cooper: I certainly welcome the work that has been done to tackle the gangs the right hon. Gentleman refers to. Such crimes have a huge impact on communities. We need the National Crime Agency working not just through the regional organised crime units, but with local forces right through to the neighbourhood police on the beat. That is often where the intelligence comes from, especially where children are being dragged in.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I know the Home Secretary understands the importance of our brave firearms officers in dealing with serious and organised crime that poses a danger to the public. I welcome the measures to provide anonymity, but will the Government consider going further by allowing a defence in misconduct or criminal proceedings if an officer can show that they followed their training and procedure?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman will know that we set out very swiftly the response to the accountability review. That included a series of measures not just on anonymity, but on strengthening the law and on the need for the system to work much more speedily to support officers in very difficult split-second decisions. We have a review under way, involving Tim Godwin and Sir Adrian Fulford, which is looking at many of these issues.

Antisocial Behaviour: Town Centres

2. **Becky Gittins** (Clwyd East) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle antisocial behaviour on high streets and in town centres. [901392]

6. **Kevin McKenna** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle antisocial behaviour on high streets and in town centres. [901396]

23. **Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve safety in town centres. [901415]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Too many town centres and high streets have been hit in recent years by soaring levels of shoplifting and street crime, and damaging antisocial behaviour, at the same time as neighbourhood police have been heavily cut. The Government are introducing new powers to tackle antisocial behaviour and shop crime, and rebuilding neighbourhood police on our streets.

Becky Gittins: Too often in recent years, antisocial behaviour has blighted our high streets, with people in Clwyd East feeling unsafe when they are out in their local community. We know that neighbourhood policing works. In Prestatyn, the recent work of North Wales police to combat antisocial behaviour at the retail centre has led to positive youth engagement and criminal charges. Does the Home Secretary agree that rather than writing off such offences as low-level and leaving communities to deal with them alone, as the previous Government did, we must prioritise neighbourhood policing and give officers the powers they need to tackle antisocial behaviour head-on?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right, and I congratulate her on standing up for her town centre. When town centre crime gets out of control, it impacts on local businesses and local confidence, and it impacts badly on communities. That is why we are bringing in respect orders, under which repeat perpetrators can be banned from town centres, and setting out our plans to have 13,000 more neighbourhood police and police community support officers back on our streets.

Kevin McKenna: I thank my right hon. Friend for that helpful answer. Many residents in my constituency flag up the real problems with antisocial behaviour in both Sheerness and Sittingbourne town centres. Windows have been smashed in church halls, and shop windows were smashed when the Christmas lights were being put on—I am seeing this all the time. Can she please tell me what help she is offering Kent police to support my residents facing this behaviour?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. As well as our plans to increase neighbourhood policing and introduce respect orders, we are going to get rid of the ludicrous £200 rule that we inherited from the Conservatives, which means that shoplifting is very often not properly investigated. That needs to be taken much more seriously.

Danny Beales: This morning I had the pleasure of meeting Sunny, the new store manager at the Hotel Chocolat in Uxbridge, which opened today. Unfortunately, during that joyous occasion, he told me all-too-familiar stories about the shoplifting and antisocial behaviour that blight our high streets. Will the Home Secretary assure me that the 19% of the Met Police's time that is taken up with London-wide and national policing issues will be taken into account when allocating the Met's budget, so that we have the resources we need and, crucially, the police we need back on our high streets?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point; I can tell him that we have already provided Met Police with an initial £30 million this year to fund the police pay increase that was not funded by the previous Conservative Government. We are also supporting neighbourhood policing right across the country and much stronger action, not just on shop theft, but on assaults against shop workers—a truly disgraceful crime.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): As a former police and crime commissioner for Lancashire, I worked very closely with the last Government on Operation Centurion, which was about really focusing in on antisocial behaviour through more visible patrols and better partnership working. We know that a lot of antisocial behaviour is egged on by a very small minority, and some of the most serious crimes related to antisocial behaviour are driven by that small minority. Without restricting freedoms, banning orders do not work and engagement with youth offending teams does not work, because they are all voluntary. What measures do the Government intend to bring in as part of their new zero tolerance zones that will be different from what currently exists, to make it really zero tolerance?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right that sometimes it is a small minority who are making life a total nightmare for everyone else. The current antisocial

behaviour injunctions just are not strong enough, because very often they do not come with a power of arrest. That is why we are introducing respect orders, which mean that repeat perpetrators can be banned from town centres. They will have a power of arrest so that swift action can be taken if they are breached.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Antisocial behaviour and crime on our high streets are best tackled with a visible police presence, but police officers in my constituency are spending a four-hour round trip taking those they are arresting to Worthing custody centre when we have a perfectly fit-for-purpose custody centre in Chichester. Does the Home Secretary agree that opening Chichester custody centre would reduce the time that police officers spend sitting in traffic and get them back on our streets?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an important point: there are often additional challenges for rural areas or areas where neighbourhood police may have to travel, and it is important that we maintain and increase neighbourhood policing right across the board in all areas. She will know that many of the issues around the location of centres are operational decisions for police forces, but I will pass the issue she has raised on to her police and crime commissioner.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The Cherry Tree community centre on the Swinemoor estate in Beverley provides support for up to 150 young people in the area, despite not having any permanent premises. It has planning permission and some money from the National Lottery, but could I please meet the right hon. Lady or one of her colleagues to discuss how we can find the funding for the right premises to support young people in Swinemoor and across Beverley?

Yvette Cooper: I will happily ensure that the right hon. Member is able to have a meeting with one of the team. We believe that introducing youth hubs is part of the prevention work that we need, particularly as part of new prevention partnerships, to stop young people being drawn into crime. We also need a new stronger law on child criminal exploitation.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The use of illegal high-powered Sur-Ron type e-bikes by criminal gangs on and around our high streets is causing significant concern, particularly in London, with incidents of antisocial behaviour, violent muggings and phone theft becoming increasingly more common. Can the Home Secretary please update the House on discussions her Department has had with the Mayor of London and the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police on what they are doing to reduce these incidents and make our streets safer across London?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right to refer to the issues around antisocial and criminal use not just of e-bikes—sometimes e-scooters are used illegally on pavements and off-road bikes cause havoc in local neighbourhoods. That is why we will strengthen the law around vehicles used for antisocial behaviour, so that they can be seized when that antisocial behaviour takes place and the police do not have to go through a whole ritual of a series of warnings which delays action.

Intelligence Sharing

3. **Paula Barker** (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve intelligence sharing following the terrorist incident in Forbury Gardens in Reading in 2020. [901393]

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The horrendous attack in Forbury Gardens in Reading claimed the lives of three people, and it is all the more agonising for their loved ones that the subsequent inquest concluded that it was avoidable. The Home Secretary and I are overseeing the implementation of commitments made in response to the inquest, and we are determined that all the lessons learned from this terrible incident are acted on.

Paula Barker: I thank the Minister for his response. James Furlong, David Wails and Joe Ritchie-Bennett were murdered in the Forbury Gardens terrorist attack in Reading in 2020. The coroner found major problems with intelligence sharing between authorities, which was underlined in the prevention of future deaths report published in May. Alongside others, Gary Furlong, my constituent and the father of James, is demanding that this is not just another report that sits on a shelf gathering dust. What action will my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary take to make permanent changes on the back of this attack? Will she agree to meet Gary Furlong and me to discuss progress in due course?

Dan Jarvis: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very important issue. Our deepest condolences are with the loved ones of James, Joseph and David following their tragic deaths. I assure my hon. Friend and the families that we will do everything in our power to stop this happening again. We will of course be happy to meet the families to discuss changes made, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and her constituent to discuss the matter further.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the families of the Reading victims and the victims of other terror attacks.

Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, has said that as much information as possible should be put into the public domain as early as possible to maintain public trust. Can the Minister assure the House that he and his ministerial colleagues have always disclosed relevant information at an early stage in relation to high-profile terror-related cases that have attracted substantial public and media attention?

Dan Jarvis: The shadow Home Secretary has raised an important issue. Yes, we agree with Jonathan Hall; he is absolutely right. Our overriding priority will always be to ensure that the victims of crime get justice, and we will look at how best that can be achieved.

Retail Crime

4. **Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle shoplifting and violence against shop workers. [901394]

19. **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle shoplifting and violence against shop workers. [901411]

22. **Chris Ward** (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help tackle retail crime. [901414]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): In the last year of the previous Government, shop theft reached a record high, and we saw intolerable levels of abuse against shop workers, leaving people fearful of going to work. This Government will not stand by as these crimes devastate our high streets and town centres. That is why we are committed to rebuilding neighbourhood policing, scrapping the £200 limit, which has let thieves steal below the level with impunity, and introducing a new, stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker.

Chris McDonald: Our shop workers will be putting in some long, hard shifts in the coming weeks to help us to get ready for Christmas, but a report from the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers has said that their risk of being the victims of assault in the workplace has doubled in the last year. Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending USDAW's Freedom from Fear campaign and affirm that the Government's commitment to removing the immunity from certain types of shoplifting introduced by the Conservative Government will proceed at pace?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting USDAW's findings and its tireless campaigning alongside the Co-op for the new stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker, which we will be proud to introduce in the forthcoming crime and policing Bill alongside the scrapping of the £200 limit. I take this opportunity to recognise the commitment of Cleveland's police and crime commissioner, Matt Storey, in tackling retail crime. I look forward to working with all police and crime commissioners to tackle this scourge on our communities.

Tom Rutland: Shoplifting is a crime that threatens the feeling of safety for shoppers and shop workers alike. In my constituency of East Worthing and Shoreham, the issue has become so severe that in the past year a resident has described it as an epidemic. Can my right hon. Friend please tell me how the Government plan to tackle this issue, so that shoppers and businesses in my area can operate in safety and with confidence?

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that people in East Worthing and Shoreham and across the entire country want to know how this Government are going to tackle this epidemic. I have referred to the 13,000 neighbourhood police officers, respect orders, the abolition of the £200 threshold limit and the stand-alone offence of assaulting a shop worker. I want to restore confidence in the people my hon. Friend represents—confidence that will make them feel their streets are safer—and ensure that criminals in their area pay the price for their crimes.

Chris Ward: My constituency team and I recently visited shops on one of the busiest high streets in my constituency. Of the first 10 we visited, nine said that their staff had suffered attacks at work, and all 10 said

that shoplifting was now pretty much a daily occurrence. Does the Minister agree that extra resources and extra policing are part of the answer, but that we should also be looking at programmes such as offender to rehab schemes—one of which has been rolled out in the west midlands—to make sure we are also tackling the causes of retail crime?

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend paints a deeply upsetting and unacceptable picture of the impact that aggressive and repeated shop theft can have on retail workers. The worst thing is that we know that it is replicated up and down the entire country; we cannot continue like this. That is why we are determined to take the action that I have set out in previous answers, but I agree that we have to look at issues around rehabilitation for offenders, including treatment for addiction where appropriate.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Bath is a very popular tourist and shopping destination, but it has also seen the highest increase in shoplifting offences between 2023 and 2024. For my shopkeepers to feel safe, they want a much more visible police presence in Bath. What can the Government do for them?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Shop theft went up by 21% in the previous year, which is totally unacceptable, and I hear very clearly what she says about her constituency of Bath. That is why the neighbourhood policing model that this Labour Government stood on at the general election is so important for starting to deal with shop theft, which—as we have just been talking about—has become an epidemic.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Home Secretary has repeatedly reiterated her pledge to tackle shoplifting and violence against shop workers by having a named officer in each community, as part of the 13,000 uplift for neighbourhood policing. I spoke to Cambridgeshire constabulary recently, which confirmed that under the Home Secretary's plans there would be one police officer to cover the whole town of St Ives. That officer would cover not only St Ives, but the town of Ramsey and all the villages in between—Woodhurst, Old Hurst, Pidley, Warboys, Wistow and Bury. Last week, the Policing Minister would not commit to reviewing the police allocation formula to ensure Cambridgeshire receives its fair share of funding. How can one officer be expected to cover such a large area effectively, given that Cambridgeshire is likely to receive only a handful of the officers?

Dame Diana Johnson: I say gently to the hon. Member that he has to look at what this Government inherited from his Conservative Government after 14 years, during which neighbourhood policing was repeatedly cut. This Government are committed to restoring neighbourhood policing. We have said that we will bring in 13,000 police officers, police community support officers and specials.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): When?

Dame Diana Johnson: The shadow Home Secretary is shouting “When?” at me. We are working on this as quickly as we can, five months in, after 14 years of what the Conservatives did to our policing.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Shoplifting is often organised by criminal gangs, and Norfolk police have had some success in fighting them. Does the Minister recognise that partnerships such as Operation Wonderland—which has just been launched by West Norfolk police alongside the local council, CCTV operators, street rangers and shop workers—are key to tackling this crime and making sure offenders are brought to justice?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Policing alone cannot deal with this crime; we need to work hand in hand with businesses, as well as the trade unions. USDAW has been very important in the campaign for the offence of assaulting a shop worker that we are going to bring in. I have also met the British Retail Consortium, and will chair a regular forum with the retail sector to make sure we are sharing best practice. We are going to deal with the problems we have inherited.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): One of the best ways to help tackle retail crime is to put more police on the streets. The last Conservative Government did just that—[*Interruption.*] The last Conservative Government did just that, delivering record numbers of police, with more funding than ever before, but we were not stopping there. This year, the Conservative Government increased frontline police funding by £922 million. Will the Minister commit to matching or even improving that figure next year?

Dame Diana Johnson: I do not know if it is just amnesia on that side of the House, but I think the Shadow Minister needs to reflect on what we actually inherited: PCSOs cut by 50%, specials down by two thirds and over 20,000 police officers cut under the Conservative Administration. So a little bit of humility about what they have left us with would go down very well.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

5. **Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD):** What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. [901395]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): We are determined to honour our commitment to those who supported us in Afghanistan and who stood up for freedom and democracy, placing their own lives at risk. To date, the Afghan schemes have brought over 32,000 people to safety in the UK, including thousands through the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. We aim to continue to relocate eligible individuals through our established schemes as quickly as possible.

Wendy Chamberlain: A major issue of concern for Afghans who have been here since the opening of the scheme is that their residency permits are now up for renewal. I am sure the Government do not want to render illegal those whom we welcomed to the UK. Can we have some guidance from the Home Office about some of the questions that people have asked me: where do people go for renewal; how is the Home Office

responding to those who have had several changes of address; and if there is a cost, what happens to those who cannot pay?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and for all her work for those who are here from Afghanistan. We continue to seek to email and notify all individuals currently resettled in the UK whom we are aware of, and I will certainly continue to discuss with her the methods we are using for those facing other issues.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): My constituent Dr Lubna Hadoura is an NHS consultant who desperately wants to be able to care for her 80-year-old mother, a refugee displaced from Gaza earlier this year who is now alone in Egypt and unable to care for herself. Will the Minister assure me that her application for an adult dependent relative visa will be carefully, humanely and properly considered?

Mr Speaker: I am not quite sure that that is actually about the resettlement scheme, but okay.

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. The death and destruction in Gaza are intolerable, and I assure her that that application is being looked at very closely and she should be receiving an update very soon.

Domestic Abuse

7. **Cat Eccles** (Stourbridge) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle domestic abuse. [901397]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): The Government have set out an unprecedented mission to halve violence against women and girls within a decade. I say this on White Ribbon Day, and it is good to see everybody wearing their white ribbons. We are determined to tackle the scourge of domestic abuse in all its forms. From early 2025, Raneem's law, which will embed domestic abuse specialist teams into 999 control rooms in order to improve the police response to domestic abuse crimes, will ensure that victims get a swift and specialist response when they call for help. We will also, finally, launch the pilot of the domestic abuse protection orders and roll them out across the country, which the previous Government failed to do three years after the fact of the law changing. So we will be providing stronger protections for survivors and ensuring that perpetrators are properly monitored and managed.

Cat Eccles: I thank the Minister for her response. My constituent Samantha Billingham is a domestic abuse survivor who now runs training sessions on coercive control. Coercive control is a thread that runs throughout all abuse, and I was shocked to hear that it does not form a core part of the training for the police, social workers or any other domestic violence training. Will the Minister meet me and Samantha to ensure that coercive control forms a key part of domestic violence training?

Jess Phillips: I have met Samantha Billingham, a local west midlands legend campaigning in this space, a number of times and I share my hon. Friend's shock at the lack of knowledge about coercive control. All police, social workers and others in contact with victims of domestic abuse ought to be aware of coercive control and its insidious effects on the victim, and of course I would be delighted to meet her.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): There is a significant disparity in sentencing for murder based on whether a weapon was taken to the scene of a domestic crime or was already present. Sentences for murderers who used a weapon already available at the crime scene start 10 years lower than sentences for those who brought a weapon with them. Does the Minister agree that this disparity must be tackled?

Jess Phillips: I thank the hon. Lady and pay tribute to Julie Devey and Carole Gould, two of the parents who are fighting this campaign. A Ministry of Justice sentencing review is currently ongoing, and I know that Carole and Julie and Members here will want to feed into that.

Young People: Violent Crime

8. **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to help prevent young people from becoming involved in violent crime. [901398]

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The epidemic of knife crime that has grown over the last decade is devastating families and communities right across the country. That is why this Government have set ourselves an unprecedented mission to halve knife crime over the next 10 years. We are already taking action to get lethal blades off Britain's streets and taking stronger action against illegal online knife sales. We are also determined to stop young people being drawn into violent crime and county lines in the first place, which is why we are delivering a radical new young futures prevention programme, with targeted interventions to help at risk young people and a network of new youth hubs.

Alice Macdonald: I thank the Minister for meeting me recently. As she says, too many young people are being drawn into county lines, suffering exploitation and violence. This is a significant problem across the country, including in Norwich. Many organisations are working hard locally to improve the situation, such as the Joe Dix Foundation, established by his parents after Joe's tragic murder in 2022. Can the Minister reassure me that the Government are investing all they can in preventive measures and set out what is being done to support organisations on the frontline?

Dame Diana Johnson: It was a great pleasure to meet my hon. Friend just last week to discuss this issue. Organisations like the Joe Dix Foundation do amazing work to help keep people safe and keep young people out of county line gangs in particular, and through the Home Office county lines programme we are going after exploitative gangs and providing specialist support for children and young people. Our young futures programme will establish those prevention partnerships in every local authority to identify children and young people at risk.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Minister speaks of the young futures programme. Will she work with the Northern Ireland Executive to put in place the same programmes so that we can prevent young people in Northern Ireland from joining paramilitary organisations, which are nothing more than organised and violent crime organisations?

Dame Diana Johnson: I can certainly talk to Ministers in the Northern Ireland Office to discuss what we can learn from the proposed programme and the good practice we know exists already in many parts of the UK. We want to build on that so I am very happy to share that.

Car Theft: Rural Areas

9. **Dr Marie Tidball** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle car theft in rural areas. [901399]

Mr Speaker: Who wants to answer this one?

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): Sorry, Mr Speaker. These questions are like buses—they all come along at once.

Vehicle theft is a deeply distressing and damaging crime which can have a detrimental effect on both individuals and businesses, including in rural communities. That is why we are working closely with both the police and the automotive industry to ensure the most robust responses possible to these crimes. Last week I met with the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for vehicle crime to discuss this issue and how we can better work together to prevent it.

Dr Tidball: An increase in car and van thefts and antisocial behaviour in Stocksbridge, Deepcar, High Green, Chapeltown and Dodworth has left my constituents feeling vulnerable and unsafe. Local people have also experienced excessive 999 response times. How is the Minister tackling the rise in vehicle thefts, working with manufacturers to improve vehicle safety and supporting South Yorkshire police after years of Conservative cuts?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am pleased that this question is being asked, and it is important to note that this autumn, driven by the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for vehicle crime, the national vehicle crime reduction partnership has been launched, bringing together the police, the Home Office and manufacturers on the very point of how we tackle this problem. We are also committed to bringing forward legislation to ban electronic devices used to steal vehicles, empowering the police and courts to target those criminals using, manufacturing and supplying them.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): That was a welcome answer from the Minister. Farmers in Wiltshire complain not just about car theft, which is endemic, but wider agricultural theft, too, and the terrible scourge of hare coursing. It is all bound up in serious organised crime. Does the Minister recognise the seriousness of organised rural crime of this nature, and what steps is she taking to address it?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I recently met the Agricultural Engineers Association to discuss the implementation of the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, which he will know is

important in tackling some of that rural crime with agricultural equipment that has been stolen, often by organised gangs. There is work ongoing on this, and the issue is recognised by the Home Office.

Public Confidence in Policing

10. **Jake Richards** (Rother Valley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase public trust and confidence in policing. [901400]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Public confidence in policing fell under the last Conservative Government, as we saw a big drop in police on the beat, with fewer crimes solved and a real sense in communities that more criminals are getting away with it. This Government are determined to turn that around, starting with getting police back on the beat and rebuilding neighbourhood policing.

Jake Richards: Earlier this month I held a community meeting in Dinnington about the regeneration project on the high street. It was well attended, and people are optimistic, but they are also worried about the lack of police in the area and the crime that continues to blight their town. Can the Home Secretary reassure the residents of Dinnington that this Government will rebuild community policing, which was utterly let down over 14 years of Conservative Government?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The percentage of people seeing police on the beat each week has dropped by two thirds over the past 14 years. The percentage of people who say they never see the police has doubled. That is the shameful consequence of 14 years of Conservative policing policies. This Government will put 13,000 more police and police community support officers back on the beat.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Local volunteers in Potters Bar were left struggling on Remembrance Sunday to stop the traffic to allow the march to take place. They were told by the police that they lacked the resources and the power to stop the traffic, yet on the same day in neighbouring Essex the police managed to visit a journalist regarding a deleted tweet. Every weekend, vast amounts of resources pour into London for pro-Palestinian marches. Does the Home Secretary share the despair of my constituents at this allocation of resources, and will she provide guidance for next year's Remembrance service, both on police powers and the responsibilities regarding those marches?

Yvette Cooper: I just point out to the former Deputy Prime Minister that the state of policing in this country is the policing that we inherited after 14 years of Conservative Government, in which they took police off the beat and in which we lost neighbourhood policing and PCSOs. This Government have made clear what the priorities for policing should be neighbourhood policing, including tackling antisocial behaviour and town centre crime, and reducing serious violence, including knife crime and violence against women and girls. We always believe that Remembrance Day should be respected, which is something that one of his former colleagues as Home Secretary did not respect.

Mr Speaker: I call the acting shadow Minister.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): More than 13,000 non-crime hate incidents have been logged by UK police forces in the past year, including against schoolchildren as young as nine for classroom insults. This is estimated to have taken 60,000 hours of police time and undermines public trust and confidence in policing. The last Government tightened the guidance, and it has been widely reported this morning that the Home Secretary will update it again. How will the right hon. Lady know if her changes have worked? What is the metric, and is there a target? If the changes do not work, will she restrict investigations to take place only when there is an imminent risk of an actual crime?

Yvette Cooper: I welcome the hon. Member to her acting role—I am not sure how long she is acting for. We have made clear what we believe the priorities should be for policing: neighbourhood policing and reducing serious violence on our streets, and that should be the case across the board. We should have a common-sense approach to policing decisions in every area across the country. On the issues she raised, the inspectorate has recently done a report, which found inconsistencies in a whole series of areas. We believe that its recommendations need to be taken immensely seriously by forces across the country.

Online Safety: Children

11. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help keep children safe online. [901401]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): There is nothing more important for the Government than keeping our children safe. That is why I am appalled by the volume of child abuse that is proliferating online, and why we are determined to act. We are committed to robust implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023, which contains strong protections for children, but we will not hesitate to go further if tech companies fail to play their part. Our investment in the National Crime Agency, GCHQ, an undercover online network of police officers and the tackling organised exploitation programme is supporting our efforts to keep children safe online by targeting and stopping the highest harm and most technically sophisticated offenders.

Gregor Poynton: I greatly welcome the action that the Government are taking, but the fight against child sex abuse online is only as strong as its weakest link, and Facebook's decision to allow the encrypted sharing of images makes it a very weak link indeed. Does the Minister share my anger that Facebook appears to be turning a blind eye while its platform becomes a safe haven for paedophiles?

Jess Phillips: My hon. Friend raises an extremely serious issue. I assure him that we very much share his concerns. The Home Secretary has met representatives from Meta and our officials are in regular contact. What we say in all those discussions is very simple. For years, Meta has been an industry leader when it comes to preventing and detecting child sex abuse online, and

what we all want to see is it continuing to play that positive role and not—as my hon. Friend fears—going in the opposite direction.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): My constituent lost his son to suicide following exposure to an online suicide forum. He is sadly one of 88 known Britons, the youngest of whom was just 17, whose deaths have been linked to this one site. Under the Online Safety Act, the Technology Secretary has the powers to include such small but very dangerous sites under category 1—the most heavily regulated category—but Ofcom has advised him against doing so. Will the Minister press her colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to include these exceptionally dangerous sites in category 1?

Jess Phillips: I pay tribute to the hon. Member's constituent. It is unimaginable for any parent to have to go through something like that. We at the Home Office are working incredibly closely with our DSIT colleagues as the Online Safety Act comes into force to ensure that it is as strong and robust as it can be. We are having those conversations daily.

Violence against Women and Girls

12. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to tackle violence against women and girls. [901402]

18. **Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): What steps her Department is taking with police forces to tackle violence against women and girls. [901410]

20. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What support she is providing to local organisations to help tackle violence against women and girls. [901412]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): The scale of violence against women and girls in our country is intolerable, and the Government will treat it as a national emergency. As part of this mission, we are bringing together Ministers from right across Government so that every Department does its bit, from prevention work in schools through to relentless pursuit of dangerous perpetrators. On top of that work, we have already begun strengthening the police response to domestic abuse. We will mark the next 16 days of activism with further announcements on our work to tackle spiking, stalking and other VAWG crimes.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: Charities such as Aylesbury Women's Aid do brilliant and vital work to support survivors of domestic abuse. However, when these survivors interact with other public-facing services such as emergency or healthcare services, they are not always met with the same level of understanding. What measures is the Minister taking to ensure that survivors of domestic violence and abuse are met with a trauma-informed approach across all public services?

Jess Phillips: A massive thank you to Aylesbury Women's Aid for the amazing work that it is clearly doing. I am afraid that my hon. Friend and victims are exactly right in their assessment. That is why we must have a completely cross-Government approach to ensuring

that no matter where a victim stands up, all services take responsibility for their role in the lives of those who are suffering.

Monica Harding: As the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles) pointed out, coercive control is a criminal offence but it is often overlooked, despite research suggesting that it is the third highest risk factor in domestic homicide. In my surgeries in Esher and Walton, victims have told me that there is not a sufficient understanding of coercive control in police interviews, particularly when other crimes are being investigated. What assessments are being made of the effectiveness of the roll-out of the domestic abuse risk assessment—DARA—toolkit, which was introduced by the College of Policing in 2022?

Jess Phillips: A number of different risk assessment tools are used, whether DARA or Dash—the domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and honour-based violence risk assessment—which has a more historical grounding and is used more widely. I want the hon. Lady to know that it is impossible to read any domestic homicide review in our country for the past decade and not think that risk assessments, and how well they are used and operating, is something that we should look at.

Chris Bloore: Will the Minister join me in thanking the incredible staff at the Sandycroft centre in my constituency, who offer life-saving support for vulnerable people in times of crisis? Will she visit the centre with me to hear from CEO Lee McKenzie and the independent sexual violence advisers, who are on the frontline tackling increased violence against women and girls?

Jess Phillips: As it is very local to me, I take a particular interest in the Sandycroft centre. Such centres are invaluable to vulnerable women, and I would be delighted to visit him and Lee—it would be a 15-minute drive.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that local charities like Jasmine House, which operates in my constituency, play a vital role in supporting women who have been victims of a sexual crime? But in addition to the worry of constantly trying to find funding, they are concerned about the impact that the Government's proposed increase in employer's national insurance will have on their ability to continue providing that help. Does the Minister agree that they should be exempt from the changes to national insurance contributions?

Jess Phillips: I pay tribute to Jasmine House. As someone who applied for funding for a similar centre, I understand exactly the funding pressures that its staff will face. What the sector really needs is stability, the assurance of more than single-year funding, which the Government are looking at, and making sure that we mitigate to ensure that there is enough.

Topical Questions

T1. [901417] **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Today is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. It marks the start of 16 days of global activism on the issue. As part of the Labour Government's safer streets mission, we have set an ambition to halve violence against women and girls, which I hope everyone will be a part of.

Today we are setting out new action to tackle the devastating crime of spiking, with a new stand-alone criminal offence to strengthen the police response, new specialist training for bar and door staff across the country, and new recording measures, because we fear that the prevalence is much higher than has been previously thought, and the dangerous criminals responsible need to be caught and stopped. As we look forward to the festive season, everyone should be able to enjoy a night out without having to worry about the safety of their drink and whether they will be able to get home safely.

Deirdre Costigan: I met constituents at my coffee morning in Southall Green on Friday, who raised the constant issue of open drug dealing and antisocial behaviour in the town centre. Will the Secretary of State work with the Mayor of London to ensure that we have more police on the streets of Southall and London as soon as we can?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have already given the Met an additional £37 million this year, on top of what it was previously allocated. We also need to ensure that here and right across the country we have neighbourhood police back in town centres, because that is how to tackle not just local drug dealing, but antisocial behaviour and other crimes that blight communities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Let me start by offering the Home Secretary a belated congratulations on her appointment. Having been a Minister in that Department, I know how difficult her job is and I genuinely wish her well in doing it. We will always seek to work constructively with the Government in the national interest. I also associate myself with the remarks she made about International VAWG Day—International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls. Since the election, 19,988 people have dangerously and illegally crossed the channel, a 23% increase on the same period last year. Why does the right hon. Lady think the numbers have gone up so much on her watch?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the shadow Home Secretary for his opening words. I think he described his time in the Home Office as his best ministerial job ever. Given that he was Chief Secretary to the Treasury under Liz Truss, we can perhaps wonder why. He was also the Immigration Minister who, I remind him, told the Commons and the Select Committee that he would not rule out using giant wave machines as the way to stop small boat crossings. We inherited record high levels of small boat crossings in the first half of this year. We have taken action to fix the previous Government's chaos.

Chris Philp: I am asking the Home Secretary about her record. I am asking the Home Secretary why small boat crossings have gone up during her time in office.

Perhaps it is because, as the National Crime Agency said, we need a deterrent. Yet she cancelled the Rwanda deterrent before it even started. Now we hear Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President, asking European member states to look at offshore processing. Is that not why it has gone up? Is that not why the Minister for Border Security and Asylum admitted last week that she is opening new hotels instead of closing them down?

Yvette Cooper: Seriously, what a lot of chaos! Highest level on record: that was the six months of the last Conservative Government, while the right hon. Gentleman was in government. In fact, the numbers since the summer are not the highest on record. That, unfortunately, was his legacy. While he was the Immigration Minister, he increased the number of asylum hotels by 500% and increased the number of people in asylum hotels by over 900%. Seriously, he should not try to give lectures to anybody else at all.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am going to give a little lecture. If you really want to attack each other, can you do it before we get to topical questions? These questions are meant to be short and sweet, because otherwise other Members will not get in.

T2. [901418] **Anneliese Midgley** (Knowsley) (Lab): Specialist domestic abuse services, such as The First Step in Knowsley, are facing an increase in demand but are having to turn people away due to a lack of funding. What more can Ministers do to support such services?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): I have visited The First Step, and to say that it is run by brilliant Merseyside women would be an underestimation. Specialist “by and for” services play an essential role and provide tailored support to victims and survivors. We understand the challenges that the sector faces, in particular with the level of demand their services are currently facing. All decisions on funding after March 2025 are subject to the spending review process.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): We all want to stop criminals terrorising our communities, whether they are domestic abusers or shoplifters targeting our high streets. Live facial recognition is being rolled out by our police forces, including on Sutton High Street in my constituency, but we cannot ignore the risks that this technology presents. Facial recognition systems are most likely to misidentify black people and women, doing nothing to stop crime and further eroding trust in our police. Will the Minister introduce clear regulation oversight of live facial recognition, such as that which the EU passed last April?

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): This is another area where the new incoming Labour Government are having to look at powers and measures brought in by the previous Government. Live facial recognition can have very positive effects, but we need to consider whether we need a framework around it. That is why I will be hosting a series of roundtables before Christmas to discuss with stakeholders the way forward on this technology.

T3. [901419] **Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): The National Audit Office recently raised serious concerns about the previous Government’s decision to buy poor-quality, expensive and contaminated asylum accommodation at Northeye. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that asylum accommodation is fit for purpose and represents value for money?

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. What the National Audit Office found in its report was not only an appalling process of decision making by members of the previous Government, but a grotesque waste of £15 million of taxpayers’ money—just like the waste of £60 million at RAF Scampton. In contrast, the new Government are determined to cut asylum accommodation costs by stepping up decision making, reducing the backlog—

Mr Speaker: Order. Gregory Stafford.

Dame Angela Eagle:—and increasing returns.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is the Back Benchers who do not get in.

T4. [901420] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Transnational repression by Iran, China, Russia and other unfriendly nations continues to be writ large on diaspora populations in this country. What is the Government’s strategy on transnational repression, and will the Home Secretary reintroduce the last Government’s defending democracy taskforce to monitor incidence?

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The taskforce is examining closely the threats that he raises, and we shall have more to say about that shortly.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): I am sure that the Home Secretary would agree that good government is transparent government. I have been told by her Department, in response to a written parliamentary question, that the number of crimes committed by illegal migrants is not available through published statistics. I am sure that the Home Office does hold the data, so will the Minister commit to publishing it in full?

Dame Angela Eagle: There will be a huge drop of immigration-related national statistics at the end of the week.

T5. [901421] **Jake Richards** (Rother Valley) (Lab): Two brave women from Maltby came to my most recent surgery. Each told me about the horrific physical and emotional abuse that they had suffered at the hands of their ex-partners. They also told me that the police had ignored non-molestation orders, which—as I know from my professional experience before I was called to the Bar—is far from uncommon. What steps will the Government take to ensure that any relevant court orders are given due force?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is a serious problem of injunctions, non-molestation orders and protection orders not being

treated properly. That is why we are introducing Raneem's law, which includes stronger protection orders and specialists in 999 control rooms.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Chelmsford's allocation of dispersal accommodation for asylum seekers is more than 120 beds, but the number found to date is about a tenth of that number owing to the high demand for and high cost of private rented accommodation in the district. What extra support can the Minister offer councils facing the increasing cost of housing asylum seekers?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are trying to co-operate much more with local authorities so that we can deal with these issues, but ultimately the way to deal with them is to get the backlog down and get people out of high-price accommodation so that we can integrate them if they are granted asylum.

T7. [901423] **Abtisam Mohamed** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I have met a number of British-Palestinian families who are trying to reunite with their families in Gaza. Part of the entry clearance process requires the undertaking of biometrics. There is no visa centre in Gaza, and they are unable to leave owing to the closure of the Rafah crossing. Will the Home Secretary, or the Minister, please indicate whether they are willing to introduce a temporary waiver for biometrics so that people can complete the entry clearance process?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): The death and destruction in Gaza are intolerable. Palestinians who wish to join family members in the UK must do so via the range of existing routes that are available, but if my hon. Friend wishes to raise a specific matter with me, I shall be happy to meet her.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): What steps is the Minister taking to tackle crime in rural areas?

Dame Diana Johnson: As I said earlier, I have met representatives of the Agricultural Engineers Association to discuss the implementation of the secondary legislation that is required to deal with the theft of agricultural equipment, and I am also having meetings with the rural crime units to discuss some of the specifics. However, the neighbourhood policing guarantee applies in rural areas just as much as in urban areas, which is important.

T8. [901424] **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): My constituent Tracy set up the organisation Changes Are Made in memory of her grandson Cameron Hamilton, who was fatally stabbed in Bournemouth town centre last year. Tracy believes deeply in the power of education and positive activities to tackle knife crime, and is campaigning for a youth hub in the constituency. Can the Home Secretary update us on the progress being made towards the roll-out of a network of youth hubs, and will she support Tracy's campaign?

Yvette Cooper: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's constituent Tracy for campaigning in memory of Cameron. Too many young lives are being lost. That is why we are setting up the Young Futures programme, with youth hubs but also prevention partnerships, to work across the country.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): In recent weeks, the number of channel crossings has been far higher than the Home Office expected, which is why we have seen Ministers rapidly approving new asylum hotels. We are told that the situation is temporary, because asylum claims are apparently now being processed faster and people are being moved through accommodation faster too. What reassurances can the Home Secretary give my constituents that the faster processing of asylum claims, with no deterrent in the system, will not simply act as a massive incentive for more people to come here on small boats?

Yvette Cooper: I have to tell the hon. Member that unfortunately the previous Government cut asylum decision making by 75% in the run-up to the election, and they took away caseworkers. That is why the backlog was soaring. We have now put caseworkers back in place so that we can start clearing the backlog, because asylum hotels are costing the taxpayer huge amounts of money.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Disabled women are almost three times more likely to experience domestic abuse and almost twice as likely to report sexual violence. Does the Minister agree that it is important for not only her Department but the police to work with disabled women-led organisations to understand the intersection with gender-based violence and the double whammy that affects disabled women?

Jess Phillips: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pay tribute to Stay Safe East, one of very few specialist disability and domestic abuse charities. Without "by and for" services, we simply would not be serving most of the women in our country who need support.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): A report published today shows that 60,000 hours are taken up each year investigating non-crime hate incidents. Does the Minister agree that confidence in the police could be restored if they prioritised their time and resources to investigate actual crime rather than hurt feelings?

Dame Diana Johnson: This Government have made very clear what our priorities are around safer streets and where the focus should be for policing: on halving knife crime and halving violence against women and girls over the next decade. The Home Secretary has also been very clear that a common-sense approach must be taken to non-crime hate incidents. We will work with the inspectorate and the College of Policing on the matter.

Speaker's Statement

LORD PRESCOTT

3.32 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Prime Minister, I should like to say a few words about our former colleague Lord Prescott. John was first elected to this House in 1970, and he served the people of Hull for four decades. He became deputy leader of the Labour party in 1994—my father helped on that campaign—and Deputy Prime Minister at the 1997 election.

I have to say thanks to John for coming to Chorley to ensure that I had a new start as a Labour Member in Chorley. I will just share what John did. On that day, tragically, the press pushed an old lady over and her arm was broken. The first thing John said was, “I must go to the hospital.” He went to hospital to see that lady as her cast was being put on. That was the kind of person John Prescott was.

John played a major role in delivering the Kyoto protocol and was a great champion of regional government, integrated transport and affordable housing. After leaving government, he became active in inter-parliamentary relations, leading the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He was an effective politician, a highly respected colleague and a towering figure in the labour movement and in this House. He will be deeply missed, and all our thoughts are with Pauline and the family.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for those words, which John's family will have heard.

There are many Members of this House who serve their constituents faithfully. Some deliver change for the entire country. Very few enter into public consciousness, let alone public affection. But John Prescott achieved all those things. He was absolutely unique and people loved him for it. He had the most extraordinary life, from failing his 11-plus to stewarding Anthony Eden on a cruise ship, to being deputy leader of—as he described it—“the greatest party there is”,

and the longest-serving Deputy Prime Minister this country has ever had.

It was an extraordinary life, yet ordinary people across the nation felt that he was one of them. He told a story of a working-class lad made good who embodied the aspiration of working people across the entire country. People felt recognised in the struggles they had—the snobbery and the small-mindedness that still plague politics even today—but they also felt that he understood and championed their ambitions, their hopes and their dreams.

John was a politician for working people through and through. That was who he always was. A proud son of Wales and an honorary son of the Humber, he served the city of Hull for 40 years, as you said, Mr Speaker. Everyone knew that he loved it as fiercely as he fought for it. Everything he did was about making working people's lives better. That was evident from his whole career, a career in which he was often ahead of his time. He led on climate change, fighting regional inequality, supporting the minimum wage, working to transform

public transport, building council houses and even completing the channel tunnel. In many ways, he set the path that we walk today. Make no mistake: he did things his own way and forged his own path, and in doing so he brought about some of the greatest transformation this country has ever seen.

John was the linchpin of new Labour, because beneath the pugnacious exterior he was a skilled negotiator, sometimes with immense and perhaps surprising sensitivity. He had an incredible skill, which was the ability to bring people together from different starting points—whether that was in his work on climate negotiations or closer to home in his own party—to stand together in a better place.

That sums up another thing that I think the public sensed about John: that he was not in it for himself. He was willing to work with people he did not agree with, as well as challenging those he usually did agree with. He had great self-awareness and great humility, and if he disagreed fiercely in private, he would do so and then defend the line—often improved because of his intervention—in public to the hilt.

John was a team player and he was proud to play for team Labour. That was never more evident than during the campaign season when it was time to bring out the battle bus, a tradition that our Deputy Prime Minister proudly continued this year. The Prescott express was a morale boost to any campaign. It may have been arriving in a Tesco car park, but John was always met with a reception like Beatlemania. And no wonder: the public were at the heart of John's politics and it was clear that the public had a particular place in their heart for him, too. That was key to his popularity. Indeed, after the famous incident it was the public who came out swinging for him. That night, Labour campaigners were anxiously dispatched to the most accurate focus group that there is, the local pub, to hear what people were saying. The reports were clear: the public had his back, just as he had always had theirs. Tony Blair, my predecessor, said simply, “John is John.”

And he was. John was John, and he will live on in Labour legend, in the memory of everybody who is in this House now and who served when he was in the House, and in the affection of the nation. We remember today his wife Pauline, and we send our love and condolences to his family and his loved ones. We stand with the people of Hull and working people across the country to say, “Thank you, John, for a lifetime of service, for a genuine character and for a changed nation.” May he rest in peace.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. On behalf of the Opposition, I pay tribute to the late John Prescott. Lord Prescott will be remembered for many things: as a committed Member of Parliament for his beloved constituency of Kingston upon Hull East, as a formidable campaigner for the causes he believed in, and for his public service as Deputy Prime Minister. As I said last week, he was a true patriot and had a unique way of connecting with the electorate. Many of us did not know him personally, but his strength of personality was felt.

[Mrs Kemi Badenoch]

For those of us who came into politics during the new Labour era, our experience of politics was shaped by Lord Prescott. He was a leading figure in making the Labour party under Tony Blair electable, after enduring four consecutive election defeats. In the process of broadening his party's appeal, he ensured that Labour thought about the needs, values and aspirations of regular people across this country, not just those of a metropolitan elite. He was often underestimated, yet by all accounts he was an intelligent, amusing and relentlessly hard-working man with great political instincts. Although I would doubtless have disagreed with him on many things, I would have loved the opportunity to argue with him about making our country better.

In paying tribute to the late Lord Prescott, I express heartfelt condolences on behalf of myself and my party, and I send sincere condolences to his family, his friends and his colleagues.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I pay tribute not just to my predecessor as the Member of Parliament for Kingston upon Hull East, but to a family friend of over 50 years. In doing so, I send my heartfelt condolences to Pauline and the family.

Many will remember John as a political giant, and indeed he was, but he was also a gentle giant to many. John always had time to chat to anyone who stopped him. Many Members will speak today of the great work he did both inside and outside this House, but I want to speak about the John we knew in east Hull, both as our MP and as a very dear friend, as he was to many.

East Hull was John's adoptive home, and it became a strong part of his identity. Everyone in east Hull has their own story about John, including those he helped, and there were many thousands of them. One of John's biggest legacies in Hull is the £55 million regeneration of the Preston Road estate in the heart of the constituency as part of the new deal for communities. I am told that John was the person in the Cabinet who spearheaded that programme.

I have had the great pleasure and honour of knowing John all my life. As kids we enjoyed family holidays with the Prescotts, and I still keep a picture on my office desk of me, JP and the family hurtling down a log flume. I keep it for a reason: because John was clearly enjoying it the most.

One year, John decided that we were going to Loch Ness to find Nessie. We did not find Nessie, but we had the most amazing time, with memories we will never forget. During the voyage, Captain John thought it would be fun to throw his watch overboard to test our diving skills—as kids, we did not realise that John was an expert diver—but it sank too far. We began to panic a bit, but John, with a big grin on his face, dived overboard. He was missing for more than a few minutes, we thought, but he came up on the other side of the vessel, holding the watch with a massive grin on his face.

John's legacy will always be etched on the hearts of those he served and the city that he loved. There will never be another JP, and no Member of this House will ever be able to connect with the voters quite like he did. He truly was one of a kind. John's spirit and approach

to politics will live on in all of us who were inspired by him and by his dedication and commitment to the cause. Rest in peace, comrade.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I was never on John Prescott's Christmas card list, but I did have the interesting task of shadowing him in the early noughties for three years, and I felt like I got to know him. My respect for him grew, though I was never sure whether it was entirely reciprocated. I would occasionally tour the media studios with him, and on one occasion John was getting his make-up on and clearly had not realised that I was outside the door. He said to his aide, "Is that bloody Liberal here again?"

We spoke more in later years, when I was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, as John always retained a deep and well-informed interest in all things climate, with his significant, globally recognised role in securing the Kyoto climate treaty. The Government's chief climate negotiator in my time, the brilliant but sadly departed Pete Betts, had also been John's key negotiator at Kyoto. Pete would tell the story of how John's sheer energy and staying power were crucial to the success of those negotiations, and how John would tour the negotiating rooms throughout the night, uttering the great phrase: "I'm walking. I'm talking."

Our paths also crossed in the great city of Kingston upon Hull, when we eventually managed to get Siemens to invest in a wind turbine manufacturing facility for offshore wind farms. There was a celebration on the day when the first sod was turned to build the factory, and the reception was held in what is called The Deep—a huge tourist attraction, which John had played a crucial role in making happen, down by the marina in Hull. The Deep is the UK's home to several species of shark. As we walked around it, being instructed about sharks, we were reliably informed that sharks can be very friendly, and though he would never admit it in public, John was always very friendly to me. He was a trailblazer and an inspiration, even plunging into the Thames in a wetsuit to make an important point about water pollution—exactly the sort of savvy, effective campaigning that I for one admire. John will be missed by very many people, so on behalf of bloody Liberals everywhere, I send my heartfelt condolences to Pauline, John's children and grandchildren, and all his family and many friends.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As chair of the parliamentary Labour party, I echo the tribute made by the Prime Minister and send our thoughts and love to John's family. At the PLP meeting tonight, we will have a chance to reflect on his enormous contribution to the country and the party. As a former Labour organiser, I can tell the House that he was beloved by our members. They would move mountains in Wales to go and see him, although he himself said:

"When I do die, after 50 years in politics, all they will show on the news is 60 seconds of me thumping a fellow in Wales",

The many, many tributes over the weekend rightly reflected his immense contribution to the country, which should never be underestimated: his drive to improve council housing; his championing of the minimum wage; his

leadership on climate change—climate action before it was a thing. A true socialist and thoroughly authentic, he cared only about making people's lives better.

To go back to that punch, there are many others here today who were close friends with John, or who worked with him and knew him far better than me; we were, however, connected by one event, for I, as a youngish general secretary of the Welsh Labour party, organised his visit to Rhyl—clearly not very well, although he never seemed to hold it against me, and he did not get me sacked, which was an enormous relief at the time. There is so much that I could say about that day. He was a trooper. He went back inside immediately after the punch and did this rather strange comedy show at the Little Theatre, but I will not test your patience, Mr Speaker. The definitive guide is in Matt Forde's podcast with Martin Angus, which I would recommend to all Members. For those of us in the background of the footage, it never goes away. Although John was right that the clip has been shown again a million times over the weekend, his legacy was always far bigger than a GIF. He will be much missed by our big Labour family.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I served in this place with John Prescott for many years, and I admired him from afar as being a true Labour man and a man of true grit. I am not sure that my admiration of him was reciprocated, but I held him in great affection. My first memory of him was in 1983, when I arrived in this place as a new Member of Parliament. I gave a speech, during which I could see John grunting and looking furious. He probably thought I was an absurd, young, opinionated Thatcherite brat—and he was probably right.

Talking of Mrs Thatcher, my next memory of him was when I saw him having a quiet supper in the little Members' canteen we used to have downstairs. The moment my boss, Mrs Thatcher, came in, I could see John waving his hands in fury at her for all that she had done. Neil Kinnock leaned over and said, "Calm down, John, calm down." I thought, "Here is a man of real strong opinion." We have so many anaemic politicians today—I am not looking at anybody in particular—so it was wonderful to have a man like John Prescott on the Opposition Benches.

John much mellowed and it was a great joy to serve with him on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I remember him saying that his children wanted him to go on "Strictly Come Dancing", but he decided not to. That would have been something for the history books—John Prescott on "Strictly Come Dancing"!

As a local Member of Parliament, I pay tribute to John Prescott. I used to take my children to The Deep, and he did a great many things for Hull. I wish hon. Members could have watched Look North, our local television news programme, and seen the tributes paid by local people, who said how loved he was in Hull and how hard he worked for the people. He was a great man and he will be sorely missed.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I was deeply saddened to hear about the death of John Prescott. I send my condolences to Pauline, his sons and all those who were close to him.

I considered him to be a good friend of mine and of Mansfield. He was a giant of a man and a champion of the coalfields, devolution, local government and climate action.

I first met John in the 1980s, as an activist in the Labour party, and enjoyed supporting him in his first campaign to be deputy leader in 1988, and in his campaign to be leader and deputy leader in 1994. His legacy includes setting up the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which was established to help support former coalfield areas in communities such as Mansfield that had been impacted by the pit closure programmes of the 1980s and 1990s. That helped ensure that my area received millions of pounds of funding.

John had a particularly strong link to my constituency of Mansfield, especially through my Labour predecessor, Sir Alan Meale, who was his parliamentary private secretary for some years. Anecdotally, I can recall many endearing memories of John, including a time when we were playing table tennis in Sir Alan's front yard in Mansfield. It was a lovely sunny day and we were enjoying our game in the garden, on a day when the Prime Minister was out of the country on business. An important call came through that John had to take, and we paused our game. To this day, I have no idea who it was or what was said, but the conversation clearly distracted John so much that when he arrived back, he hit the ball with such force that it bounced right off the table and hit the ministerial car. From that experience, I can assure the House that the left hook still packed a mighty punch.

In the years after John left office, I would often drive him back to the station at Newark or Doncaster after his many visits to Mansfield, so he could get the train to London or back home to Hull. The insights from his frank and honest recollections of history from the Blair and Brown years will stay with me for a very long time. May he rest in peace.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. When I first arrived in the House, it was common in the Conservative party—the Thatcherite Conservative party, I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh)—to view John Prescott as public enemy No. 1. It was an act that he loved playing into, in public at least. That being said, outside the studio or the Chamber, he was friendly and helpful, certainly to me. Indeed, he was almost the best possible constituency neighbour one could want.

John Prescott was quintessentially a working-class hero—an identity that I suspect the current Deputy Prime Minister also adopts. Of course, he was a brilliant constituency ally and a forceful defender of the interests of the people of Hull, with the emphasis on force. However, he was also a necessary champion of the new Labour party. The Prime Minister referred implicitly to the fact that John Prescott delivered one man, one vote. We should remember that it was an act of huge courage for him to take on his own union allies, I think at about one hour's notice, and persuade them to support the neophyte Tony Blair.

Frankly, despite the snobbery of the London establishment about John Prescott's education, it was a very unwise person who underestimated his intellect. He was a formidable and brilliant innovator on—I am looking at the Environment Secretary—the environment, on Europe, on devolution and on a whole range of things.

[David Davis]

He was what we would all hope to be: not a creature of history, but a changer of history. For that, we should always admire him.

To put to one side all those grand things, he was also greatly, greatly loved by his family. On that basis, I offer my condolences to Pauline and the rest of the family.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to add my own few words to the tributes that have been made, and especially to welcome the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), which were so warm and personal.

John Prescott's great many achievements—his commitment to climate change and other matters—have already been spoken of. He was a truly authentic working-class hero, and somebody who always attracted a crowd wherever he went. He persevered with his famous battle bus through good times and poorer ones. What may sometimes be missed is his commitment to devolution, and the great efforts he made in the north-east of England, where he committed to the campaign for a north-eastern assembly. We were not successful on that occasion—the referendum was not won—but, ultimately, John's legacy prevails in the devolved institutions and authorities that we have seen ever since.

On a personal note, I want to put on record my thanks to John for his personal support to me. I found myself propelled on to the shadow Front Bench a little bit prematurely and unexpectedly, but he was of great support to me in discharging the transport brief. He retained such immense knowledge, and on every single occasion he offered encouragement, for which I will be eternally grateful. He was a true giant of the Labour movement. We will miss him enormously, but his legacy remains. I, too, pass on my sincere condolences to Pauline and to all his family.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. On behalf of the Scottish National party, I pass on our sincerest condolences to Pauline, to John's family and to his many friends, colleagues and comrades right across the Labour movement. You have lost a colossus of a man, and an inspiration to working-class people right across the United Kingdom who were encouraged by his example to go into politics.

I remember coming down here as a new MP in 2001 and observing the Labour Front Bench—titans, all of them, and all known to the UK public, but dominant among them was John Prescott, and it was John Prescott the public wanted to hear from. When he appeared on the TV screens, the public paid attention and listened to what he had to say. He resonated with the British public, who held him in a curious affection. If what he had could have been bottled, I am sure we would all take a little sup of it today.

I will never forget where I was, as a candidate in 2001, when that famous incident came in that the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) referred to—who could? I think we all know where we were. I was with a bunch of sixth-formers at a hustings at Brechin high school, and one of the senior pupils said to me, "If it's like that every day in your political life, I want a bit of that." There's inspiration for you, Mr Speaker.

John was a huge music fan and a great supporter of our music act, MP4. We could never quite master the jazz that he seemed to favour—although maybe as a tribute to him we will get round to doing one of those numbers—but it was something he completely loved.

Everyone has talked about John's commitment to climate change, but there was also his commitment to devolution, which a few colleagues have mentioned. John Prescott was the engine who drove that path towards a Scottish Parliament and the regional assemblies which will be happening as a matter of course with this new Labour Government.

John was part of a generation that we are sadly beginning to lose, but he will stand out as one of the true great parliamentarians in this House of the past few decades and we will all miss him dearly.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is wonderful to hear all the various tributes to John and I wanted to share my own memories of him. As some have mentioned, when it came to campaigning, his big thing was his battle bus—who would not love touring the country eating sweets with Martin Angus? I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) will attest to that.

I have my own memory of John's battle bus from after the 2005 election. He got a small group of us together and we toured London as commuters were on their way to work, at around 7.30 or 8 o'clock in the morning. John was on the tannoy thanking them all individually for voting Labour and for another five years of a Labour Government. Watching people literally stop in the street, confused that a bus was talking to them, only to discover that it was actually the Deputy Prime Minister talking to them, was incredible. John then took us all to his flat, where, despite having had no sleep at all, he made us bacon sandwiches and tea. That was John at his best: generous, indomitable and completely unpredictable.

John's incredible achievements and those of that Labour Government will stand the test of time. He was the cement that kept the broad church of those New Labour Governments together and we will always remember him for that. I also want to say that last year my father died of Alzheimer's, and it was very difficult, in those early days, to remember the man who was, before that cruel disease took him away. I really do hope that Pauline and John's family are listening to the wonderful tributes that are being paid here in this House and around the country, so that they can remember the extraordinary man that John was and the extraordinary life that he lived.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I first collided—if that is the right word—with John Prescott when I was shadow Secretary of State for Transport as he ploughed on with his integrated transport plan, which was one of the centrepieces of the first Blair Administration. I found that some of my colleagues tried to treat John Prescott as a bit of a joke. That was a mistake. Yes, we teased him about his two Jags, and he rather loved that, but he was utterly sincere in what he did, passionate, and pretty brutal with his Opposition opponents when he felt he was on top. We clashed again over the proposals for regional assemblies. Great campaigner though he was, he lost the north-east referendum, and I do not think he ever really forgave me for that.

When required, however, John could be a great statesman. He was right to insist on a public inquiry into the Marchioness disaster, which the previous Government had refused to hold, and he was right immediately to announce an inquiry into the Paddington rail disaster as soon as it happened. I recall getting one of the most surprising telephone calls of my political life when, having told the Conservative conference that he was right to call that public inquiry and that we should wait for its outcome, I got a call from him to thank me for that bit of bipartisanship—something even he was capable of when the cameras were not looking.

I pay tribute to John for that, because the Cullen inquiry came up with a completely new safety regime for rail, including a rail accident investigation branch for the Department for Transport. We have not had a public inquiry into a rail accident ever since, because of the safety regime that he implemented following the inquiry. Every survivor of the Paddington rail crash and subsequent rail crashes is grateful to him for what he did for passenger safety on our railways. If for nothing else, we should remember him for that.

I send my best wishes to John's family and to all his friends and colleagues on the Government Benches at this sad time.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I will share two particular memories of Lord Prescott. The first is from my time working for the disability charity Scope. We had decided as a campaigns team to use the 1997 general election to highlight the many obstacles that disabled people faced when exercising their democratic right to vote. I and my campaign colleagues devised the "Polls Apart" campaign, which included a special campaign pack for candidates.

Bearing in mind that this was in the halcyon days before email, a campaign pack was something of a rarity. We printed, stapled and posted out hundreds of packs to candidates the length and breadth of the UK, including one to the Labour candidate for Kingston upon Hull East. Off it went, sent second class. To our amazement, a week or so later, a reply came back saying that Mr Prescott not only supported the campaign, but had written to all of Labour's candidates in his capacity as the general election co-ordinator, instructing them to take the campaign actions that our pack suggested. More than that, when Labour was elected a few weeks later, he brought forward amendments to the Representation of the People Act to make it easier for disabled people to exercise their right to vote.

I had met John Prescott a few years before that, when I worked for the then Member of Parliament for Streatham, the right hon. Keith Hill. Both John and Keith were members of the RMT parliamentary group, which was as broad and diverse as its talent was deep. I asked Keith ahead of my remarks today if he had any particular memories of John that I might share with the House, and he told me of one from his time as a Minister in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

John and Keith were due to make a presentation on Labour's housing growth areas to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in the Cabinet Room one morning at 9 am. At 4 am, John was still working on the presentation. He decided that he needed to know about the rail connections between Cambridge and Oxford, so he phoned Network Rail. Members can doubtless imagine the startled reaction

of the poor Network Rail official who answered that call at 4 o'clock in the morning from someone claiming to be the Deputy Prime Minister, who had a very specific question about east-west rail links. Tony Blair was equally amazed at 9 am. "And did he tell you what the rail connections are?", asked the PM. "There aren't any," replied John—"We're going to change that." Now, thanks to the Budget, that change will finally be delivered—a fitting tribute, perhaps, to the work ethic, energy and enthusiasm for change that John Prescott exemplified.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. My condolences to Pauline and all of John's family at what must be a truly devastating time for them. David used to work in my office, and he sent me a message just after John died. He was very close to his father and saw him as his hero and his friend. We send our condolences to all of them.

I obviously knew John in the House for many years. When he was first elected along with Dennis Skinner, they shared a flat in Clapham. I do not know what went on in that flat, but while they were good friends, they were very different characters. I later learned that after the last vote took place in the House, Dennis and John would both leave to go back to the flat, but they never travelled together. Dennis always made sure that he got there first, so that he could get hold of the one television in the flat, turn it on and watch the darts, the snooker or whatever else. John would turn up and want to watch "Newsnight", and Dennis refused to change the channel—he would say, "No way. You'll watch the darts with me." You can imagine the repartee and the arguments that would have gone on between them, which would have been incredibly funny.

In the 2017 election, John offered to help in any way he could, and he was fantastic. We did several events together. One day, we started in Hull in the morning with the launch of our arts manifesto, and then went on a tour all around Yorkshire and Humberside in the famous bus. John seemed to know the owner of every fish and chip shop in the whole of Yorkshire, and insisted on stopping at every one, so we had a big supply of fish and chips all day long. Then we got to Scarborough, where we were doing a rally in the pavilion by the seafront. John and I got up to speak on the stage, and I do not think a lot of the people there realised that a political rally was going on. They thought they were just there enjoying the sunshine, and then these two guys got up on the stage and started talking.

The people loved John, because he brought out Freddie the fox. We had a long discussion about the evils of foxhunting—the evils of Tory foxhunting. "The Tories are always going to bring back foxhunting. The Tories would kill the fox." Then he pulled Freddie out of his coat and said, "Look at poor Freddie here. They're going to tear him apart. That's what the Tories do to you." He was loved for all of that.

I want to say thank you to John for what he did, but also to remember that one of the crucial points in his political career was the issue of climate change and Kyoto. It was not easy, popular or normal; a lot of people refused to even consider what we are doing to the natural world and the environment, and how there are limits to what we can do, hence the protocol that John negotiated and signed up to. He was one of the people who was very important in starting to change

[Jeremy Corbyn]

the global debate about climate change and respect for the natural world and the environment. We should all say thank you to John Prescott for that.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The first time I met John Prescott in his role as Deputy Prime Minister was in 1997, when he opened up Admiralty Arch to 60 young homeless people as part of the winter shelter programme. It was a bitterly cold winter, and at the time, the Conservative Back Bencher Crispin Blunt said that this project would be treating a historic building as if it were a “flagship for undesirables”. Given that John was frequently described as an undesirable by many of his opponents throughout his life, he took that as a badge of honour, and he was really proud of that homelessness project. I will never forget the way he shared breakfast with those rough sleepers and took a real interest in every one of their lives. It was a testimony to his compassion, his practical politics, and his unwavering commitment to housing policy. Many millions of council tenants saw home improvements—new windows, new doors and home insulation—and none of them will ever forget that. Those are the basics that many of us take for granted, but which far too many people lacked at the time.

In a superb biography by my late former colleague on *The Independent*, Colin Brown, naturally entitled “Fighting Talk”, there was a lovely and telling quote from John:

“There are those priests of the Left who want to keep their consciences and there are those who will get their hands dirty. I belong to the dirty hands brigade.”

John was regularly patronised and frequently underestimated, but he had the last laugh by delivering for real working people. For that, we are all grateful.

Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In the last six months of 2005, the United Kingdom took over the rotating presidency of the European Union, and Prime Minister Blair wanted to make a big success of it. One of his concerns was that there was a young British MEP who was prone to behaving very badly in the Chamber and being particularly rude to visiting Heads of State, so John Prescott was sent to see me. He himself, of course, had served as an MEP and was a big project supporter—he loved everything about the European Union—so he came to explain to me that it would be very bad for Britain if I were to stand up and cause a scene when Prime Minister Blair was speaking. I will not say that he threatened me, but I certainly felt deeply intimidated and behaved myself impeccably over the course of the next six months. That was the bruiser John Prescott perhaps.

A couple of years later, on Remembrance Sunday, when the ceremony was over and the parades had finished, I was walking up Whitehall and there, to my astonishment, walking on his own and without any security, was the Deputy Prime Minister. I said hello and wondered what he was doing. John had seen a group of Arctic convoy veterans on the other side of Whitehall. A seafarer himself, he had gone over to speak to the men who had endured such appalling hardship during the last couple of years of the war, and said to them, “I’m going to fight to make sure that you guys get a campaign medal after all these years, recognising what you’ve done.”

They did get the medal, and I got the message. I understood why he had been so phenomenally successful from humble roots: he connected, he got on with people and he was very human. We mourn his passing, but perhaps we also mourn the passing of big working-class characters in politics. We need far more of them.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As you well know, John had many connections with the north-west of England. He went to school on the Wirral. He was a parliamentary candidate in Southport, and he returned there to campaign in the 2017 general election. He was a seafarer out of Liverpool, and he was presented with a trophy by Anthony Eden, whom the Prime Minister mentioned. The trophy was for winning a boxing bout on board ship, and it was there that he honed the craft that may have led to what he was known so famously for later on.

When I came here in 2010, I bumped into John in the Committee corridor, where he was sitting at a desk working. He said he was there because, despite being a former Deputy Prime Minister, he had to share an office with four other Members of the House of Lords—he had recently been ennobled—and he moaned about the fact that there was no preferential treatment for him. However, despite the moan, he was getting on with the job, as John always did.

My favourite story of him is when, during the 2010 election campaign, the battle bus turned up on grand national day outside Aintree racecourse. He had a campaign to keep the grand national free-to-air on terrestrial TV, and there he was with his loudspeakers haranguing the racegoers to come and sign his petition, which they did in droves. Not only did they sign the petition, but they queued in large numbers for selfies with John. That goes to the point about the affection in which he was held, and the impression that John made that day will stay with me forever.

When I came here and was serving in this place, as he was serving in the Lords, he was a source of terrific advice to me, and I am proud to have counted John as a friend over the years. I send my best wishes to Pauline, David and the rest of his family. May John rest in peace.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. When I was elected for Beverley and Holderness in 2005, John Prescott, the MP for neighbouring Kingston upon Hull East, was of course already a legend. He was the word-mangling, fast-fisted former bar steward who had, for the last eight years, been Deputy Prime Minister of this United Kingdom. Hearing the tributes from across the House and all the ways in which that one man was able to influence history and make a difference is, I hope, an inspiration to aspirant working-class politicians all over the country, but also to people in this House.

I knew John from a few years before I entered Parliament. He came to Cambridge for a transport summit, so I organised a demonstration against it and stood outside all day. The day went on and he did not come out. When eventually he did come out, I was just about the only demonstrator left. I immediately berated him and his entourage, and we had a surreal dance around the car park, before he went up to a Jaguar and tried to get in: it was not his. I think it took him quite some time to forgive me for that.

I regularly saw John—as did colleagues from Hull, such as the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), who is sitting on the Government Front Bench—on Hull trains, and he was normally surrounded by papers at a four-place table that he was trying to keep entirely to himself.

Although he was gruff, he was also engaging. He would often come to Beverley, when Pauline would go shopping and he would go to the Royal Standard pub, the finest establishment in Beverley, where he was always very welcome, and people to this day hold him in the highest regard.

As has been remarked, he led our delegation to the COP at Kyoto in 1997, and was widely regarded as the key element in delivering its historic outcome, the first time an international agreement was made to recognise and cut climate emissions. The former US Vice-President Al Gore said that he had

“never worked with anyone in politics...quite like John Prescott.”

John continued to take climate issues seriously, and we would have passionate and rather loud conversations on the train as we went to and fro from east Yorkshire. When I led our delegation to last year's COP, the first to commit to phasing out fossil fuels, I knew my team and I were following in the footsteps of someone who may have come from a humble background but went on to change the world.

Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Over two months ago, I rose to give my maiden speech in this Chamber, opening with a comical line about one of my constituency's most famous sons, Lord John Prescott. Although I am sad to be commemorating his passing today, it is important to reflect on the indelible mark that he has left on British politics.

A formidable character, John Prescott was a political giant but never stopped being one of us: an ordinary, down-to-earth, working-class man. The ambitions of John and others for communities like his as part of a trailblazing Labour Government are the reason why so many of us are here today.

Often underestimated by both his political allies and enemies, he was the glue that held the Labour Government together and saw it deliver so much. Personally, I knew him little more than as an overly keen teenager at Labour party conference asking for a selfie with a political hero

—he did oblige, although in his customary unimpressed fashion—but his impact on me and so many on the Labour Benches has been huge.

On behalf of the people of Clwyd East, I say a fond farewell to one of our own, a treasured son of north Wales, a political trailblazer, and a true one-off. My thoughts are with Pauline and his family.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to add to all the warm tributes to John. I got to know him and encountered him outside of a political context. It is a matter of record that towards the end of his time as Deputy Prime Minister he had several bouts of ill health and was admitted to hospital on a couple of occasions, and he was admitted to the critical care unit where I was a nurse at the time. He made an incredible impression on me and my fellow staff. He was a really great patient, which, let's face it, cannot be said of every VIP that crosses into a ward. He was warm and fun, and abrasive in the right way and challenging in the right way. One of my most abiding memories is being summoned in to see the Deputy Prime Minister because his hospital food was rubbish. He wanted to complain about that; I hope that is the only time a Deputy Prime Minister calls me in to criticise me for something that I am responsible for, but you never know.

It is a testament to him that, after that spell in hospital, he invited all the staff who had looked after him to do a big tour, in a very John Prescott way, at Admiralty House, where he took us all through the back corridors of Whitehall, entertaining us with great bits of history and anecdote and finishing up with a mock auction. He had acquired a lot of geegaws and knick-knacks from all his diplomatic visits abroad, and he was throwing them out, with his very strong arm, for people in the room to catch. I hope that many of those people, including colleagues of mine at the time, still have some of those items and will treasure them.

I give my heartfelt condolences to Pauline and to John's family.

Mr Speaker: The House is always at its best at these times, and I am sure that John would have been smiling at the tributes; they were fantastic. The only thing I would add is that John managed to divide Hull into two when he became a “Robin”, but we will leave it at that.

Israel-Gaza Conflict: Arrest Warrants

4.24 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's response to the decision taken by the International Criminal Court's pre-trial chamber I to issue arrest warrants in respect of the Israel-Gaza conflict.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): Last Thursday, judges at the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant and the reportedly deceased Mohammed Diab Ibrahim al-Masri, commonly known as Deif, commander-in-chief of the military wing of Hamas.

The ICC is the primary international institution for investigating and prosecuting the most serious crimes of international concern. It is actively investigating allegations of the gravest crimes in countries around the world, including Ukraine, Sudan and Libya. In line with this Government's stated commitment to the rule of law, we respect the independence of the ICC. We will comply with our international obligations. There is a domestic legal process through our independent courts that determines whether to endorse an arrest warrant by the ICC in accordance with the International Criminal Court Act 2001. That process has never been tested, because the UK has never been visited by an ICC indictee. If there were such a visit to the UK, there would be a court process, and due process would be followed in relation to those issues.

There is no moral equivalence between Israel, a democracy, and Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah, two terrorist organisations. This Government have been clear that Israel has a right to defend itself in accordance with international law. That right is not under question, and the Court's approval of the warrants last week does not change that. Israel is of course a partner across UK priorities, including trade, investment, security and science and technology. We co-operate across a wide range of issues for our mutual benefit.

This Government remain focused on pushing for an immediate ceasefire to bring an end to the devastating violence in Gaza. That is essential to protect civilians, ensure the release of hostages and increase humanitarian aid into Gaza. We have always said that diplomacy is what will see an end to this conflict, and that can only be achieved through dialogue. It is in the long-term interests of the Israelis, Palestinians and the wider region to agree to a ceasefire deal urgently and bring this devastating conflict to an end.

Priti Patel: The International Criminal Court's decision to issue arrest warrants for the state of Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and its former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant will do nothing to help secure the release of those poor hostages, who have been held captive by Hamas for more than a year. It will not help to get more aid into Gaza, and it will not deliver a sustainable end to this awful conflict. In charging Israeli leaders alongside Hamas, the ICC appears to be drawing a moral equivalence between Israel's war of self-defence

and Hamas terrorism. We utterly reject any moral equivalence. The only beneficiaries of this decision are Hamas and their terrorist sponsors, Iran, who are now celebrating this propaganda coup as a great victory for Hamas and Hezbollah. Since the ICC's decision, we have had dither from Ministers, confused messaging and no clarity, so I am grateful to the Minister for his remarks today.

The Government have indicated already that they will seek to enforce these warrants through our own courts, and there is a process around that. On the issue of warrants, we have expressed serious concerns over process, jurisdiction and the position on the complementarity principle. We believe that the warrants for Mr Netanyahu and Mr Gallant have no basis in international law. Do the Government believe that the Court has jurisdiction in this case, given that Israel is not party to the Rome statute and Palestine is not a recognised state? Does the Minister agree that the ICC must act within legal norms?

In the absence of the ICC making public the specific context of the charges, does the Minister share the concerns expressed about reports of process errors in the ICC's investigation and the concerns expressed by Lord Macdonald, the former Director of Public Prosecutions, about the use by the prosecutor of an expert panel? Finally, but crucially, what effect does the Minister believe that Mr Netanyahu's immunity under international law as a serving Prime Minister of a country that is not a state party has on enforcing these warrants in the UK's own courts?

These are important questions on which I look forward to the Minister's response. He has already spoken about securing the release of hostages and more aid coming into Gaza, but at this time when such a conflict is taking place, it is important that we have clarity from the Government.

Hamish Falconer: I welcome the questions from the right hon. Member across the Benches. Utmost in the Government's mind is the need to bring an immediate end to the conflict in Gaza and to secure the release of the hostages, whose families I have met. She knows that I am familiar with these issues from my previous life. We also need to see more aid going into Gaza. The questions at issue with the ICC are separate from that.

Diplomacy will continue regardless of the ICC process. But I had understood it to be the common position of the House that the international rule of law is an important commitment. The International Criminal Court is an important body—the primary body—in enforcing those norms, and the issues on jurisdiction and complementarity were heard by the pre-trial chamber. Its three judges issued their findings. I think we should respect those.

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

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The International Criminal Court was created when 120 countries put their names to the Rome statute and signed up to the principle that certain basic standards of behaviour must be enforced internationally, with those laws applicable to everyone, no matter who they were. From the time when Winston Churchill led the Conservative party, this country has been a proud supporter

of international law. It is wrong for us to try to undermine it. Does my hon. Friend share my deep disappointment that the Conservatives have fallen as far as they have?

Hamish Falconer: As I think has been clear from our actions from July when we became the Government, the international rule of law is incredibly important to this Government. All our actions will be guided by it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The conflict between Israel and Hamas has had a devastating impact on Palestinian and Israeli civilians, with women and children paying a particularly terrible price. Now that the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for those it believes are culpable, the UK has obligations under international law, which we must uphold. The previous Conservative Government chose to be selective with those obligations when it came to the ICC's jurisdiction in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. That was deeply regrettable and damaging for our country, and I greatly regret that Conservative Front-Bench Members are pursuing that same line today.

It is right that the Government have committed to uphold the ruling, and I welcome the Minister's statement that they will support the process to enforce the arrest warrants. Does the Minister share my concern about the words of Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, who has proposed sanctioning nations—including the UK—who uphold the ruling? Will he outline the specific new steps that the Government are taking to secure an immediate bilateral ceasefire with all parties, so that we can put a stop to the humanitarian disaster in Gaza, get the hostages home and open the door to a two-state solution?

Hamish Falconer: Every member of the Government—most particularly the Foreign Secretary and the rest of the Foreign Office ministerial team—is engaged every day, including this morning, in pressing all parties for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, for an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon, and for a de-escalation of violence in Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but also more broadly in the middle east, where violence remains far too high.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The ICC has issued an arrest warrant for the Prime Minister of a democratic state that is a UK ally, having found that there are reasonable grounds that he is responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Does that not call for action as well as words from the UK Government, which might include ending trade with illegal settlements, the sanctioning of members of that Government and settlers, and indeed recognition of the state of Palestine if we are to show not only our disapproval, but how we want to move forward?

Hamish Falconer: I recognise my hon. Friend's long commitment to these issues. As you would expect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will not comment further on the ICC process, which needs now to carry through in accordance with due process in the way you would expect. On sanctions, which have been discussed before in the Chamber, I am not, in the usual way, at liberty to provide any further commentary on who we might consider for them.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Whatever reservations one may have about the conduct of the conflict in Gaza, there are two fundamental principles: first, Netanyahu is a democratically elected leader of a sovereign state; and secondly, that state is conducting a legitimate war of self-defence. The Minister acknowledges those facts, but does he not appreciate how this ruling is seen by many of my constituents as an affront to those principles?

Hamish Falconer: I am slightly stumped by the questions from the Opposition. We are signatories to the ICC Act. I think the whole House agrees with the importance of the rule of law. Representations were made to the ICC in the pre-trial chamber, and it has come to its decisions. I think we should respect its independence.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I find it shocking but not surprising that the Conservative party has chosen to downgrade and disparage the highly respected International Criminal Court. We are a nation that upholds the rule of law, so I am proud that the new Labour Government have chosen to respect the independence of the ICC in its arrest warrants against Benjamin Netanyahu, Yoav Gallant and Mohammed Deif, on the basis that there are reasonable grounds for their criminal responsibility for potential war crimes. Does the Minister agree that it is important that we respect the independence of that ICC judgment and that, if required, we implement those findings?

Hamish Falconer: I am not really able to go much further than to say that there is a domestic legal process, through our independent courts, that would determine whether to endorse an arrest warrant. We would follow due process in the way that hon. Members would expect. This is a decision not for Ministers but for an independent court.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): The Minister may be aware that I have fought the corner for international courts time and again in this House. I view upholding the authority of those courts and their reputation as very important. The difficulty here is not just that Israel is a democracy, but that it has an internal, independent judiciary, which puts a limit on what any Government can do in Israel. That is why equating—or appearing to equate—Netanyahu with all the other monsters that the International Criminal Court has quite properly prosecuted risks bringing the court into disrepute.

Hamish Falconer: I know that the right hon. Member has looked at these issues over a long period of time. Questions of complementarity are important, and I understand that they were considered by the pre-trial chamber.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): Several of our allies and international partners have outlined their commitment to fully support the ICC, including Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium and Ireland, so I welcome the Government's commitment to respect the independence of the ICC. Does the Minister agree that it has a high evidential threshold for issuing arrest warrants for alleged perpetrators, which has been demonstrated in this case?

Hamish Falconer: The deliberations of the ICC on this matter have gone on for some time. I think it is clear for all to see the way in which it has proceeded, and I welcome it.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Last week I attended a memorial service for the people of Gaza with families of Palestinian origin here in the UK—I believe the Minister has met some of those representatives. We heard from a woman called Kitam, who described how, overnight, she lost 48 members of her family. As she walked back and sat behind me, she broke down in sobs as she remembered so painfully that day. She deserves justice. The issuing of a warrant is not justice. There is still a process to go through and a trial to be had. Is it not right that, whatever the court, those outcomes are adhered to? May I press him on the ruling of the ICJ advisory opinion on the occupation? That ruling is at the core of this: it should mean that we do much more than just meeting those families and sharing in their pain.

Hamish Falconer: As the hon. Member alludes to, I have met those families, and many other families who have been so wounded by the conduct of this conflict, over the course of the last year—families on both sides, both the hostage families and the many, many Palestinians and Lebanese who have seen their lives so cruelly turned upside down. As I said earlier, in the end it is only diplomacy that will bring an end to the conflict. We will continue to have contact with all sides, including those indicted. We will continue to press all those with whom we engage to bring an early end to this war. On the ICJ, we have set out our position before. We are considering the judgment carefully. We have provided an explanation of our position so far in the United Nations. It is an important, far-reaching judgment and we hope to be able to say more in due course.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's confirmation that the UK will be upholding the ICC arrest warrant for the Hamas general and Israeli leaders. The ICC found grounds to believe that Netanyahu and Gallant

"each bear criminal responsibility for the war crime of starvation as a method of warfare; and the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts."

It goes on to refer to

"the war crime of intentionally directing an attack against the civilian population."

On that last point, what moral justification is there now for continuing arms sales used by Israeli forces at the behest of a Prime Minister accused of such serious war crimes? When will we use every diplomatic lever to stop the killing, free all hostages and stop selling arms to a country led by someone accused of such horrific war crimes?

Hamish Falconer: I would like to just be clear that what I have said this afternoon is not that the Government will uphold arrest warrants. What I have been clear about this afternoon is that due process will be followed. These are questions for independent courts in the UK, and it is independent courts that would review the arrest warrants if that situation were to arise.

My hon. Friend asks about aid. I want to be absolutely clear: insufficient aid is getting into Gaza. I travelled, myself, to the Gaza border and saw the restrictions Israel is putting on aid reaching Gaza. Those restrictions have

been called out by me and other Foreign Office Ministers day in, day out. We are taking steps with our partners and our allies to try to ensure that people in Gaza have the aid they need as winter comes in, in order to survive. These are grave matters and I understand the frustration right across the House that we have not seen the amount of aid in Gaza that we would like to see. I recognise that people are asking for yet more to be done. On the specific question about the arms licence suspensions announced to the House on 2 September, we will of course keep that under review. We will consider the findings of the ICC in relation to that assessment.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Last year, the Labour party had to be dragged into accepting that there was a collective punishment of the Palestinian people. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman's boss said that "war is ugly". The Labour party earlier this year had to be dragged into even uttering the word ceasefire. Will the Minister show the leadership that his bosses failed to show, and say that if Benjamin Netanyahu's feet touch the ground in the UK he will comply with the arrest warrant?

Hamish Falconer: The right hon. Member says with dismay that war is ugly. War is ugly and we are doing everything that we can to bring it to a close through all the diplomatic measures we would expect. This is not an issue for grandstanding; this is an issue for diplomacy. That is what the Government are committed to.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): Surely central to the debate today must be the UK's ongoing political role as Israel's close ally, and the fact that UK-made weapons, including components, are still being used by Israel. Does the Minister recognise that beyond the commitment to uphold the ICC's arrest warrants, the UK's failure to clearly condemn the collective punishment of civilians—an intent explicitly indicated by key Israeli leading figures—and the continued military support for Israel's ongoing onslaught in Gaza have serious implications for the UK's own human rights obligations and the fate of millions of innocent men, women and children?

Hamish Falconer: I will not rehearse too much the answers provided on 2 September and on numerous occasions in the Chamber since then. We have suspended, with one exemption—to which I am happy to return—all the arms that we are selling to Israel that could be used in Gaza. That suspension, in our assessment, also covers the west bank and Lebanon. We are taking action in accordance with our commitments under international humanitarian law, and we will continue to do so.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Can we be absolutely clear about what the Government are saying? It seems that the Government are not saying that there would be an automatic arrest should Benjamin Netanyahu arrive in this country, but they are saying that there would be due process. Can the Minister confirm that

"customary international law...does not permit the arrest or delivery of the serving Prime Minister of a non-State party to the ICC"?

So the Minister is committing himself to due process but not to arrest. Am I correct in my understanding?

Hamish Falconer: There is a domestic legal process through our independent courts, and we cannot prejudge that process. I note that the shadow Attorney General has written to the Attorney General about questions of detail in relation to some of the points to which the hon. Gentleman has alluded, and the Attorney General tells me that he will be writing back on the subject of those more detailed points.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): While we watch and work tirelessly to secure a ceasefire in Gaza—which is really important simply because if children do not see an end in sight, neither do the families in Gaza—does the Minister agree that Britain's reputation on the world scene as a global leader in upholding justice would be undermined if Britain did not respect the independence of the ICC, which is what Conservative Members are implying?

Hamish Falconer: This Government think that adherence to international law, and being seen to adhere to international law, are incredibly important, and in everything we have done since July we have sought to underline that principle, which I hope is one on which the whole House would support us.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Minister has assured us that the arrest warrants will be carried out, and I hope that is the case, but will he also consider this question? If an arrest warrant has been issued for the leader of a country, and the International Court of Justice has found that country deeply wanting in respect of its behaviour as an occupying power and the war crimes that have been committed, why are we still supplying weapons that are being used in the bombardment of Gaza and destroying life as we speak?

Hamish Falconer: As I said in answer to a question from my own Benches, we took steps on 2 September to ensure that, with one exemption—which I am happy to go into—we are not selling arms that are being used and could pose a breach of international humanitarian law in Gaza. That continues to be the position, and it is kept under regular review.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The ICC's decision is a crucial step towards ensuring justice and accountability for the crimes against humanity committed in Gaza and Israel. It is vital for the Government to act without fear or favour in order to uphold the international rules-based system. War crimes are wrong whoever commits them and wherever they happen, whether they are committed by Russian forces in unlawfully occupied Ukraine or by Israeli forces on unlawfully occupied Palestinian territory. Will the Minister now review all diplomatic, economic and political relations with Israel to ensure that our country is not complicit in the atrocities that are taking place in Gaza, the west bank and Lebanon?

Hamish Falconer: I can confirm that the Department and the Government as a whole keep our international obligations under close review, including in relation to the theatres described.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Last week I was in the west bank and saw for myself the incursions by settlers into the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Following recent comments from Israel's far-right Finance

Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who described in explicit terms the active effort to annex the west bank into Israel, does the Minister agree that now is the time to sanction Smotrich?

Hamish Falconer: The comments of Finance Minister Smotrich have been condemned in this Chamber before, and we can reiterate that condemnation. As the hon. Lady would expect, however, we cannot comment on sanctions that may or may not be under consideration in the usual way.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am no friend of Hamas, but we must remember that Prime Minister Netanyahu promised us intelligence-led precision attacks in Gaza. We have seen daily violation of international law, 43,000 people killed, restrictions on food and aid, and 136 journalists killed. I welcome the Government's announcement about respecting the ICC's decision, but may I urge them to consider using all levers, including sanctions against two Israeli Government Ministers, the settlers in the west bank and other organisations operating therein?

Hamish Falconer: I will not comment on what sanctions may be under review, for reasons that are well established, but I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the sanctions that we took in October against Israeli settlers and organisations involved in both breaches of international law and violence in the west bank.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Our closest ally is the United States of America, and there has been widespread condemnation of the issuing of these arrest warrants across Congress. What effect does the Minister think this decision will have on our relationship with the United States of America, and particularly with the incoming Administration, who have very different views?

Hamish Falconer: The UK is a state party to the Rome statute, and that brings with it obligations that put us in a different position from that of the US. We will continue to engage with both the current and incoming US Administrations in the shared interest of our two countries and across the full range of our priorities.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The atrocities that led to the issuing of arrest warrants continue to this day, not least in healthcare facilities, with devastating stories coming out of Gaza. My hon. Friend has set out his frustration at aid not reaching such facilities, yet more sanctions could be applied by this Government. Why will he not escalate the UK's response to the Israeli Government by introducing sanctions so that they feel the real pain of our country but also understand that we want to ensure that justice is served by the ICC?

Hamish Falconer: I want to reassure the House about how focused the Government are on the question of aid access into Gaza. As I say, I have travelled to the region and raised these issues repeatedly with all parties, including the Israeli Government. We need to see a flood of aid into Gaza. That has been the commitment of the Israeli Government, and I regret that we have not yet seen a flood of aid and that Palestinians are suffering as a consequence. Winter is coming, and Palestinians in Gaza are extremely vulnerable. We will continue to

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press the Israeli Government to do everything that they can to ensure that more aid reaches Gaza and, indeed, all parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territories that require it. I made these points forcefully this morning, and I will continue to do so.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The ICC has issued arrest warrants for crimes including direct attacks on civilians. Open-source information shows that, on average, Royal Air Force reconnaissance flights are going over Gaza nearly four times a day. Although we all seek the information necessary to gain the release of the hostages, how confident is the Minister that the information gathered from those flights and shared with Israel has not been used to facilitate any attacks on civilians?

Hamish Falconer: I will not go into operational details, but I can assure the House that the surveillance aircraft are unarmed and do not have a combat role. They are tasked solely with locating hostages, including a British national, and they will continue to do so.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): In response to the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), I note that the UK under the previous Conservative Government signed an ICC state party statement in support of the ICC and to preserve it from political interference, just before the election. The Foreign Secretary has confirmed the UK's acceptance of and respect for the ICC arrest warrants for Netanyahu's war crimes. Therefore, is it not now incumbent on the Government to take effective, concrete steps to prevent further such acts by banning all arms licences to Israel, including those relating to F-35 parts; by imposing sanctions on individuals, on assets and on goods trading with the illegally occupied west bank; and by the urgent recognition of Palestinian statehood?

Hamish Falconer: I will not rehearse the points that we have already discussed on sanctions. The Foreign Secretary has set out our position in relation to the suspension of arms licences and the F-35 exemptions, and that remains the position. We will keep our assessments under regular review, including the findings of the ICC.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Frankly, I am disappointed that the Government are not giving any clear responses. I therefore ask this question. In October 2023, over 800 experts in international law and in conflict and genocide studies gave a warning of clear prospects of genocide. In November 2023, over 40 United Nations experts called it a "genocide in the making". We then had the ICJ judgment that called it a "plausible" genocide, and a judge from the ICJ saying:

"The alarm has now been sounded by the Court. All the indicators of genocidal activities are flashing red in Gaza."

Now we have an arrest warrant. Do this Government stand by their conviction that genocide is not being committed in Gaza—yes or no?

Hamish Falconer: It is important that we treat the international institutions with the respect that they deserve. This is an indictment from the ICC and we respect it. The ICJ process to which the hon. Gentleman

refers has not found; it is at an advisory opinion stage. We need to treat international law with the respect that it deserves.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Ind): The Minister will be aware that, as well as the ICC's recent decision to issue arrest warrants, there is now an entire body of international law, including the ICJ's advisory opinion, adopted by the UN General Assembly, ruling Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories illegal, as well as South Africa's case at the ICJ on genocide, that points towards a clear position in international law. Does the Minister therefore agree that if we are to preserve the integrity of the international rules-based order, we must start by ending the international hypocrisy and double standards and reaffirm that all states, including the UK, have an absolute obligation under international law to act now to bring all those who commit war crimes to justice?

Hamish Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I want to underline this Government's commitment in relation to accountability for war crimes. We stand against international crimes of this nature in all places, everywhere, and our commitment to international law is one of the most powerful levers we have in trying to prevent war crimes.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I ask for the Minister's forgiveness because I did not hear whether he answered this question from my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary. Is it his understanding that customary international law does not permit the arrest or delivery of a serving Prime Minister of a non-state party to the ICC, and that the UK seeking to arrest such a Prime Minister would not only breach our international obligations but be unlawful under the International Criminal Court Act 2001?

Hamish Falconer: For the awareness of the House, the shadow Attorney General has written about the two different legal interpretations of immunity and has sought the Attorney General's view on these matters. I think the shadow Attorney General acknowledges that this is a case on which the courts are the competent authority, but the Attorney General has undertaken to respond to that letter in due course.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The law is the law, and the evidence is the evidence. Whether or not it is politically convenient or diplomatically helpful, the law is the law. The International Criminal Court has been clear, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to reject the Opposition's calls to turn this into a political decision. It should remain an independent legal decision for our courts and for the International Criminal Court, and the Minister should continue exactly as he is.

Hamish Falconer: I agree.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I welcome the ICC's decision, and I sincerely hope that we will live up to our international obligations if the Prime Minister of Israel visits the UK. You have said yourself that you regret the fact that more aid is not getting into Gaza, and that you have been calling out the Israeli Government for not letting in more aid. Is it not time to do more than just calling out the Israeli Government and telling them how angry you are? Is it not time to end all

arms exports to Israel, impose sanctions, end trade with all the illegal settlements and recognise Palestine as a state?

Hamish Falconer: We will continue to press these points with vigour, and we will continue to keep all other measures under review, as I have said.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind Members not to use the word “you.”

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thought the Conservative party styled itself the party of law and order, but it seems that that is increasingly not the case when it comes to international law. The Government are right to uphold the ICC’s decision, and they were right to vote for last week’s UN Security Council resolution on a ceasefire.

The Minister will be aware that there is increasing evidence, including from organisations such as Human Rights Watch, of the forcible displacement of Palestinians from the north of Gaza. He will be aware that this is a crime against humanity, and that two of the main proponents are Israeli Ministers Smotrich and Ben-Gvir. The Prime Minister has confirmed that the Government are looking at this, so when will the Government move to sanction those Ministers as part of a wider package of further action to uphold international law?

Hamish Falconer: We follow reports from northern Gaza closely and with concern, and we have repeatedly raised many of these issues. I will not comment further on sanctions, but I wish to be clear that the forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza is not consistent with Israel’s obligations.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): Does the Minister agree that one of our greatest tools against tyranny anywhere is that—friend or foe, rich or poor, elected or unelected—the law applies to everybody, and that the universality of certain crimes means that they can be prosecuted anywhere?

Hamish Falconer: As I hope I have made clear this afternoon, this Government are committed to the international rule of law and will continue to be so.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): Despite what the Minister has said, the Government conceded at the royal courts of justice last week that UK-made F-35 parts could be used in violation of international law in Gaza, and admitted that Israel has shown no commitment to upholding these legal obligations. Despite this, the Government have continued to authorise offensive F-35 arms exports, exposing themselves to criminal liability.

It is disappointing that the Foreign Secretary is not here today, but will the Minister let our constituents know whether the Government will end their complicity in genocide, impose sanctions and end all arms sales? Will he confirm that should Netanyahu, who faces an ICC arrest warrant for war crimes and crimes against humanity, enter UK territory, he will be immediately arrested—yes or no?

Hamish Falconer: I will return briefly to the Foreign Secretary’s statement on 2 September, in which he said that

“suspending all licences for the F-35 programme would undermine the global F-35 supply chain that is vital for the security of the UK, our allies and NATO.”—[*Official Report*, 2 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 39.]

He went on to set out how the suspension of arms licences would apply to the direct sale of F-35 components to Israel but would not apply to the global supply chain. That continues to be the position.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Forty-three thousand dead; possibly 100,000 under the rubble; schools and hospitals destroyed; 16,000 children killed, including by drones and by being shot in the head—many hon. Members said that this was a genocide many months ago. Now that the ICC prosecutor has called Benjamin Netanyahu a potential serious war criminal committing crimes against humanity, does the Minister agree that now is the time to recognise the state of Palestine and end all military and financial co-operation with the Israeli Government while their leaders are essentially international fugitives?

Hamish Falconer: I will not rehearse our position on the recognition of the state of Palestine, other than to say that we believe that the Palestinians have an inalienable right to a state alongside a safe and secure Israel. The Government hope to take steps to advance that as part of a contribution to a two-state solution.

The hon. Member suggests, I think, no contact at all with the Israeli Government as a consequence of the ICC ruling. It is only diplomacy that will bring an end to this conflict. We will continue to have direct contact, and in that direct contact we will continue to do all we can to secure an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages, aid into Gaza and a more safe, secure and stable middle east.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I say this to my hon. Friend as constructively as I possibly can: a number of us have sat here for months and have asked questions about sanctions, but the response from Ministers has been to say, “We cannot comment on sanctions in the House.” Not only does that render sanctions ineffective, but it breaks down the accountability of Ministers to this House. We deserve a better statement than that.

On the legal process, my hon. Friend has rightly said that we will respect international law and comply with the International Criminal Court’s jurisdiction and decisions. If I have got the wording right, he said that it will be for the domestic legal processes involved. Where does physical arrest come within that domestic legal process?

Hamish Falconer: Let me deal with why we do not provide advance comment on sanctions, and then I will turn to the domestic legal process.

I hear my right hon. Friend. The reason that we do not provide commentary on sanctions is that to do so in advance would reduce their effect. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who is sitting next to me—may correct me, but I think that we have probably issued

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upwards of 50 or maybe even 100 sanctions in the short time we have been in government. There has been no shortage of sanctions for this House to comment on. I recognise that the two on which I have most been pressed this afternoon are of intense political interest; however, despite that intense political interest, if we were to prejudge sanctions and trail them in this House before we made them, we would reduce their impact. The same is true of the hundreds of sanctions that we have placed on Russia over the years, and it would be the same in every forum.

In relation to the domestic legal process, I hope that my right hon. Friend will forgive me for not entering too deeply into hypotheticals about how a court might discharge its findings on these matters.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Israel is a democracy. In the past, its courts have shown themselves unafraid to put even senior politicians on trial. What assessment has the Minister made of the Israelis' own ability to bring human rights cases in their own courts?

Hamish Falconer: This is described in international law as the question of complementarity, and it was considered by the pre-trial chamber. Given the independence of the ICC, I do not think it appropriate for me to offer further commentary. Arguments were made by various states on this matter, and the pre-trial chamber came to its findings.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that as well as demanding an immediate ceasefire, the freeing of all hostages and unhindered aid getting into Gaza, we must ensure that the perpetrators of heinous war crimes and crimes against humanity, whether they are friend or foe, are held to account under international law based on justice that is blind, objective and impartial? Playing politics with courts undermines justice.

Hamish Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Support for international criminal justice and accountability has traditionally been a matter on which we have had widespread support in this House. It will continue to be a priority for the British Government.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The ICC, the world's highest criminal court, has "reasonable grounds" to allege that the Israeli leaders are guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The other world court, the International Court of Justice, has found that there is "plausible" risk that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians and that Israel's occupation and annexation are unlawful.

I ask the Minister two questions. First, does he agree that the UK has obligations under international law to prevent genocide, to bring Israel's unlawful occupation to an end and to bring suspected perpetrators of grave breaches of international law to justice? Secondly and quite simply, what will the UK do differently as a result of the decisions of the ICC and the ICJ? The Minister says that he will pull out all the stops. We have heard many suggestions here today, including stopping the export of F-35s. What will the Government do differently?

Hamish Falconer: Do the Government accept that we have international obligations? Indeed we do. I have set out this afternoon how we would discharge them in relation to the ICC; I have also set out the view that we take on the ICJ process. We will continue to do everything we can to ensure that there is proper international justice that all abide by. We are one of the ICC's major funders: we commit £13.2 million a year to ensure that the ICC can function properly. In everything that this Government do, we are trying to ensure the international rule of law, and we will continue to do so.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): The UK has a responsibility not just to respect the independence of international courts, but to take active steps to promote compliance with international obligations. When nations or leaders have been accused of committing war crimes, the UK has held itself up as a global leader in placing sanctions. It is unconscionable that in this situation we are yet to stop all sales of arms to Israel. If Israel is accused of committing war crimes, does the continued sale of any arms to Israel not make the UK potentially complicit? Given the gravity of the situation, will the Minister further clarify why he cannot comment on sanctions, or indeed on the other steps that the Government are planning or willing to take to make clear the UK's condemnation of the continued slaughter of civilians in Gaza?

Hamish Falconer: Let me comment on arms sales, as they have been raised again. I will not rehearse the arguments about the F-35 exemption. In relation to the arms that are licensed to be sold to Israel, the category that has been suspended is the category that posed a risk of being involved in breaches of international humanitarian law in Gaza. Those weapons, we also believe, would be the weapons at issue in the west bank and in Lebanon. There is a second category of weapons that are for resale elsewhere, which is not relevant to events in Israel. There is a third category of weapons that are used either for defensive purposes or for purposes with which nobody in this House would disagree: body armour and helmets for aid workers going into Gaza, for example.

I say gently to colleagues across the House that there is not, in the rest of the arms sales, some solution to the dilemma that faces us. The suspension of arms sales has been done carefully and has been aimed at the potential breach of international humanitarian law. It has been reached carefully and judiciously, including in relation to the F-35. That remains the position.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I have a degree of sympathy with the Minister, who has been asked to substitute in lieu of the Foreign Secretary today, so I will ask him a question of fact. Does he recognise that pursuant to section 23(6) of the International Criminal Court Act 2001, representatives of a non-state party to the Rome statute will remain immune from prosecution unless that non-state party expressly waives that right to the ICC?

Hamish Falconer: I do not need sympathy, just careful listening. The same question was asked by the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), and the answer is the same. The shadow Attorney General has raised the matter with the Attorney General, and a letter will be sent in due course.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): I must press the Minister on the question of F-35 arms sales. He mentions direct and indirect arms sales, and he says that the indirect arms sales are either irrelevant or impossible to remedy. As I understand it, there is no reason why F-35 parts that are made in the UK, sold to the United States and used by Israel cannot be subject to a conditional licence under which they are sold to the United States with the proviso that they cannot be used in Gaza. Given that, how can it be legally or morally justifiable to continue allowing UK parts for fighter jets that are being used to kill Palestinian children to be exported even indirectly to an Israeli leader who faces an arrest warrant for war crimes and crimes against humanity? We hear about the review, but while that review has been ongoing under the last Government and this one, thousands and thousands of Palestinian civilians have been killed.

Hamish Falconer: For clarity, we have suspended arms licences where parts for the F-35 programme are sold directly to Israel. Where they are sold to the global spares pool, it is not possible to disentangle where they go in that pool and see their final destination. That is why we have made the exemption, and it is why we judge that doing so is vital for the security of the UK, for our allies and for NATO.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Does the Minister agree that the cold-blooded slaughter of tens of thousands of innocent people in Gaza cannot be justified as self-defence? Does he also agree that—contrary to the Trumpian line adopted by those on the Conservative Benches—just because a country is a democracy, that does not provide it with blanket immunity from international law?

Hamish Falconer: The hon. Member refers to the terrible loss of life in Gaza, which is in the minds and hearts of the whole House. We are a democracy, as much as signatories to petitions may wish otherwise. We abide by international law and we expect our allies to do the same, and we make that point with force.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Let us remind this House why we are here. Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant stand accused of very serious crimes: the crime against humanity of murder, and the crime against humanity of persecution and starvation as a weapon of war. Seventy per cent of those killed in this war are innocent women and children. Nobody in this House can think of a war in living memory in which 70% of those killed were women and children.

I want to ask the Minister a very specific question, because he has evaded all of this so far. Can he tell us one concrete step that he will take—apart from executing the arrest warrants, as the UK is obliged to do as a state party to the Rome statute—that we can all tangibly grasp? We would like to hear it, please.

Hamish Falconer: I have been clear about what the Government have done and will continue to do. If the hon. Member would like a recap, on the very first morning that I became a Minister, we announced the restoration of funding to UNRWA. We have provided significant aid to the people of Gaza. We have provided aid that has not got into Gaza, and we have raised that with the Israelis. My ministerial colleagues and I have travelled to the region to press these issues, both alone and in company with the French Foreign Minister.

This House is united in its concern about what will happen in Gaza in December. There is no disagreement that insufficient aid has gone in. There are urgent, almost frantic efforts every day in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to try to ensure that adequate aid reaches the Palestinians. I understand the frustration of this House. We are working as hard as we can and we will continue to do so. We take concrete action each and every day on this issue.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): The ICC found that there is no justification under international humanitarian law for the restriction of aid by the Israeli Government. Indeed, the ICC detailed how doctors have been forced to carry out treatments and amputations without anaesthetic, including on children. The Government's response must include redoubling our efforts to get more aid into Gaza. Can my hon. Friend confirm what pressure is being put on the Israeli Government, in addition to what we have already done, to get more aid into Gaza?

Hamish Falconer: In addition to the steps I have just outlined, we will be working closely with our partners and I hope to be able to update the House shortly on some of the measures we are taking, in company, to try to ensure that sufficient aid gets into Gaza, particularly over this vital winter period.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The ICC arrest warrants are welcome, but in themselves they will not bring an end to Israeli war crimes and ethnic cleansing and the killing of innocent men, women and children. It is an international legal obligation on the UK Government to prevent ethnic cleansing and genocide. Will the Minister explain what specific measures the Government have taken and are taking to stop Israel's ethnic cleansing in northern Gaza and what concrete steps the UK Government have taken to comply with the genocide convention?

Hamish Falconer: The hon. Member asked about northern Gaza and some of the specific measures that have been taken. As I said in answer to a previous question, we have been paying close attention to events in northern Gaza. By way of example, we watched closely—with horror—the events at Kamal Adwan hospital. I raised them myself repeatedly with the Israeli authorities and urged them to preserve life at that hospital, including among the children. We take every opportunity to underline to the Israelis their responsibilities as an occupying power in the whole of Gaza, but particularly in northern Gaza, and indeed the obligations that fall to them in relation to medical facilities, particularly where there is ongoing treatment of children, as there was in that case.

I recognise the hon. Member's frustration at the situation in northern Gaza. We are clear that northern Gaza must not be cut off from the south. There must be no forcible transfer of Gazans from or within Gaza, nor any reduction in the territory of the Gaza strip. The Government of Israel must minimise evacuation notices to only areas where they are militarily necessary, provide timely and consistent information on when and where they take effect, and be clear on where it is safe for civilians to move to.

[*Hamish Falconer*]

The polio vaccination roll-out has now ended, but an estimated 6,800 to 13,700 children in northern Gaza were not reached due to intense Israel Defence Forces activity. That is deplorable. Delayed vaccination of any child in Gaza puts them at risk and is unacceptable, and we make those points to the Israelis. I recognise the hon. Member's frustration, but we are doing what we can to try to ensure that children and others in northern Gaza have access to the aid they need.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): Many of my constituents have written to me to express their horror at what is happening in Gaza. Does the Minister agree that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency plays an indispensable role in the provision of humanitarian assistance, and does he oppose the Bills recently passed in the Knesset that would prevent UNRWA's operation?

Hamish Falconer: I thank my hon. Friend for passing on the concern of his constituents; I know that that is felt right across the country and that many other Members would wish to put on record the concern of their constituents too. I do condemn the Knesset Bill in relation to UNRWA. We have made the point clear that UNRWA is indispensable. Only UNRWA can provide the aid into the Occupied Palestinian Territories at the scale required, and we will continue to press for UNRWA's continued operation in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is crucial that the Labour Government comply with our obligations under international law to uphold the ICC's ruling and enforce the arrest warrants against Israeli Ministers. That compliance is vital, given the previous Conservative Government's besmirching of the International Criminal Court and, in turn, damaging of the UK's standing on the world stage. Many of my constituents in Wokingham would like to see the UK stand up for what is right and see that the UK does not turn its back on international law. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will not undermine the ICC's ruling by unequivocally agreeing to uphold the arrest warrants?

Hamish Falconer: I reassure the hon. Member and ask him to pass on to his constituents that this Government will indeed do the right thing and stand up for international law. I have set out the manner in which we would do that over the course of this afternoon.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Ind): I welcome the Government's commitment to uphold their obligations under international law and therefore to issue arrest warrants to these men if they set foot on British soil. If the Government acknowledge that the Prime Minister of Israel should be on trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity, how—morally and legally—can we continue to supply him with the weapons being used by Israel in its horrific assault on innocent civilians in Gaza?

Hamish Falconer: I have outlined our position in relation to both our international and domestic obligations to the ICC and our position on arms sales. I reassure my hon. Friend that we will consider the findings of the ICC in the ongoing review process in relation to arms sales.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I am truly perplexed, as most of the British population watching this debate no doubt will be, by some of the arguments being advanced. When it comes to the ICC, topics such as morality and equivalence do not feature; this is a principle of law. An independent body, encapsulating some of the most senior members of the judiciary, has made a finding, yet we have the issues of democracy and morality being used to argue for some sort of impunity for leaders. Will the Minister state that if Benjamin Netanyahu arrived on these shores, if the ICC had issued warrants, we would at least detain him, subject to our domestic procedures?

Hamish Falconer: The hon. Member makes an impassioned and welcome commitment to due process and the independence of the law, and I will not demur from that by providing commentary on what domestic courts might do in a hypothetical situation.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): I am frankly astonished at the principle underlying some of the comments made by the shadow Foreign Secretary and some of her Conservative colleagues today. I have been giving assemblies to primary school children across the Earley and Woodley constituency emphasising that British democracy means that nobody is above the rule of law. I hope that one day, Conservative Members might understand what the children of the Earley and Woodley constituency instinctively understand, which is that we should be equal under the law, whether we are the political leaders of a democracy or otherwise. That is why I welcome the Minister's statement that the Government will comply with their international obligations.

The Minister has set out the work he has been doing in travelling to the region and witnessing at first hand the blockage of aid into Gaza by the Israeli Government. The United Nations states that over 83% of food aid has been blocked, which of course leads to the risk and ongoing fact of starvation in the region. What can the Minister and the Government do in line with our positive obligation under international law to prevent future atrocities occurring in Gaza?

Hamish Falconer: The Government are deeply concerned by the latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification finding about food insecurity in Gaza. We are making efforts to try to ensure a more rapid and regular flow of aid, including items that have been barred, which often seem to be those that are most vital for winterisation—as the international humanitarian community call it—in Gaza. We will continue to press for more flexibility on these points, so that the necessary tents, sleeping bags and other equipment required to safeguard Palestinian life over the course of the winter can move in at the scale that is required.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Having seen and lived through the misuse of lawfare in Northern Ireland, whereby the terrorist uses law to target those who seek to live by the law while ignoring the fact that every one of their actions is illegal, I very firmly oppose the UK's stamp of approval on any ICC decision on Israel. It is only when you—not "you" meaning the Minister, but "you" meaning me—have been the victim of whitewashing propaganda, as Unionists have in Northern Ireland, that you truly understand the danger. Will the Minister

not recall that Israel has been defending itself under perpetual attack, and that this ICC ruling is simply affirming the Hamas agenda of hiding terrorism behind women and children, sacrificing them to achieve their goal? That goal is clear: to wipe Israel off the map. That is something that we can never support, and I hope the Minister will never support it either.

Hamish Falconer: I do not support the actions of Hamas—I condemn them outright and utterly. The actions of Hamas, including the continued keeping of hostages, represent unspeakable cruelty, both to the Israeli people and to British nationals. We do not forget Emily Damari, who is still held more than a year since she was taken. That being said, we can both condemn terrorist organisations such as Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah and encourage our allies to keep to the very highest standards, and our commitment to international law is part of that contribution.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I have just returned from the west bank, where I met Roland Friedrich, director of UNRWA affairs, and saw UNRWA's work at first hand. In the west bank alone, that work includes running 97 schools and 43 health centres and providing public services such as clean drinking water and rubbish collection. Does the Minister agree that there is no viable alternative to UNRWA, and will he do everything in his power to ensure Israel allows its vital operations to continue?

Hamish Falconer: I do agree. There is no alternative to UNRWA, and we will raise those points, both directly with Israel and in company. It is vital that UNRWA, underpinned by a succession of UN Security Council resolutions, is able to continue its vital work, both in the west bank and Gaza and across the wider region.

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Can the Minister reassure us that he and other Ministers have directly pressed Israel on compliance with international humanitarian law in their meetings with their counterparts?

Hamish Falconer: I can. I did this morning, and I will continue to do so.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Emily is a British citizen who, as the Minister has said, has been held hostage ever since the attacks. Would the Minister explain what measures the Government are taking to make contact with those holding the hostages so that we can bring Emily home?

Hamish Falconer: Hostage cases are some of the most horrifying situations that a family can face. I know that many people in this House have met with Emily's family, and have seen at first hand their bravery, but also the agony that they feel a year on. I regret deeply that the best chance of release for all of the hostages is through negotiated agreements, and I call on all parties to come back to the table to try to advance the agreement necessary to secure a release of hostages, an immediate ceasefire, and a reduction in the awful violence that scars us all.

Storm Bert

5.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on Storm Bert. The storm brought heavy rain, high winds and snow across the UK over the weekend. The flooding Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy)—and I are receiving regular updates on the flooding in England. Our thoughts and our sympathies are with all those who have been affected.

This morning, I held an emergency meeting with Environment Agency chief executive Philip Duffy to discuss the flooding response and ongoing plans to protect communities. I was briefed on the latest situation, the 24/7 response being led by the Environment Agency and the emergency services, and the actions being taken to further protect communities in the coming days, with river levels expected to rise further in some places. We discussed how to bolster the response from the Environment Agency, emergency services and local authorities, if required.

Flooding in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is dealt with by the devolved authorities. The Prime Minister spoke to the First Minister for Wales on Sunday, and the Welsh Government have activated their crisis management arrangements in support of the local response. We have offered additional support to our colleagues in Wales if and when that is required.

I would like to put on record my thanks to the emergency responders, local authorities and the Environment Agency for their immense efforts to help communities across the country. Around 28,000 properties have been protected by Environment Agency flood defences. Unfortunately, an estimated 107 properties have flooded across England, principally from river and surface water flooding. While Storm Bert has now passed, we will continue to see the impacts of this weekend's heavy rainfall over the next few days. Environment Agency staff are continuing their work across the country, and are engaging closely with local resilience forums and local responders, with arrangements in place to scale up their response if and when that is needed.

As of 4 pm today, there is one severe flood warning in place, with 120 flood warnings and 145 flood alerts in force across England. A severe flood warning, which reflects a danger to life, was issued in the early hours of this morning. It relates to the Billing Aquadrome on the River Nene in Northamptonshire, where the caravan park was safely evacuated. This is the fourth time the aquadrome has been flooded in recent years, and I would like to thank local responders for their swift actions to protect those most at risk.

The Environment Agency and local responders have also been busy protecting properties elsewhere in England, including flooding from the River Teme in Tenbury Wells, where around 40 properties have flooded. The river has now peaked, and local responders will be focusing on the lower reaches of rivers over the next few days. There has been a focus on the Calder valley in west Yorkshire, the River Weaver in Cheshire and the River Avon in Bath, including Chippenham and Bradford-on-Avon. Further flooding is, sadly, likely over the next few days, as water levels rise in slower-flowing rivers such as the

[*Steve Reed*]

Severn and the Ouse. The Environment Agency anticipates that any impacts should be less severe than we have seen in recent days.

Storm Bert also caused disruption to road and rail networks. Our transport industry has well-established plans to respond to severe weather and get affected transport networks running smoothly as quickly as possible. National Highways, local highway teams and Network Rail staff have been working all weekend to reduce floodwater and remove fallen trees from roads and railways. Unfortunately, residual floodwater is affecting the great western main line, the midland main line and other branch lines, and this continues to affect passengers' journeys. The safety of passengers, train crew and staff is always the top priority, and railway lines will be reopened as soon as it is safe for trains to run.

Climate change will inevitably lead to more severe weather of the kind we have seen this weekend. As Environment Secretary, I have made it my priority to improve our flood defences and drainage systems to keep people and businesses safe. This Government inherited flood defences in the worst condition on record following years of under-investment by the previous Government. Over 3,000 of our key flood defences are below an acceptable standard. That is why we are investing £2.4 billion over the next two years to build and maintain flood defences.

We have also set up a new floods resilience taskforce to make sure there is better co-ordination between central Government and the frontline agencies on the ground up and down the country. This brings together organisations including the Association of Drainage Authorities, the National Farmers Union, local resilience forums, and emergency responders. It is key to strengthening resilience in the face of floods, and it met for the first time in September to prepare for the autumn and winter.

We have provided £60 million in the recent Budget to help farmers affected by the unprecedented flooding earlier this year, and I am pleased to tell the House that the bulk of the payments are already in farmers' bank accounts. We have confirmed that an additional £50 million will be distributed to internal drainage boards to manage water levels to protect agriculture and the environment, and we will launch a consultation in the new year which will include a review of the existing flood funding formula to ensure challenges facing businesses and rural and coastal communities are taken into account when delivering flood protection. We aim to bring in that new approach from April 2026.

I repeat my thanks to the emergency services, local authorities and the Environment Agency for their work to keep communities safe during Storm Bert. I will continue to receive updates from the Environment Agency and its teams on the ground, and I will continue to ensure that Members across the House are contacted when flooding affects their constituency.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.42 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Storm Bert has had, and continues to have, terrible impacts across the United Kingdom. Our thoughts are with the loved ones of those who have lost their lives in recent days as well as the people whose homes and businesses have been devastated and all the communities affected by flooding and this weather. I understand the distress, the anger and, frankly, the exhaustion many will be feeling today as they contemplate the process of rebuilding their homes, businesses and communities because my own constituency suffered terrible damage from Storm Babet a year ago. Residents need practical support quickly, and they also need some reassurance for the future.

I thank the emergency services, the local authorities and the Environment Agency for their efforts to help people quickly and often in dangerous circumstances, but I also thank the members of the public who have stepped in to help their neighbours and local communities in countless ways. They are the rays of kindness in what has been a dark weekend for many communities.

The Government need to focus on how help will be given to those who have been driven out of their homes, including the provision of decent temporary accommodation and the repair and reopening of schools, as well as the process for speeding up insurance claims so that residents can return home as quickly as possible. Knowing, as we do, sadly, from previous storms, how important Members across this House will be in helping their constituents, will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that his Department sends a daily operational update to Members across the House so that Members may help their constituents assiduously?

Last week the Secretary of State's Department will have received data from the Met Office about the severity of this storm and its likely impacts. So that we can understand the urgency that the Secretary of State gave to these warnings, will he please tell us about the discussions he had with the Environment Agency and the Met Office before the storm hit and when they were held, and what actions were implemented as a result of any such meetings?

The Secretary of State mentioned his Government's floods resilience taskforce, which was set up to improve flood preparedness. It has met once since July, and its next meeting is next year. He has just said that its duty is to prepare for the autumn and winter. Can he list precisely the preparations arising out of that meeting and the practical impacts on communities up and down the country?

Regrettably, with the threat of flooding still present—indeed, as I rose to my feet, one severe flood warning and 120 flood warnings were still in place—the Secretary of State descended into playing politics. To correct him, I will just set out these facts, and there is a question for him to answer at the end. The last Conservative Government committed a record £5.2 billion from 2021 until 2027 to provide significantly improved flooding defences across the country. That is critical and long-standing infrastructure work. Will he confirm whether the £2.4 billion he has referenced is part of that £5.2 billion or in addition to it?

The Conservatives ringfenced £100 million to help those communities threatened repeatedly by flooding. It was called the frequently flooded allowance. Will the Government confirm the continuance of this fund and its ringfencing? When is the next assessment for that scheme?

Can communities flooded through Storm Bert be included? We also set up the natural flood management fund to complement traditional bricks and mortar defences. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that will be continued? I note that the Secretary of State has mentioned funding independent drainage boards to the tune of £50 million. Can he confirm that the funding has been cut from the £75 million promised by the Conservatives, and why?

While I welcome the increase of £10 million in the Budget for the farming recovery fund, which was announced by the Conservative Government to support farmers for last year's wet weather, can the Secretary of State confirm that he will announce new money to support farmers for this winter's bad weather? Can he give comfort to the farmers watching that the Treasury will include adverse weather conditions and flooding as mitigations for its much criticised family farm tax?

I end by wishing every community, whether they are the subject of those flood warnings or watching their weather updates with great concern, a safe and comfortable few days ahead.

Steve Reed: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments, and I echo her good wishes to people who have been affected by the situation. She refers to funding. I politely remind her that she was a Treasury Minister in the previous Government, who underfunded our flood defences and left more than 3,000 of them—the highest level on record—in an inadequate state. She asks about appropriate support on the frontline. The floods resilience taskforce exists to ensure that those on the frontline across the country—local authorities and the agencies responsible—were ready for this and other storms when they happen, and that appropriate support was in place for individuals, families and communities that may be affected. That of course includes those who are most vulnerable.

The Minister for Water and Flooding, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy) has already held a roundtable with insurance providers to ensure that we are speeding up support for those who are affected by flooding. The Environment Agency will keep Members regularly updated on the circumstances in their own constituencies. Turning back to funding, we have allocated £2.4 billion over the next two years, which is more per annum in each of those two years than the previous Government allocated for the current year.

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

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I entirely empathise with my right hon. Friend about what he has inherited. We have had the perfect storm of massive funding cuts to the Environment Agency with increased pressures from flooding as a result of climate change. Notwithstanding that, the need for improvements in our flood defences is urgent and critical. How can communities such as mine in Chesterfield, flooded by the Rother and Hipper rivers, engage with the work he is doing so that we can be more prepared, working with the Environment Agency to bridge the funding gap for the existing scheme on the River Hipper? My heart goes out to all the communities across the country that have been so appallingly flooded.

They need to know how we can work with the Government to step up the urgency so that our country is more flood-prepared in future.

Steve Reed: I thank the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee for his questions and of course sympathise with residents in his constituency who have been affected by the recent flooding, and indeed previous flooding. The Government are reviewing the flood funding formula to see how we can make it more effective. That includes nature-based flood management, such as planting more trees further upstream to help the land hold more water, so that less rainwater floods downstream to more populated areas where it can cause more damage. That consultation will involve businesses, rural communities, coastal communities and communities such as his all feeding in to ensure that we have a flood funding formula that works for every part of the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. The financial cost of the devastation caused by Storm Bert will run into many millions, yet that is nothing compared with the heartbreaking loss of life. My prayers are for the loved ones of those who have died and for the communities so horrifically affected. I, too, am grateful to the emergency services of all kinds, council workers, the Environment Agency and the communities who have pulled together and been wonderful neighbours up and down the country. Indeed, I am grateful to the many Members who have got their hands dirty serving their constituencies. That includes my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) who, in the absence of any trains, hired a car this morning and left Parliament to get back to her communities to be with those who have been devastated by the flooding.

This storm highlights the foolishness of the Government's real-terms reduction of 1.9% to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' budget. That is a potential threat to flood-affected communities through its impact on flood management schemes, natural flood management and specific projects such as those in Kendal and Appleby. Will the Secretary of State clarify whether he may seek to reverse those cuts?

Disruption to rail services has been significant, too. Less than a year after the terrifying derailment at Grange-over-Sands, the whole of the Furness line in my constituency is out of action until later this week. Will Ministers put extra resources into ensuring that that vital line and others are upgraded and made more robust?

Storm events also have an impact on our sewerage networks. Research by the Save Windermere campaign estimates that storm overflows discharging untreated sewage into our lake began at 3.21 this morning and by midday could have reached a volume of 7 million litres. Will the Government speed up action to prevent egregious storm overflows like that across our country? Finally, does the Secretary of State understand that given the crucial role that farmers play in natural flood management, his decision to cut 76% of the basic payment scheme from next year could push farmers away from such schemes altogether? Will he revisit that decision?

Steve Reed: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments and questions. I share and echo his gratitude to Members across the House for the work they have carried out to support their local constituents and signpost them to appropriate support. We will be ensuring that the Environment Agency continues to engage with Members on that important work.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the very difficult financial inheritance that we had from the previous Government. In that context, I think the fact that we have been able to deliver an increase in funding for flooding is to be welcomed: £2.4 billion over the next two years means an increase in both years compared with the amount of funding provided by the previous Government for the current year.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned storm overflows. When we have these more severe episodes of rain, it is extremely distressing to see more storm overflows discharging sewage into rivers, lakes and seas. Sir Jon Cunliffe is leading a wider review into the failures of governance and regulation that have led to this situation, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and Liberal Democrat Members will engage with that. In addition, we are requiring every single outflow to be monitored so that we know what is going into our rivers and can take appropriate action, including through the strengthened powers under the Water (Special Measures) Bill.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): Storm Bert has been devastating for my constituents. In Cwmtillery, with its disused coal tips, 160 mm of rain fell in just 48 hours. Across Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, homes have been washed out, children's Christmas presents have been ruined and families without insurance are counting the cost. I hugely welcome the £25 million in the Budget for Welsh coalfield tip maintenance and safety measures; that makes a big difference. Given, though, the extraordinary weather that we saw on the weekend, will the Secretary of State please look again to see if further support will be available for coal tips in the future?

Steve Reed: I recognise the absolute devastation that my hon. Friend described, which homeowners and business owners will have felt in seeing their homes devastated by flooding. The Prime Minister contacted and spoke to the First Minister of Wales on Sunday. He made available any support that the Welsh Government may need to deal with the situation. That offer stands open, and we are ready to support colleagues in Wales if and when they require that, recognising that parts of Wales have been the hardest hit by Storm Bert.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Plaid Cymru's thoughts are with all those across Wales affected by Storm Bert. Confirmation of a coal tip landslide in Cwmtillery is extremely concerning and will lead to anxiety for others living near coal tips. Those tips are the legacy of an industry that extracted from Wales to enrich London, yet the UK Government have pledged just 4% of the £600 million needed to secure them. Will the Secretary of State commit to providing the full funding required?

Steve Reed: Again, I share the hon. Member's concern about the situation. This is the first Government ever to have offered funding to support the problems of coal

tips that she described. As I said in response to the previous question, the Prime Minister has made it clear to the First Minister of Wales that the Government stand ready to provide more support to the Welsh Government if that is required.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): This weekend, much of my constituency was under a severe flood warning. Businesses, roads and homes were flooded. We were luckier than in previous years in terms of severity, but in places it was agonisingly close, with rivers centimetres away from breaking their banks. Calder Valley has had two major floods in the past decade, and the fact that we avoided the same level of destruction this time was in no small part because of the work of local flood wardens, natural flood management organisations such as Slow The Flow and Calderdale council. I pay tribute to them.

It is almost a decade since the serious floods in Calder Valley on Boxing day 2015. We had further floods in 2020. While the Environment Agency has carried out flood prevention works in Mytholmroyd and Brighouse, it has not even made a start on planned schemes in Hebden Bridge and Elland. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the plans we have upcoming and get some action from the Environment Agency? My constituents are understandably really anxious.

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend very much for his question. I am sure that his constituents will be pleased to hear of the increase in funding over the next two years to support areas that are affected by flooding as well as the review to the flood funding formula that we are consulting on to ensure that we are taking the most appropriate and effective steps necessary to protect communities and businesses from flooding. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister for Water and Flooding will be more than happy to meet him to discuss his constituency concerns.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is not the silver bullet, but given the severity of the situation over the weekend, every little helps. Will the Secretary of State—he will earn huge plaudits if he is able to pull this off—convince the Environment Agency that it would be helpful to many communities in North Dorset, the south-west and elsewhere to increase the capacity of our rivers through a managed programme of dredging? We are losing capacity. Last week I saw a river where two arches of a bridge were entirely silted up. That is losing 20% of capacity. It is not the silver bullet, but capacity improvements would help.

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I know his constituency well and I know what a champion he is for communities there. I am sure that he will welcome the fact that we are reviewing the formula with the Environment Agency, to look at precisely what actions would be most effective to protect communities in whichever part of the country they find themselves in, including his very beautiful part of Dorset.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Last July, the previous Government issued its third national adaptation plan, and this March the Climate Change Committee issued its independent assessment of NAP3. It said that it falls far short of what is needed, that it lacks the pace and ambition to address growing climate risks—which

we are already experiencing—and that it fails to set out a compelling vision for what the Government's well-adapted UK entails, with only around 40% of the short-term actions to address urgent risks identified in the previous climate change risk assessment.

Will the Secretary of State ensure that the key recommendations of the Climate Change Committee in its assessment of NAP3 are implemented and that an urgent refresh of NAP3 takes place, to strengthen it and avoid locking in additional climate impacts? Key reforms must be implemented over the next year, along with enforcement. Those are the recommendations of the Climate Change Committee. Can he assure the House that he is taking those seriously and moving them forward?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is right to point to the impact of climate change through the much more frequent severe weather incidents that we are seeing, whether droughts in the summer or floods at this time of year and through the winter. That is why we are reviewing the formula and our approach to managing flooding. We take the reports and views of the committee very seriously as we continue to look at how best to adapt to the challenges that climate change presents to the whole country.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): People living in former mining communities across south Wales deserve greater reassurance on what the Government will do about coal tips. Can the Secretary of State explain what exactly they will do to make these tips safe, particularly when it comes to the live monitoring of any movement and early warning systems?

Steve Reed: There is a programme to improve the maintenance of coal tips, which is underway through the Welsh Government. As I said, this is the first Government to allocate funding to tackle that risk and its very serious implications for people and communities living in affected areas.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Environment Agency for protecting much of my constituency. However, businesses still continue to flood. Could the Secretary of State say what he is doing to review the remit of Flood Re, so that businesses, leaseholders and properties built after 2009 can be covered by the Flood Re scheme, which really does help people through times of flooding?

Steve Reed: As I have indicated, the Minister for water, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), has already chaired a roundtable with insurance providers, including Flood Re, to look at what more can be done to provide support. As things stand, 99% of the most high-risk households can get quotes from over 15 insurance providers, and four out of five homeowners with claims have seen a 50% reduction in their insurance premiums. We are looking at what more can be done for businesses through the British Insurance Brokers' Association.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I associate myself with the words of gratitude paid by the Secretary of State to all those who have helped over the weekend. The House will know that I have raised

the situation of Tenbury Wells many times. It is devastating to hear that it was flooded again this weekend. I do not know whether the Secretary of State, in his meeting with Philip Duffy this morning, was told that there is a really well advanced design for flood defences for Tenbury Wells, which has been substantially funded thanks to previous funding allocations. I wonder if he could find it in his heart—and in his £2.4 billion over the next two years—to get that scheme over the line.

Steve Reed: I know the hon. Lady's constituents will be very grateful for her championing of their cause, particularly given the flooding that we have seen over the weekend. The funding allocations will be made in the usual way by the Environment Agency, working through its regional flood and coastal committees and engaging with local stakeholders. I am sure that she will make sure her voice and that of her constituents are heard, as she makes a powerful case for funding those flood defences.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that my constituency has some of the mightiest and most beautiful rivers, including the Wye, the Usk and the Monnow. But having those incredible rivers means that we are really at risk of flooding. Yesterday we had two severe flood warnings. They have been downgraded today, but there are still five flood warnings, some of which are on the River Wye, which, as my right hon. Friend knows, runs through England and Wales. I want to express my gratitude to Monmouthshire county council, South Wales Fire and Rescue and all those in the community who helped, particularly Darren in Skenfrith, who has been up for 36 hours helping the community. That community has been flooded four times in the last three years. Can the Secretary of State please assure me that he will encourage Natural Resources Wales and the Environment Agency to work together to solve those flooding problems on cross-border rivers?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We need to ensure that the agencies with responsibility for the same rivers or catchment areas and that operate cross-border work as effectively as they can. I will make sure that those points are conveyed to both agencies.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. The thoughts of my Scottish National party colleagues and I are with the families of those who have lost their lives during Storm Bert. I also associate myself with his remarks on the response of the emergency services.

Many unnamed storms occur in Scotland, and in my constituency in particular. For example, a part of the seawall in Gardenstown came down recently. I am sure that Storm Bert has made that worse. I note the Secretary of State's comments regarding additional support that could be given, and will he confirm that, with the coming storms that we expect in Scotland, he will be able to make the same commitment for Scotland as well?

Steve Reed: Of course, the Government will stand ready to support and help the devolved authorities whenever they face circumstances like these.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My thoughts are with all those affected over the weekend. I also thank everyone who has been protecting the public at this very difficult time. The levels on the River Kennet, which is a tributary of the Thames—and indeed the Thames itself—have been rising to dangerous levels in recent hours. Could the Secretary of State provide an update on specific matters in the Thames valley region, in particular the flood defence schemes in the Reading area and the vital work that he is preparing to do upstream to plant more trees and to rewild to avoid flooding?

Steve Reed: I am sure that my hon. Friend will welcome our proposals to review the formula so that we can look at nature-based flood management in the way that he described. I will ask the Environment Agency to contact him with an update on what is going on in his constituency, and what further action is being taken as the river continues to rise to ensure that his constituents are kept safe.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I also acknowledge the enormous work done by Philip Duffy in the Environment Agency. He came down to visit my constituents in Britford in the first quarter of this year and made an enormous impact. In addition to the £30 million, for which the people of Salisbury are very grateful, for the Salisbury river park scheme that has just completed, it is important that smaller schemes, driven by parishes such as Britford parish council, are given licence to combine both their own precept and investment from the Environment Agency to come up with bespoke schemes. Will the Secretary of State ensure that attention is given by the EA to how it can give as much flexibility as possible, so that small schemes can also move forward at parish level?

Steve Reed: I echo the right hon. Gentleman's comments about Philip Duffy at the Environment Agency and all his colleagues, who are doing an incredible job—they always do, every time storms hit. The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important and interesting point about how we can better tie up different approaches to funding. I will take that back and discuss it with the EA. I will ensure that he receives a full written response.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): My constituency is home to a wonderful retirement community at Hartrigg Oaks. However, residents living there have told me that they worry, every single time there is a storm, about how the River Foss may overflow on to their property. There is a fix: a water pump to alleviate flooding, but that was removed, shamefully, by Yorkshire Water three years ago. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that Yorkshire Water should fix that urgently, following Storm Bert?

Steve Reed: It is important that we look at all possible ways we can protect communities from flooding. I do not know the detail of the particular instance my hon. Friend is speaking about, but I am happy to look at it. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), the Minister with responsibility for water, and I will be happy to meet him to discuss what we can do to support him in what he is calling for.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking firefighters from Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service, who have attended over 420 water incidents during Storm Bert, including many across my constituency in North Devon? Does he agree that community resilience for severe weather incidents should be a statutory duty in England, with accompanying Government funding, as it is in the devolved nations?

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and I share his gratitude to those in the Devon and Somerset emergency services who are keeping people safe at this very difficult time. We will look, with colleagues in the Home Office, at whether further duties are required to ensure that communities are safe when circumstances like this happen.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to all the agencies that worked so hard over the weekend in flood-affected areas in my constituency in really difficult circumstances, and to express my deepest condolences to the family and friends of Mr Brian Perry? As well as the police and fire and rescue services, many of the teams involved in searches of this nature are staffed by volunteers, such as Ogwen Valley mountain rescue organisation, and we owe them all a huge debt of thanks. I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the additional support that has been offered to the Welsh Government and colleagues in Wales in response to the devastation caused by Storm Bert. What further contact will there be with the Welsh Government in the coming days?

Steve Reed: I echo the condolences for the loss of life and state my gratitude to those volunteers who have been engaged in supporting communities at this very difficult time. We will of course stay in regular contact with the Government and other authorities in Wales, to make sure that if they require further assistance it is made available to them as quickly as it can be provided.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Storm Bert affected many parts of my constituency in the Scottish Borders, and I pay tribute to the volunteers and emergency services who kept local residents safe. Many farmers have been particularly badly affected. Have the Government made an assessment on crop yields, not just in Scotland but across the UK, as a direct result of Storm Bert?

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Appropriate assessments will be made once we have had time to consider exactly what has gone on, but I am sure that, like me, he will welcome the allocation of £60 million through the farm recovery fund to support farms that were devastated by flooding earlier in the year.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. My thoughts are with all those affected by Storm Bert. As chair of the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group, I express my solidarity and thanks to all our emergency services, including firefighters on the frontline.

Extreme weather events are on the rise and are becoming ever more frequent as a result of climate change, highlighting the urgent need for proper funding and resources. England is the only part of the UK without a statutory duty for flooding, leaving fire services underfunded and under-resourced to respond effectively. That must change. As the FBU has long called for, when will the Government finally provide a statutory duty for fire and rescue authorities to respond to flooding incidents in England? Furthermore, in our election manifesto the Government committed to developing a national structure to inform policy and standards in the fire and rescue service. When will that be implemented? Finally, will the FBU be invited to the floods resilience taskforce to ensure that the voice of firefighters is heard in shaping flood resilience strategies?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Fire and rescue authorities have the powers to intervene, but she is quite right to point out that there is not a duty. Officials in my Department, working with the Home Office, will review that to consider whether it remains appropriate. My hon. Friend the Minister for water, who now chairs the floods resilience taskforce, is happy to issue an invitation to the FBU to participate in that.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Residents across Somerset are once again feeling incredibly anxious. Parts of Glastonbury and Somerton saw 130 mm of rain during Storm Bert over the weekend, which has placed additional strain on our ageing flood defence network. Does the Secretary of State agree that, because of the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather, we need to incentivise our farmers and landowners to urgently establish more nature-based flood solutions on their land and fund more extreme weather resilience plans for isolated rural communities?

Steve Reed: I share the hon. Lady's concerns about the circumstances in Somerset. I agree with the points that she is making. We have increased the actions available through environmental land management schemes, including more actions around natural flood management of precisely the kind she describes. I look forward to seeing much more of that over the months and years to come.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for reminding the House about the first-time funding for coal tips. I notice that Plaid Cymru mentioned coal tips but could not leave the Chamber quickly enough or wait for the end of the statement.

I pay tribute to the local authorities, emergency services, volunteers and all those affected by Storm Bert in Cardiff, in Rhondda Cynon Taf and across south Wales. May I ask my right hon. Friend to speak to colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology about looking carefully into the role of the Met Office? It is clear that its response was slow and that there was an underestimation of the impact of Storm Bert: it put out a yellow rather than an amber or red warning. Our constituents have been let down by this incompetence before. It cannot keep happening.

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend should be reassured, and so should the whole House, that in most affected parts of the country, warnings were given with adequate time for people to prepare. I encourage people to sign up on the website of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs or of the Environment Agency for warnings and alerts if they live in an area that could be affected by flooding. I am aware of the particular concern that my hon. Friend mentions about the Met Office; I will indeed be speaking to colleagues in DSIT as they review the circumstances and look at how the situation can be improved for future such events.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I draw the Secretary of State's attention to what happens after the acute phase of flooding, particularly in rural areas like mine. I have small areas and villages that are affected and then struggle to get things sorted out. For example, Witherley in my constituency is small enough to be affected heavily by flooding that goes up through its roads, but it then struggles to have the capacity to get all the agencies to sort it out because of the funding. When he looks at the funding model, will he consider the issue of size?

Also, trying to pull agencies together in one place has taken me more than a year. We are meeting on 13 December to plan, but it has taken 10 years of work to get them all together. Will the Secretary of State look at a way of ensuring that the process is clear, so that it is spelled out to all the agencies, including fire agencies and water companies, what they are accountable for? Everyone, and most importantly the public who are affected, needs to know who is accountable for what.

Steve Reed: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his work in trying to bring the agencies together in his locality, which is precisely what we are trying to do at a national level with the floods resilience taskforce. In fact, it would be helpful for the taskforce to look into how co-ordination is happening on the ground in localities such as his, especially given how long he has been pushing for this to happen in a more effective way—so far, sadly, without success. I would very much like to see the national taskforce supporting him in that work so that he can deliver for his local residents.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): In places like Ironbridge Gorge in my constituency, it is days later when the water comes down the river and has an impact on businesses and residences. Each and every time the temporary flood barriers are erected, a hammer blow is dealt to the economy in this world heritage site. Will the Secretary of State instruct the Environment Agency to come up with a plan and resource for frequently flooded areas, given that year on year the flooding becomes worse in places like Ironbridge Gorge? I invite him to visit the gorge to see it for himself.

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for his invitation to visit the gorge; I would very much like to take him up on it when time allows. I am sure he will welcome the review of the flood funding formula, which will allow us to take different approaches to managing flooding in ways that will be much more effective. He should be aware that the Environment Agency will be conducting its funding allocation in the usual way through its relevant committees, and he should feed his views into that process.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): This weekend, residents in my constituency were flooded yet again. The same thing happened only five weeks ago, and after that event I met people at my surgery who showed me footage of floodwater spewing out of their toilet into the downstairs area, and of their sodden houses. I met more than 100 residents in the village of Eardisland who expressed concerns that I know are widespread in the county and the constituency.

On that occasion in October more than 100 households in Herefordshire were flooded, yet the flood recovery framework was not initiated because Ministers felt that the flooding was not widespread or severe enough. Will the Secretary of State please consider the terms under which the flood recovery framework is initiated? It provides vital support that councils can pass on to help that recovery: immediate grants for communities and businesses, with council tax and business rates relief. Will he think about how that is triggered and consider giving the responsibility to local authorities, which are far the best-placed agencies to judge when it is required? In addition to everything we need for flood resilience, that immediate support is crucial at times like this.

Steve Reed: May I extend my sympathies to the hon. Lady's constituents following the distressing experiences that they have undergone during this and, I am sure, previous flooding episodes? She is quite right to ask how we can improve the flooding formula and get agencies working better on the frontline. It is possible to do so through the consultation that we have launched on the formula, and I hope that she will contribute to that. I am sure we can get to a position where the formula works much better for her constituents in North Herefordshire and for those in every other part of the country.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I have been contacted by residents of Draycott, Marchington and Rolleston and others in my constituency who have been affected by the flooding this weekend. This is a persistent problem that affects these areas every time we experience heavy rainfall. What work is the Department undertaking with county councils and other agencies to ensure that rivers are properly maintained and drains are regularly cleared to prevent this recurring devastation?

Steve Reed: I empathise with the suffering that my hon. Friend's constituents have experienced because of the recent flooding. We are reviewing the formula; we realise that it is not working as effectively as it should. Along with the floods resilience taskforce, we will be looking into how we can better improve co-ordination on the ground among the different agencies that have responsibility first for keeping people safe and then for helping communities to recover after flooding of the kind that my hon. Friend describes.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Residents of south Abingdon have already been flooded twice this year, and tonight there is another warning. I cannot imagine what they must be feeling. When I visited them in September, they reported feeling very alone. They had been promised a flood defence, and then the Environment Agency said that it was not value for money; they had been promised sandbanks, which then did not show up. When we asked the EA today whether it would be on the ground, it told us that it

could not send enough people—not because it did not have the staff or the money, but because not enough of them had completed a workplace assessment and training on how not to be assaulted by angry residents. Of course staff safety is everything and Environment Agency workers deserve our thanks, but surely an element of common sense needs to be applied. Surely the best way to help angry residents is to be there and help them in their hour of need.

Steve Reed: I am grateful for the point that the hon. Lady makes. I would be happy to raise it with the chief executive of the Environment Agency to ensure that when there is an urgent need for support and staff are available to provide it, that is what happens.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to Derby last year to see our flood defences and to meet firefighters who had saved lives and property when Derbyshire was hit by floods. May I echo the calls for him to explore with the Home Office the possibility of putting the water rescue that they perform on a statutory footing? Will he give us an update on the next phase of Derby's flood defence work?

Steve Reed: It was a great pleasure to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and meet firefighters and other emergency responders so that, together with her, I could thank them personally for the work that they always carry out in circumstances like these. She has referred to the duty that may be required of the fire service and other emergency services to respond to such circumstances. Currently, there is a power but no duty. I will be engaging with colleagues in the Home Office to see whether we need to put in place such a duty. I will be sure to keep my hon. Friend updated as those conversations progress.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): A couple of weeks ago I held a roundtable with some Mid Buckinghamshire farmers on the measures required to mitigate flooding, especially after extreme weather events such as Storm Bert this weekend. At the top of the list was the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) made about dredging and river capacity. On top of that, however, communities in Buckinghamshire such as Calvert Green and Fleet Marston are being flooded for the first time in decades as a result of some of the big infrastructure that is being built, particularly HS2. It seems that HS2 will concrete over a field, completely unaware that that will have a knock-on effect on farmland next door. Will the Secretary of State commit to working with the Transport Secretary and, I suggest, the Deputy Prime Minister, given their plans to concrete over the countryside, to ensure that where construction takes place, there are proper—and I really mean proper—flood mitigation measures?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We need to look at dredging and other means of mitigating the risk of flooding, and he is quite right that that needs to be done across Government. We will have those conversations and will ensure that measures are taken to protect communities as much as possible from the more severe weather events that we are seeing as a result of climate change.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend was speaking, the water levels on the River Ouse continued to rise, which means that tonight

my constituents in Newport Pagnell are once again bracing themselves and preparing their homes, businesses and farms for the second flooding incident in just a few weeks. Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the dedicated volunteers of the Newport Pagnell flood group for their tireless work in protecting our local town? Will he pay tribute to our local firefighters who are responding to this incident? Their water response unit in Newport Pagnell deals with incidents across the area. I should declare an interest: my brother is one of those brave local firefighters and is currently responding to an incident in Beaconsfield. Will my right hon. Friend also outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure that communities such as Newport Pagnell are better safeguarded against flooding in future?

Steve Reed: I share my hon. Friend's praise for volunteers and the emergency services, and particularly for his brother, for the work that they are carrying out. I am sure that he will welcome our review of the funding formula, which will ensure that all appropriate steps are taken in whichever parts of the country are affected, to improve resilience against the kind of flooding that we have seen over recent days. I know that the Environment Agency is aware of the rising water levels in the Ouse and other slower-moving rivers and is taking appropriate steps to safeguard people in Newport Pagnell, in other parts of his constituency and, indeed, along the rest of those rivers who may be affected as river levels continue to rise.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I note from the Secretary of State's statement that the floods resilience taskforce is designed to ensure better co-ordination between central Government and frontline agencies. Can he advise whether any of those agencies, local authorities or, indeed, the devolved Administrations have requested military assistance through the MACA process? If they have, is that being considered? Will he consider including the Ministry of Defence in his floods resilience taskforce?

Steve Reed: Yes, the devolved Administrations were represented on the floods resilience taskforce. We want to co-ordinate better with them and to ensure that they are co-ordinating with their own agencies and the frontline staff who are charged with protecting communities from the devastating impacts of flooding.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): As the House has heard today, a major incident has been declared in Northamptonshire: there is a risk to life in my constituency and that of my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool). Over 1,000 people have been evacuated from the Billing aquadrome, and we have seen hundreds of workers from the council, the EA, Anglian Water and the emergency services, and volunteers and residents' groups, working around the clock to make sure that my neighbours are kept safe. Does the Secretary of State agree that the collaboration I am seeing in Northampton demonstrates the importance of the floods resilience taskforce that he has announced, which will bring together multiple agencies to protect towns such as mine?

Steve Reed: I had the pleasure of visiting the aquadrome, and I am very sad indeed to hear that it has been flooded yet again. My hon. Friend is right to point to

the fact that it is not just about increasing funding, important though that is; it is also about getting the agencies on the ground to co-ordinate better at national, regional and very local levels.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): We have a flood alert in Runnymede and Weybridge at the moment, but it takes a few days for the water to make its way down to us, so we do not know the full impact of Storm Bert. We hope that there will not be a repeat of what happened with Storm Henk earlier this year, when constituents were passed from pillar to post due to the myriad statutory responders during a flood emergency. What will the floods resilience taskforce do to fix that, and will the Secretary of State support my campaign for an individual point of contact and co-ordination? We need a flood control centre in Runnymede and Weybridge, and in all our constituencies, to support our residents in a flood emergency.

Steve Reed: The role of the floods resilience taskforce is to ensure not just that there is better co-ordination at national level and between national and local agencies, but that co-ordination happens far better at the local level in the way that he is describing and that there is much better communication with residents, so that they know who to contact, and can do so in a much simpler way, to get the support and help that they need both when floods are coming and as areas recover from the impacts of flooding.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): One of the ways in which my Hazel Grove constituents have been impacted by Storm Bert is as passengers facing severe delays and cancellations on our rail network, particularly the west coast main line. Will the Secretary of State please update the House on the conversations that he has had with colleagues in the Department for Transport on how to minimise the impact, and on how to ensure that we learn the right lessons, so that future flooding causes even fewer impacts?

Steve Reed: We are in close contact with colleagues in the Department for Transport, and safety must be the priority for both passengers and people who work as part of the crews on the trains or on the ground. The railway lines will be opened as soon as it is safe to do so. We are aware that further steps need to be taken to protect all forms of public transport and, indeed, all parts of the country from the increase in severe weather incidents.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The flooding Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice, recently confirmed to me that the Government's new floods resilience taskforce brings together a range of partners, including the Environment Agency, the devolved Administrations, selected regional Mayors and lead local flood authorities. However, following flooding in Brampton and St Ives that was caused by the high level of the River Great Ouse last month, Cambridgeshire county council informed me that its role as lead local flood authority was only a supporting one, and residents have been understandably frustrated by the lack of clarity about who owns what. Can the Secretary of State offer some clarity on which agency leads the multi-agency response during a flooding event, and how is that reflected in how it interacts with the floods resilience taskforce?

Steve Reed: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that important point. Part of the role of the floods resilience taskforce will be to ensure that there is clarity on the ground, area by area, as to who are the lead responders and how co-ordination is happening, in a way that will provide the maximum benefit to people who are at risk of being affected by flooding.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I hope that the Secretary of State will join me in thanking workers at Torbay council, who have stepped up to help out residents across my constituency during Storm Bert. I highlight to colleagues the fact that we are haunted by deep cuts to the flood defence budget under the previous Government. Will the Secretary of State reflect on a piece of critical infrastructure: our Dawlish rail line? Phase 5 of the Dawlish rail resilience programme remains up on the shelf and has not been funded yet. Will he give assurances that it will be funded, to protect this vital piece of infrastructure?

Steve Reed: I share the hon. Gentleman's thanks to those who have been involved in protecting people from the impact of flooding. I can write to him on his specific question about the Dawlish railway.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I remind Members that I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on flooding and flooded communities. Large areas of North Shropshire are often under water, either from river flooding or from prolonged rainfall. This weekend has been no exception, with villagers cut off for long periods of time and vast swathes of farmland flooded. This year, there are farmers who have been unable to plant crops in the current harvest, which has just been collected, and who will not be able to do so next year—they are in a desperate state. When the Secretary of State reviews the flooding formula and the funding, will he consider how farmers will be compensated for storing vast quantities of water upstream, regardless of whether they like it or not?

Steve Reed: We can take that into account when we look at the flooding formula, but I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome, as I do, the additional £60 million in the Budget for farmers who have been affected by the severe levels of flooding experienced earlier in the year.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): The advice from Great Western Railway this morning was not to travel. Following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), how many meetings has the Secretary of State had with the Transport Secretary about the resilience of Great Western Railway?

Steve Reed: It is always wise to follow the advice that is given for people's safety. We are in regular contact with colleagues in the Department for Transport and other parts of Government to make sure that we are doing everything we can to keep people safe.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): My constituency of Witney has the Windrush, the Evenlode and the Thames, all of which have really impacted constituents today. We have just lost out on some FiPL—farming in protected landscapes—funding to produce modelling of the Windrush, which is upstream of Witney, our key market town in the constituency. That means that we are unable to forecast how we can lower and slow the flood crest through Witney, which would make it safer. Will the Secretary of State please look into providing better funding or enlarging the funding for such modelling, so that we can keep towns such as Witney safe on rivers like the Windrush?

Steve Reed: I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point. We will make announcements on FiPL early in the new year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Finally, I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Everybody knows that when I am called, it is all over—almost. [*Laughter.*] I thank the Secretary of State for bringing forward a very positive action plan and strategy. I send my sincere sympathies to those who have lost loved ones, and to those who are particularly anxious, worried and depressed about their properties. That is a serious worry for people who do not know what they will do next.

Will the Secretary of State outline what discussions have taken place with counterparts in the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that the Assembly and local communities have the ability to quickly regroup and get a handle on the devastating flooding that has taken place throughout the United Kingdom? I also need to ask him a question that I wish I had the answer to. One of the big questions is about alternative accommodation for those who have been flooded out. Has he been able to give any attention to that question, and if so, will the answers be shared with the people back home?

Steve Reed: They say it's not over till the fat lady sings, but I am not sure that they had the hon. Gentleman in mind when that particular phrase was coined. I am in regular contact with the devolved authorities, including on flooding. They sit on the floods resilience taskforce and it is important that there is co-ordination across all parts of Government across the UK to ensure that we can provide appropriate support for people in precisely the circumstances that he describes when flooding hits.

Point of Order

6.40 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On Saturday there were several incidents of Greater Manchester police violently restricting young Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller children who had come into Manchester city centre to do Christmas shopping. Video footage depicted a group of Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller children being dangerously forced on to a train out of the city to stations unknown, with one child being pushed to the point of nearly falling on to the track. Footage also shows a young man being forcibly restrained on the ground and arrested.

The actions of GMP raise serious questions about its operational approach and decision-making processes. This has caused huge distress for the many young people involved, for their families and for those across the Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities. Therefore, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I seek your guidance on how we can encourage the Home Office to make a statement and to consider an investigation into the incident?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving prior notice of her point of order. I have not had any indication that the Home Secretary intends to come to the House to make a statement, but the hon. Member has put her point on the record and I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will note her comments and pass them on.

Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The reasoned amendment in the name of Kevin Hollinrake has been selected.

6.42 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Last month, the Chancellor set out the Government's first Budget. That Budget was a once-in-a-generation event to wipe the slate clean after 14 years of the Conservatives. At that Budget, we laid the foundations for our No. 1 mission of economic growth. The scale of the mess that we inherited at the general election meant that we had to take tough decisions on welfare, spending and tax. Those decisions have been difficult, but they were necessary. They have enabled us to deliver economic stability and fix the public finances. Doing that is crucial to getting public services back on their feet, and to giving businesses the confidence they need to invest and thrive.

Stability, certainty and predictability are highly prized by businesses when making decisions about where and how much to invest. In opposition, I spoke to businesses time and again about the importance of stability, so in government we have made sure to deliver for them by publishing our corporate tax road map alongside the Budget. In my meetings with businesses about what they need to succeed, the system of business rates also came up time and again. I heard businesses criticise a system that is inflexible, that disincentivises investment and that places an unfair burden on those businesses on high streets across England.

That is why, in the Budget, the Chancellor confirmed our first steps towards creating a fairer business rates system that protects the high street, supports investment and is fit for the 21st century. We are determined to support high streets, as they are places that bring people together and serve as focal points for economic activity. Their success is what people across the country want to see, and it is a priority for the Government to deliver it. That is why, in our first Bill on business rates in this Parliament, the Government have prioritised making progress to rebalance the rates burden faced by high street businesses.

The Bill before us seeks to put into law the commitments made at the Budget by enabling the introduction from 2026-27 of permanently lower tax rates for the retail, hospitality and leisure properties with rateable values below £500,000 that make up the backbone of high streets across England. We are determined to give those businesses a tax cut, and we know that that must be fully funded in a challenging fiscal context. For that reason, the Bill also enables us to generate sustainable funding for those tax cuts through an increase of multipliers on the most valuable 1% of business properties in the country.

This targeted approach captures the majority of large distribution warehouses, including those used by online giants, as well as other out-of-town businesses that draw footfall away from high streets. It will enable us to lock

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in new, permanently lower tax rates for core high street businesses, providing not only a tax cut but stability and certainty after the one-year retail, hospitality and leisure relief, which has been precariously extended year by year since the pandemic. Our approach provides a permanent tax cut to help high street businesses succeed, alongside the certainty that they need to invest and the means to pay for it within our tough fiscal rules.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Minister talks about certainty, but one of the biggest problems for small businesses is that so many things are happening at once, including the national insurance contributions increase, the Employment Rights Bill that is coming in, and now the levy that has been cut down from 70% to 40%. The cumulative effect of all those makes a massive difference for my businesses. A hairdresser that I met only this weekend talked about how much of a problem that will be. How does the measure help to engender stability for those small businesses, which have to wait until 2026?

James Murray: Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that, around the difficult decision that we had to take on employer national insurance contributions, we provided explicit protection for small businesses by more than doubling the employment allowance from £5,000 to £10,500, which will benefit hundreds of thousands of small businesses across the country. I suggest that he talks to businesses in his constituency about that.

We are not shying away from the fact that difficult decisions were taken in the Budget, but he might also consult the plans that were left in operation by the previous Government in July. If we had pursued those plans, and if we had not taken any action on business rates, the retail, hospitality and leisure relief would have ended entirely next April. The cliff edge looming next April would have seen it go down to zero. We have extended it, despite the tough fiscal circumstances, for another year at 40%. That is a reasonable way forward while we put in place these permanent reforms.

As I mentioned, the measures in the Bill to level the playing field for high streets are the beginning of our efforts to transform the system of business rates. Our ambition to go further is set out in the paper published alongside the Budget, "Transforming business rates". That paper sets out the Government's priority areas for further reform to support investment and make the system fairer. It invites businesses and industry representatives to work with us on designing the best possible system for the future.

I am grateful to all those businesses and representative bodies that I have spoken with in the last few weeks for their engagement already. We will consider what more the Government should do to incentivise investment and growth, including by looking at the efficacy of improvement relief and empty property relief, the impact of losing small business rate relief on expanding businesses, and the cliff edges within the current system.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): If the Minister is looking for other methods by which public finances could be effectively deployed, will he look carefully at the last decade, during which small business rate relief has been used by second home owners to flip their

properties to business rating and pay nothing at all? In Cornwall alone, that has resulted in over £500 million of taxpayers' money being paid out to wealthy second home owners through covid aid and the small business rate relief. Will he look at how wealthy people have been incentivised to use that method to their advantage? Will he ensure that we have a much fairer system that puts first homes before second homes?

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman raises a crucial point about ensuring that the tax system is fair and that it supports the behaviour that we seek to incentivise.

That leads me neatly to my next point. As part of the discussion paper on transforming business rates, we have committed to consulting on adopting a general anti-avoidance rule for business rates in England. Although that might not necessarily address the exact problem the hon. Gentleman highlights, it speaks to the general issue of avoidance in relation to business rates.

We will also look at how the burden adjusts with the economic cycle, and we will assess the merit of a further increase in the frequency of re-evaluations. I look forward to working closely with businesses and representative organisations to deliver a business rates system that is fit for the 21st century, and that work begins today with the powers in this Bill to deliver our permanent tax cut for high streets.

As I said earlier, the tough decisions that the Chancellor set out in the Budget to deliver economic stability and fix the public finances enable us to give businesses the confidence they need to invest, and to get public services back on their feet. One public service that is crucial to breaking down barriers to opportunity is the education system, which is why the Government have prioritised ensuring that every child has access to the high-quality education that they deserve.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Like others, I have repeatedly raised the need for exemptions for religious schools. For the Free Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland, for example, the expression of its faith and treasured beliefs does not sit comfortably with mainstream schooling, and it is the same for many other faiths. If the Government are determined to press ahead, does the Minister agree that exemptions must be made, at the very least, for such schools? On behalf of those Churches, those faiths and those people, I have to say that the Government must think again.

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for a rare intervention, but this Bill is about business rates in England. Some of his wider points may relate to the removal of the VAT exemption for private school fees in other countries and nations of the UK. Those provisions will be debated as part of the Finance Bill on Wednesday and, if he repeats his comments, I might be able to address them more specifically.

Today, we are addressing the business rates system that applies in England. This is important because every parent aspires to get the best education for their child, and we as a Government are determined to ensure that those aspirations are met. At the Budget, the Government announced a real-terms increase in per pupil funding, with a £2.3 billion increase to the core schools budget for the financial year 2025-26, including a £1 billion uplift in high-needs funding.

This funding increase needs to be paid for so, to help make that happen, the Government are ending the tax breaks for private schools, as set out in our manifesto. This includes ending charitable rate relief eligibility for those private schools in England that are charities. This Bill will do that, and its measures operate alongside the ending of the VAT exemption for private school fees, which is being delivered through the Finance Bill that I will be moving on Wednesday. Together, these measures will raise £1.8 billion a year by 2029-30.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The Bill makes provision for maintaining the charitable status of institutions that are wholly or mainly concerned with providing full-time education for pupils with an education, health and care plan. Will the Minister set out the definition of “wholly or mainly”? What support will be put in place for councils to afford the burden of extra pupils moving into mainstream education? Schools will be facing the double whammy of losing charitable status and VAT being imposed on school fees. Hampshire county council is already under financial strain, and it will face a crisis point by 2026-27 under these proposals.

James Murray: As I will explain, the test of “wholly or mainly concerned” is 50% of pupils, or more, having an EHCP specifying that their educational needs can be met only in a private school. I will provide some more detail in a moment.

Of course, the Government have prioritised funding for the state education system in this Budget. The £2.3 billion increase, including a £1 billion uplift in high-needs funding, is possible only because of the difficult decisions that we have taken on taxation, including in the Bill.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that the Budget’s prioritisation of state schools should be welcomed? I have talked to teachers in Harlow and, under this Labour Government, they feel hope for the first time in 14 years. Is it not shocking that the Conservative party is still bemoaning the removal of tax exemptions from private schools, rather than focusing on the mainstream education attended by 96% of children?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is right that we, as a Government, are focused on improving state education for children across the country, because we know that every parent aspires for their child to get the best possible education. That is what our plans seek to achieve, and I would welcome it if the Opposition supported our efforts for the good of children across the country.

Members will have the chance to scrutinise the detail of this Bill in Committee, but I will now spend a few moments outlining how the Bill’s provisions are intended to operate.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Minister recognise that many independent schools, such as Lady Eleanor Holles school and Hampton school in my constituency, are involved in a huge amount of partnership work with schools in disadvantaged areas, like Feltham’s Reach academy, to help disadvantaged children to have opportunities that they would not otherwise get? Does he recognise that both the measures in this Bill and the introduction of VAT on private school fees will lessen that partnership work, which will have a detrimental impact on many state schools?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but what will have a positive impact on state schools across the country is the extra funding that we announced in the Budget. If Opposition Members want to support extra funding for schools, they have to support some of the tough decisions to raise that revenue in the first place. They cannot have it both ways. I know the new Leader of the Opposition is very keen to oppose tax rises while claiming that she supports the investment, but she cannot have it both ways. If Opposition Members want to support extra funding for schools, the NHS and other public services, they have to have some responsibility and accept the decisions that we are taking, or propose some of their own.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the Minister confirm the continuation of small business rates relief for the rest of this Parliament?

James Murray: I will come to business rates. The hon. Gentleman will have a chance to respond in full in just a moment. *[Interruption.]* I see that he is impatient to tell us how much he supports the Bill—or am I misreading the signs from across the Dispatch Box?

As I have said, this Bill will enable the introduction of new multipliers in the business rate system from 2026-27. The provisions in this Bill will enable the introduction of two lower tax rates, which may be applied only to qualifying retail, hospitality and leisure properties. The definition of “qualifying properties” will ultimately be set out in secondary legislation but, for the avoidance of doubt, it is our intention that the scope of these new tax rates will broadly follow that used for current retail, hospitality and leisure relief. These new rates will provide permanent tax cuts, offering certainty to businesses by ending the continued uncertainty of retail, hospitality and leisure relief, which has been rolled over annually since covid-19.

Our intention is for a lower rate that offers a tax cut for retail, hospitality and leisure properties that currently pay the standard multiplier, with a rateable value between £51,000 and £499,999. Another rate will offer a larger cut to the retail, hospitality and leisure properties currently paying the small business multiplier, which are those with a rateable value below £51,000.

We are clear, however, that any tax cut must be sustainably funded. For that reason, the Bill will also enable the introduction of higher multipliers, which can be applied only to the most valuable properties—those with a rateable value of £500,000 and above, which represents less than 1% of all properties in England. The rates for any new multipliers will be set in the 2025 autumn Budget in the light of the outcomes of the 2026 revaluation. The Government recognise, however, that it would be inappropriate to take unfettered powers that allowed the Government to change tax liabilities by unlimited amounts. For that reason, the Bill includes sensible guardrails to limit the use of those powers.

The guardrails determine that the two lower tax rates, when introduced, may not be set lower than 20p below the small business non-domestic rating multiplier, and that the higher tax rates, when introduced, may not be set higher than 10p above the non-domestic rating multiplier. Let me make it clear that those values are maximum parameters and do not represent the changes that we intend to implement. They are guardrails that

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offer sensible limits with proportionate flexibility. They ensure that the Government can respond to future revaluations as well as the changing economic and fiscal context. As I said, the exact rates for 2026-27 will be set out in next year's Budget.

Alongside the provisions on multipliers, the Bill contains provisions relating to private schools that will raise around £140 million a year. There are more than 2,400 private schools in England, of which approximately half are charities and are able to benefit from business rates charitable relief. The Bill will remove the eligibility of private schools that are charities for that relief. The Bill provides a specific definition of a private school as "a school...at which full-time education is provided for pupils of compulsory school age...where fees or other consideration are payable for that...education"

or

"an institution...which is wholly or mainly concerned with providing education suitable to the requirements of persons over compulsory school age but under 19...where the provision of full-time education...is wholly or mainly provision in respect of which fees or other consideration are payable".

A number of right hon. and hon. Members have questioned how the Government's plans will affect pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. My officials and I carefully considered the design of the policy, and the provisions in the Bill mean that private schools that are charities that wholly or mainly provide education for pupils with an education, health and care plan will remain eligible for charitable rate relief. To be clear, in answer to the earlier question from the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dineneage), "wholly or mainly" in business rates generally means 50% or more. The Government believe that will ensure that the majority of special educational needs schools will not be affected by the measure.

The measure will operate in addition to the existing business rates exemption for properties used by private schools wholly for the training or welfare of disabled people. That exemption, which we are retaining, means that those types of properties pay no business rates at all. Taken together, the existing and new provisions are intended to ensure that most private special educational needs schools will not be affected by the removal of charitable rate relief.

Victoria Collins (Harpden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Given the terrible SEND crisis across the country, does the Minister really think that it is good enough that only "most" of those schools will be exempt?

James Murray: I hope that the hon. Member will welcome the fact that we have committed an extra £1 billion in 2025-26 to high needs funding in the education system. The Government are committed to reforming England's SEND provision to improve outcomes and return the system to financial sustainability. I would welcome her support for our measures in that regard.

Dr Luke Evans: I appreciate the Minister making this carve-out on SEND, but I would be grateful if he could give us some statistics. He said that "most" will be carved out. Have the Government done any work to determine how many schools will still fall under the provisions? If not, placing such an impact assessment in the Library would be useful for Members across the House.

James Murray: Let me point the hon. Gentleman to a document that has already been published: "Removal of eligibility of private schools for business rates charitable relief", which sets out the impact and all the figures that he requests. There are 2,444 private schools in England, 1,139 of them are charities, and we expect that under our plans 1,040 will lose the relief. The schools that are wholly or mainly concerned with provision for children with an EHCP that specifies that their educational needs can be met only in a private school will retain access to charitable rate relief. I hope that that document will give him some of the statistics that he requests.

Let me add a few more details, in case they help hon. Members in understanding the policy. I can confirm that stand-alone nurseries with their own rates bills are not within the scope of the Bill. If they are charities, they will retain their eligibility for the existing relief. In addition, the Bill references independent training providers, which provide valuable vocational training courses on behalf of the Government, ensuring that there are suitable further education opportunities for all. Because of the funding mechanism used by the Government to fund independent training providers to provide full-time education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds, the Bill provides a specific carve-out to ensure that those institutions will not be affected by the measures in the Bill. As previously announced, it is the Government's intention that this measure will come into effect from 1 April 2025. As business rates are a devolved tax, the measures in the Bill will apply only in England.

The measures in the Bill will play their part in bringing about the change that the Government were elected to deliver. The powers to introduce new multipliers serve as first steps on the road to transforming the business rates system. We are determined to transform the business rates system to support our high streets in a sustainable way, to offer stability and promote investment, and to drive the economic growth that is our mission as a Government. Our vision of a modern business rates system is one that helps to create wealth and decent jobs in every part of the country, and that ensures that high streets serve as the heart of local communities.

We are also determined to break down barriers to opportunity and help all parents to achieve their aspirations for their children. That is why the Bill will make changes to the relief from business rates that private schools that are charities currently enjoy, raising crucial funding to help to ensure that every child has access to the high-quality education that they deserve. The Bill delivers change. Change is what the British people voted for, and I commend the Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Opposition spokesperson.

7.6 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question and add:

"this House observes that the Autumn Budget 2024 has cut central Government funding for retail, hospitality and leisure business rate relief in 2025-26, and that this Government funding will end completely in 2026-27; expresses concern that the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill represents a stealth increase in business rates on high streets and the hospitality sector, as well as on larger businesses, on top of the Government's

increases in National Insurance contributions; regrets the lack of a proper cumulative impact assessment on the effect on business; notes that the removal of charitable rate relief on independent schools, taken together with the imposition of VAT, will mean fewer children going to private schools and will therefore create extra pressure on state schools, will undermine aspiration and parental choice, and mean larger class sizes in state schools and increased costs for taxpayers; and therefore declines to give a Second Reading to the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill.”

It is a privilege to speak in this debate on behalf of His Majesty’s Opposition. The Conservative party has a proud record of supporting businesses on the high street. We cut business rates to support small businesses, including doubling small business rates relief from £6,000 up to £15,000, and almost trebling higher rate relief from £18,000 to £51,000. We increased the frequency of business rate revaluations, making our business rates system fairer for businesses and more responsive to local economic trends, helping businesses to invest, create jobs and grow.

The contrast with this business-bashing Labour Government could not be greater. They have brought forward a mass of new red tape for business by means of the Employment Rights Bill. I note that the Regulatory Policy Committee released its commentary today on the impact assessment, which it said is “not fit for purpose”. It says that the annual costs to businesses could be much higher than £5 billion, and the impact assessment has received a red rating.

The Government have also imposed huge new tax increases on businesses. The worst thing is that they were not even man enough to tell businesses that they were going to do it—quite the opposite—which is why, as much as the Minister says that businesses have confidence in his plans, the Institute of Directors has said that it has seen the biggest one-month fall in investment confidence in its history. The Confederation of British Industry said today that 50% of its members will reduce headcount, and two thirds are scaling back hiring. Is that the kind of growth that he imagined he would bring forward with his legislation?

Infamously, the Labour party promised in its manifesto not to raise national insurance. Next week, we will have the Second Reading of a Bill that reneges completely on that promise by raising employer’s national insurance contributions by £24 billion a year. Labour has also hit business through the family farms tax, and our best family businesses in other sectors by halving business property relief. I remind the Minister that family businesses employ 13.8 million people in this country and pay over £200 billion every year in taxes. The Government are killing the geese that lay the golden eggs.

In its manifesto, the Labour party promised to

“replace the business rates system, so we can raise the same revenue but in a fairer way. This new system will level the playing field between the high street and online giants”.

In a speech to the House on 12 May 2022, the Deputy Prime Minister said:

“We would scrap business rates to help our high streets flourish.”—*[Official Report, 12 May 2022; Vol. 714, c. 300.]*

The Treasury Minister himself also stated his party’s intention to “scrap business rates” to the House on 25 October 2023. The Bill before us breaks those promises because it does not “replace” or “scrap” the business rates system. Not only that, but as a result of the Bill

and the measures in the Budget, business rates are actually going up, both for online companies and businesses on our local high streets—yet more broken promises from a Government of broken promises.

Maybe the Government do not realise exactly what they are doing, perhaps because members of their Cabinet have no experience of starting and running a business. Shamefully, there has been no consultation with businesses about the changes. True to form, the Government have not published a full regulatory impact assessment alongside the Bill on the changes to business rates multipliers. It is a discourtesy to the House and to our constituents for the Government to refuse to consult with businesses, consider the impact their policies will have or publish the information that would allow Members of the House to scrutinise the plans properly. Instead, they are using their majority to ram through the half-baked damaging measures in the Bill.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I find it more than ludicrous to hear the Tories lecturing Labour about red tape. What the Tories have served up to the country through Brexit and the damage they have done to our economy is a disaster. To hear them masquerading as—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Only interventions relevant to the speech in hand should be made. There is no need for that performance.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I remind him that it was not the Conservative party that voted to leave the European Union, but the people of this country. We respect democratic mandates.

I hope every Member on the Government Benches who walks through the Lobby to support the Bill tonight realises the price their constituents will pay for that decision. If the Government will not publish the likely consequences of the Bill, let me set out what I believe the consequences will be.

The Government claim to be cutting business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in England, but that is not the case. The business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses that we introduced cuts 75% off bills, but that support is being reduced by the Labour Government. They are almost halving that relief to 40%, meaning that shops, restaurants, cafés, pubs, cinemas, music venues, gyms and hotels will all see their business rates rise.

James Murray: Was that 75% business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses due to expire in April 2025?

Kevin Hollinrake: As the Minister knows, it had been renewed every year since 2021. The Conservative party supports businesses. When that 75% was passed on in England, the same moneys were provided to Scotland and Wales. What did Wales do? Only 40% relief was passed on, not 75%. That is the Welsh Government’s attitude to business. The Conservative party supports businesses, but the Labour party does not because it does not understand them.

Businesses face a stealth tax from Labour, with a £925 million rise in rates next year. That will add more than £5,000 to the business rates bill for the average pub, on

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top of £5,000 per year in extra costs for national insurance rises. It will also add more than £9,000 to the rates bill for the average restaurant, on top of the £12,000 national insurance increase, which means an additional £21,000 in total per annum for a typical business.

There will also be an increase of up to £2.7 billion in 2026 through higher business rates via the new multipliers, despite Labour's manifesto promise not to increase the amount raised by the levy. These tax rises, as the CBI has said again today, will be passed on to workers through lower wages and to consumers through higher prices, making a mockery of Labour's claim that it would not raise taxes for working people. The British Retail Consortium has warned the Government:

"The sheer scale of new costs and the speed with which they occur create a cumulative burden that will make job losses inevitable, and higher prices a certainty."

The Bill will replace retail, hospitality and leisure relief with a lower multiplier for businesses with a rateable value below £500,000. That will be funded by the new higher rate multiplier for premises with a rateable value of more than £500,000, as the Minister set out. Setting the threshold at that higher level is a blunt instrument. I can assure the Government that it will have consequences for businesses that are not big online retailers. It will hit large supermarkets, supermarket delivery, large department stores, football and cricket clubs, conference centres and airports. Some of those on whom the new charges will be levied pay tens or hundreds of millions of pounds in rates. At the maximum level, it will mean a 20% increase to their rates bill.

It is no wonder that the outgoing chief executive of John Lewis has criticised Labour's lack of business rates reform and warned that, alongside the national insurance increase, this is a "two-handed grab" from businesses. The Cold Chain Federation has warned that the business rates changes and the NICs increases could lead to the cost of food and medicine going up. That might be a double whammy for consumers, as the National Farmers Union has warned that the cost of food will go up because of the family farm tax. The Labour Government do not seem to have thought that through. The Labour party used to say that the business rates system created uncertainty, but now KPMG has described the Government's plan to change the business rates system, as set out in the Bill, as "creating uncertainty for businesses".

The Bill is silent on the matter of small business rates relief, which is a lifeline for many businesses on our high streets. When the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution winds up the debate, will he confirm that the Government intend to retain small business rates relief for the rest of this Parliament? Business is listening, and it needs to know.

Let me address the sting in the tail of the Bill: Labour's education tax. The shadow Education Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), feels passionately, as do all Conservative Members, that the Government are making the wrong decision. This Bill is part of the Government's education tax, because removing the charitable rate relief from private schools that are charities goes hand in glove

with the utterly wrong-headed, anti-aspirational and counterproductive policy of charging VAT on private school fees.

Chris Vince: Will the shadow Minister tell us how many state schools there are in his constituency, and whether he will talk so passionately about them when he talks about the decisions that this Government are making to support state schools?

Kevin Hollinrake: The Bill is about raising rates on private schools, which is why I mention them, but I am very happy to talk in glowing terms about the state schools in my constituency, including the one that I attended as a boy and the ones that my children went to. I am for state schools, but I am also for independent education. Why is it either/or? Why would anyone ever tax education?

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): The Stop School Cuts campaign website estimates the combined school cuts since 2010 in Thirsk and Malton, the shadow Minister's constituency, as more than £70,000. Will he point to where in the public record he has spoken out about that?

Kevin Hollinrake: I was part of the fairer funding formula for schools in my area, which had the worst-funded local authorities in the country. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that schools in my constituency improved under the stewardship of the Conservative Government. Surely that is the key metric, rather than just how much money is put in.

Dr Luke Evans: The impact of taxing private schools with VAT will be that thousands of pupils move out into the state system. That will take away funding. It is already having an impact, but no mitigation has been put in place. The Education Secretary said that 3,000 was not the correct number, but she would not give out the number of pupils who have moved. The Government know those numbers and they need to come clean, because the impact of those pupils moving will eat away at whatever the tax raises.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I understand that 90,000 pupils will be transferring to the state sector as a result of these plans. We Conservatives hold firmly to the principle that education should not be taxed. The only other nation to have tried is Greece, which abandoned the policy within months because of the disastrous consequences.

The Independent Schools Council has said that some independent schools will close entirely and others will scale back the education they offer, causing significant upheaval and disruption to the lives of tens of thousands of children. As surely as night follows day, that will mean fewer children going to private schools and increased pressure on state schools.

I would be grateful if the Minister enlightened me about whether this policy complies with article 14 of the European convention on human rights. The legal issues memorandum considers the principle of non-discrimination regarding the difference in treatment between private schools and state schools, but not between private schools that are charities and other charities that will still qualify for charitable rates relief. I look forward to the Minister's clarification.

During our time in government, England became one of the top-performing countries for education in the western world, a legacy that this Government seem determined to trash. In short, this Bill may be short, but it is long on disastrous consequences. I implore Government Members to think about their local schools and their high street businesses that are about to be clobbered, and about the resulting job losses, higher prices and boarded-up shop fronts. I ask all Members to think about what is in their constituents' best interests, do the right thing and vote against the Bill.

7.21 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I will focus on the removal of private schools' eligibility for charitable business rates relief. Before I was elected to the House I was a scientist, but before I was a scientist I trained as a secondary school teacher. In school, I saw at first hand the dedication and resilience of my colleagues, but I also bore witness to the challenges that they faced—challenges that led many, many teachers to leave the profession after only a few years. I left after only my training year, citing the unsustainability of marking books at 1 o'clock in the morning, planning lessons at the weekend and never seeing my family as the reasons why I could not continue in the profession, despite loving being a teacher. I chose to leave the profession to do something that I feel is much easier: to take a doctorate in engineering.

When I trained 10 years ago, teaching had a profound retention issue, but now it is worse. One in 10 new teachers leaves after just one year in the role; one in four leaves after just three years. Little over half of teachers see their career last more than 10 years. Many are outstanding teachers who do not want to leave the profession. Even now, I miss teaching every day.

The picture in our education system gets worse when we look at maths and science, subjects that I know the whole House believes are vital. The maths teacher shortage began in 2012, and in 2023 the intake of new maths teachers was just 60% of the Government's target. I was a physics teacher, and in 2023 there were six times as many vacancies for science teachers as there were in 2010. In my view, the failures of the previous Government's education policy led to this abysmal state of affairs, and they are profoundly unacceptable.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is talking from personal experience about an important part of our education system. He talks a lot about teachers and the previous Government's failed education policy, but will he take a moment to recognise the vast improvements in our performance in international league tables and the fall in the disadvantage gap in the years leading up to covid-19? Will he at least give some credits to the outputs, not just the inputs?

Adam Thompson: I will come to some of those points further on in my speech, if the hon. Gentleman is willing to hang on for a few minutes.

I trained as a teacher when the former Member of Parliament for Surrey Heath was Education Secretary. He made significant changes to the education system during his tenure, as the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer) has just

alluded to. Those were changes that I and the vast majority of my colleagues at the time strongly disagreed with. Those changes ignored decades of pedagogical research and favoured the metrification of our children over learning. They harked back to the rote learning of 50 years ago and set pedagogy back decades.

Austerity was already being very much felt in the sector. Teachers were expected to put in the same effort, but with fewer resources and with their pay frozen. Now it is worse. After a decade of Conservative Education Secretaries following in the footsteps of the former Member for Surrey Heath, teachers' pay has taken a significant real-terms cut. In many ways, he inspired me to enter politics as a Labour Member—a sentiment that I know many of my colleagues on this side of the House share. Opposition Members may challenge me about why I raise these points, but I think they are all part of what the Bill is about. They are about keeping teachers in their jobs, paying them fairly and giving them the resources that they need to give our children the education that they deserve.

The previous Government set a goal that all children should finish year 11 with at least GCSEs in maths and English. That is a laudable goal, which has my full personal support, but last year just 45% of children in England—not even half—achieved it. Only one state secondary school in my constituency of Erewash attained results above that average, and even in that top-performing school, just half their children in year 11 attained GCSEs in maths and English. Every other state secondary school in my constituency was below that 45% average, and at the worst-performing the result was fewer than a third.

I should note that I place none of the blame for those issues on the local schools themselves. I have met several local heads and many teachers, all of whom it is powerfully obvious to me have made incredible sacrifices to deliver excellence in our local education system, and all of whom have been burned by the failures of education reforms introduced throughout the past decade. The people of Erewash elected a Conservative Member of Parliament in 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019, and in return the previous Government let their children down.

I have been talking a lot about state schools, which is only natural when they are the schools that 94% of our children attend, but I would also like to highlight the major independent school in my constituency, Trent college in Long Eaton. In the run-up to the election and since then, I have been around as many of the schools in Erewash as I can, and Trent college is no exception. I have spoken many times to staff and pupils, and this weekend I attended a show put on by the incredible Wildflower community choir at the school's chapel. It is a wonderful school, with excellent staff led by the brilliant Bill Penty. The staff provide fantastic opportunities to all the pupils who attend. The facilities are the best I have ever seen in a school and the staff do a huge amount for our community, but it is a simple fact that the vast majority of my constituents cannot afford to send their children to Trent college and that many of its pupils come from outside my constituency.

A great part of what this Bill is about is making sure that the incredible opportunities received by the children at Trent college, and the aspirations that they are encouraged to have, are available to all children in Erewash. I want every child in Erewash and the country to receive the

[Adam Thompson]

best education they possibly can. This Bill will support the extension of those opportunities to every child in every state school in Erewash and the country.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is giving a thoughtful and impassioned speech. Notwithstanding his support for the Government's policy, I wonder whether he regrets the fact that it is being introduced midway through the year, so that children, including those with special educational needs, will find themselves struggling to get involved with the curriculum and to fulfil the examinations for which they have put in a lot of effort and preparation.

Adam Thompson: I remind the right hon. Gentleman that if Opposition Members did not want us to have to take drastic measures to re-establish our country's economy, they should not have left a £22 billion black hole in it.

I want to flag a particular failure in the education system that was brought to crisis by the previous Government: the provision of SEND education. It has long been under-supported, and after the past decade, things are worse. Opposition Members will claim that the Bill will make SEND provision worse still. Let me tell them that for SEND children and their families in my constituency and across Derbyshire it is scarcely conceivable that things could get any worse. Some 20% of the casework that I receive in my office relates to SEND problems. The recent Ofsted report on SEND services offered by Conservative-run Derbyshire county council found that it had "widespread" weaknesses, that communication with parents was "poor" and that children's needs were often not accurately identified or provided for. The report is utterly damning—it is the worst Ofsted report I have ever seen—and Derbyshire county council's failures are extreme. For my constituents, the local elections cannot come soon enough.

I was very pleased when the Chancellor announced in the Budget an extra £1 billion to support SEND services. Having spoken extensively to parents of SEND children in my constituency, I can say that they are not worried about whether private school fees might increase; they are worried about whether their children will be able to go to school at all. This Bill is about providing equality of opportunity. It is about ensuring that a child's postcode or their parents' income does not determine their chances in life. This Bill will provide funds to fix our state schools, reverse the bite of austerity, get more teachers into school and help them to stay there, ensure that all children are properly included, and ultimately provide them with the education they all deserve.

I feel strongly that supporting this Bill is my duty to my Erewash constituents and to its schools, its teachers, its children, their parents and the future of our towns and villages. It is my duty, therefore, to vote for the Bill.

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

7.30 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Great British high street is on life support. Many bricks-and-mortar businesses are barely surviving and, where they are, it is

often against the odds. Changes in our trading relationship with Europe, the covid-19 pandemic, energy prices, the cost of living and the Conservatives' disastrous mini-Budget have all taken their toll, but for years one measure has stifled high street businesses more than any other: the broken business rates system.

The business rates system is unfair on companies, bad for our local communities and damaging to our national economy. It penalises manufacturers when they invest to become more productive and energy-efficient. It leaves pubs and restaurants with disproportionately high tax bills and it puts bricks-and-mortar shops at an unfair disadvantage compared with online retail giants. In too many places pubs, restaurants and shops are being forced to close, taking with them jobs, opportunities and treasured community spaces, and consumers are seeing the cost of this unfair tax passed on to them.

More broadly, this outdated system inhibits business investment, job creation and economic growth, holding back our national economy, yet for too long it has been allowed to continue. In their 2019 manifesto, the previous Conservative Government promised a fundamental review of business rates to ease the tax burden on smaller businesses. Yet in 2022, when I challenged the then Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), on his personal commitment to making that happen, he admitted in this place that it was

"Another of the promises I now vainly wish I had not made".—
[Official Report, 17 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 430.]

Businesses are tired of being treated with such cynicism and of relying on a patchwork of last-minute temporary reliefs. They cannot plan, they cannot invest and they cannot grow. They are crying out for fundamental reform and a new, fairer system. Before this autumn Budget, Liberal Democrats called on the Chancellor to reform business rates completely, with a new system, and to do so no later than April 2026. We believe the new system should be based on our Liberal Democrat calls for a commercial landowner levy—a bold move that would deliver a real shot in the arm for our high streets.

Instead of pursuing fundamental reform, instead of fair reform, this Bill is just more tinkering. Rates relief has been a sticking plaster—but, boy, is that plaster being ripped off in April, with a big reduction in relief. Many small businesses now say that the increase in business rates, combined with the increase in national insurance contributions, will be too much for them to absorb.

Andrew George: My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. Along with the point I made in my previous intervention about the opportunity for abuse under the rates relief system, particularly by holiday homes, does she accept that the methodology used by the current rating system for parking spaces in out-of-town retail outlets such as supermarkets hands a massive advantage to those supermarkets in comparison with town centre shops, and that we need a rating system that actually levies a rate on that benefit at a level that ensures an even playing field?

Daisy Cooper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this broken business rates system is unfair in many ways and it is the big giants, online or otherwise, that are getting an easier ride.

The Bill fails to address many other problems with business rates. For example, it does nothing to support businesses outside the three sectors of retail, hospitality and leisure, meaning it excludes key sectors such as manufacturing that are particularly negatively affected by the current system. It does not address the £51,000 cliff edge. Properties with a value over that threshold are not eligible for the small business multiplier, even though they are small businesses, and with rates relief going down, business rates bills for small businesses will go up. From next April, business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure will be cut from 75% to 40% and this Bill does nothing to avert that blow.

The Minister said he wants to rebalance business rates. I welcome that direction of travel, if it turns out to be true, but in the absence of an impact assessment, I am particularly worried about unintended consequences. I say this in the spirit of constructive opposition: it appears as though the Government are moving from a system of temporary relief to a lower multiplier. At the moment, a small business enjoys 75% business rates relief, but a very large chain has its relief capped at £100,000. If I have understood it correctly, independent shops will see their relief drop from 75% to 40%, while big chains such as pubcos and supermarkets may see their relief uncapped, which could give them a tax reduction of tens of millions of pounds. I would be grateful if the Minister wrote to me to share some modelling to reassure me that that is not going to happen and that we will not see independent businesses inadvertently subsidising big chain stores and multinationals.

The impact of the Government's changes to business rates will have a massive effect on small businesses in my constituency. The oldest pub in Britain—or so they claim—Ye Olde Fighting Cocks, will see a whopping increase of £30,000 per year in its business rates alone. The Save St Albans Pubs campaign says that even an average pub in St Albans, with a rateable value of £100,000, will face an additional £19,000 in its business rates bill from April. If we assume that an average pub makes 30p profit per pint, each of those pubs would need to sell an extra 60,000 pints a year, or almost 1,200 pints extra a week—and that is before factoring in the increase in national insurance contributions.

Other low-margin, large-premises businesses, such as children's soft play activity centres, will also lose out under these changes. DJ's Play runs much-loved indoor play centres across Hertfordshire, which exist in large warehouse-style premises. The buildings are large, but the profit margins are not. DJ's Play and many others like it provide a valuable and enriching educational experience for children, but they too will struggle to keep their heads above water.

The Liberal Democrats are also opposed to the Bill because it would levy a tax on education by removing the business rates exemption for private schools that are charities. We are opposed in principle to the taxation of education, because it is a public good. We believe that parents must be given choice when it comes to their children's education. Many families feel that, whether due to bullying, SEND provision, mental health issues or other factors, the state system cannot meet their child's needs.

Josh Fenton-Glynn: One of the first things the coalition Government voted to do was to scrap the Building Schools for the Future programme, which impacted

schools in my constituency including Calder high school, Brooksbank and Todmorden high school. Will the hon. Lady reflect on whether that was a mistake by her party and whether it has prevented state schools from being able to provide for more students?

Daisy Cooper: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He may know that during those coalition years, both the health and education day-to-day budgets were protected and it was after the Liberal Democrats left the coalition in 2015 that capital budgets were serially raided to pay for day-to-day spending.

To return to my point, there are almost 100,000 children with SEND in private education without education, health and care plans, and it will be those families who bear the brunt of this measure.

We Liberal Democrats have tabled our own reasoned amendment setting out the reasons why we are against the Bill, but I have a number of questions for the Minister that I would be grateful if he could address in his summing up. Will there be an impact assessment that sets out the impact on small businesses on high streets? Will he exclude any new investment from business rates valuations from April, so that businesses that are able to invest in their future will not see that investment pushing up their rates bills even higher? Will he think again and complete the consultation before unfreezing the rates relief, which could badly affect small businesses and our high streets? Will he confirm whether the change from a system of capped temporary relief to an uncapped lower multiplier will inadvertently end up with small businesses subsidising big corporations?

The Government say that they want growth, and so do we, but these business rates changes will stifle the growth of small businesses and high streets at a time when we should be unleashing it. We urge Ministers to think again.

7.40 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), I will speak about the removal of the charitable tax status of private schools. I stand here as not just the Labour MP for Wolverhampton North East, but someone who has spent more than 25 years working in state secondary schools as a science teacher and a deputy headteacher. My experiences in classrooms have shown me the stark realities of the funding disparities across our education system.

Removing the charitable tax status of private schools is necessary and fair. Many staff working in state schools across the country will empathise with me when I say that in recent years, something as basic as a class set of glue sticks or reliable access to working printers has become a luxury. We have to make tough choices. We are struggling to provide subject and department capitation budgets for subjects such as science, art, design and technology and music and to provide the resources needed for students to thrive with hands-on learning. We are struggling to fix leaking roofs and fund much-needed support services for vulnerable students. These are not decisions that any school leader should face, but they are the reality in too many state schools. Contrast that with the resources available to private schools, which benefit from the charitable tax exemption, giving them

[Mrs Sureena Brackenridge]

a financial advantage. Is it fair that while state schools struggle to afford basic supplies, private schools enjoy tax breaks that widen the gap? I think not.

The gulf in top GCSE results between private schools and state schools is vast. This year, almost 50% of the GCSEs taken by private school students were at least a grade 7, while less than 20% of results from students in comprehensives and academies reached the same level. By removing tax exemptions on private schools, we have the opportunity to generate an estimated more than £1.5 billion annually. Those funds will catalyse the transformation needed in our state schools. Imagine recruiting and retaining more talented teachers, modernising ageing buildings, expanding student wraparound support services and ensuring that every child, no matter where they are from, has access to high-quality education. This is not about punishment; it is about fairness. Some will argue that this policy could drive up fees, putting private education out of reach for some families, but let us be clear: private schools are businesses. Many have financial reserves, endowments and donations that they can draw on. They can adapt, just as state schools and school leaders like myself have had to adapt and balance constrained budgets for many years.

This new Government's record on education will be one of fairness and equity. We are investing in early years education, free breakfast clubs, great-quality apprenticeships and staff recruitment and retention, but we need resources to make those ambitions a reality. Removing charitable tax exemptions is a necessary and responsible step in building an education system in which a child's potential is not defined by their family's wealth. I have seen what state schools can achieve when they are given the resources they deserve—when a child who once struggled to find their confidence suddenly excels because they finally have the support that they need. Removing tax exemptions from private schools is not just a policy to me; for the students I have taught, the colleagues I have worked alongside and the countless young people still waiting for their opportunity, this is about fairness, just as they deserve.

7.45 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): In my time as a junior Treasury Minister, one important thing I learned was that there is a really good argument against every tax: VAT is inflationary, corporation tax reduces investment, income tax disincentivises work, excise duties typically fall more heavily on lower-income groups and so on. As a result, the policy tends to be, "We will do a little bit of a large number of taxes." That is not a bad policy, but business rates are particularly troublesome because of their fixed-cost nature—they do not flex to businesses' sales or profitability or to the business cycle, so they can exacerbate the effect of downturns in the economy or in individual sectors. Business rates discourage start-ups and scale-ups.

Rates fall disproportionately on property-heavy sectors. With the development of e-commerce and delivery businesses, the hurt to those with costlier premises is relatively greater. Due to the accumulation of those factors, UK Hospitality and the British Retail Consortium estimate that hospitality, retail and leisure account for more than a third of business rates while accounting for

under a tenth of the economy as a whole. That matters to us as parliamentarians because of the role that such businesses play in our town centres, village centres, city centres and high streets. There is both the direct effect that an individual shop, café, restaurant or pub has on footfall into the town, and the indirect impact due to the interdependence of businesses and the network effect.

We often lump hospitality and retail together due to the commonality of pressures that affect both, but there are also differences between them. Hospitality has taken on more of the burden of supporting our town centres over time relative to retail, because there are different levels of opportunity in e-commerce—there is some with retail businesses, but there tends to be little with hospitality businesses, because by definition if someone takes something from a vending machine, that is not hospitality.

I support the concept of fundamentally reforming business rates. The world has changed, with the growth of e-commerce and, thankfully, the growth of wages at the lower end of the wage distribution. We need to make a sharper distinction between shops and distribution sheds, but this Bill does not do that. The distinction that the Bill makes in its reform is between large premises with large rateable values and smaller premises. A quick read of the wording of the "transforming business rates" document, which explains the policy, would almost make one think that the changes are designed to distinguish online businesses from traditional retail, but they are not. The document mentions

"properties with rateable value £500,000 or more,"

which captures

"the majority of large distribution warehouses including those used by online giants".

That is true, but that will also capture lots of other businesses, such as department stores and hotels, which are clearly part of the retail and hospitality sectors. Conversely, some parts of the distribution network of online businesses will not be captured. One very large, well-known online retailer has already moved to a more distributed hub and spoke network with its regional fulfilment approach. I dare say that those one-hour delivery grocery people have even smaller individual premises.

In reforming business rates, I hope that the Minister will consider that they cannot do all the work. I strongly welcomed the previous Government's introduction of the digital services tax, which was always put forward as an interim measure pending wider reform of international taxation through the OECD. I do not believe a broader online sales tax is likely to be helpful—definitions would become difficult, and the development of some of the small businesses in our town centres that we value could be impeded—but I welcome the Government talking about more frequent valuations. Any reform of business rates must address the cliff edges that the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) talked about, as well as another problem that we as MPs worry a great deal about, which is vacant premises.

Right now, I am most concerned about right now. The Government promised that they would raise

"the same revenue but in a fairer way".

That is not what is about to happen. Let us be very clear: the amount of money to be raised from business rates is about to go up, and it is about to go up on the back of retail and hospitality businesses. The Government

will say—the Minister has already said—“But we are extending a relief that was going to come to an end.” Believe it or not, ladies and gentlemen, there is even a line in the “transforming business rates” document that says the Government will save the average pub £3,300 a year. They may say that, but that is not how it will feel to that pub or to the typical retail, leisure or hospitality business in any of our constituencies when they discover that the relief on business rates is coming down from 75% to 40%. For many businesses, in real terms, that means a doubling or more of the business rates they pay, and we cannot see that in isolation—it comes on top of many other pressures.

The increase in the national living wage is a good thing. The national living wage has been a very successful policy that, since 2015, has reduced the number of people in work on low pay from one in five to less than one in 10. However, I am afraid that the further increase in the national living wage—which I welcome—comes with things that I do not welcome, particularly the great extra cost pressure on employer’s national insurance contributions. A lot of nonsense has been talked about whether that counts as a tax on working people. Everybody knows that in the end, employer taxes on labour only ever show through in lower employment figures or wages lower than they otherwise would have been. On top of that, there are the French-style labour laws. While higher employer’s national insurance contributions may result in lower employment at any individual institution, the effect of the business rates hike will be that some establishments will close altogether.

Before I sit down, I want to say a word about schools, a topic on which impassioned speeches have been made by Members across the House. Most of what colleagues have said will probably be discussed again on Wednesday, when the Finance Bill has its Second Reading—I can assure the Minister that we will be back for that debate, too. Relatively speaking, the measures in this Bill are small compared with the VAT changes. This Bill is projected to eventually raise £70 million for the Treasury and another £70 million for local authorities, compared with £1.6 billion through the VAT hike. These measures also have a relatively small effect on displacement into state schools, but let us be clear: there is still displacement into state schools. That is a cost to the state, but more importantly, when it comes to individual places, it will be a strain on some of our local school systems, on class sizes and, ultimately, on parents’ prospects of getting the first choice for their child—the school they want to go to.

Although colleagues on both sides of the House have said that we cannot talk about the rates alone, but have to put them together with VAT, there are four things happening this year that will increase the amount of money going out of independent schools into the Exchequer. Business rates is one of them; VAT is the second; the third is the rise in employer’s national insurance contributions, which will have a big effect on this sector; and the fourth is the five-percentage-point increase in employer contributions through the teachers’ pension scheme. I estimate that for most schools, that measure on its own accounts for about 3.5% of total costs. All this matters because of the uneven effect it will have on displacements into state schools. Whether a person is in Salford or in Surrey, in Bristol or in Bury, they may find that great and unexpected strains are put on the schools in their area.

This measure, as well as the VAT measure, will also have a disproportionate effect on low-cost faith schools, many of which rely partly on donations to keep going. Those are not businesses that are in some way well endowed; they are doing something because they believe it serves the needs of their faith, something that they cannot find in the state sector. Some of those schools are charging less than the cost of the average state school place in our country, and it seems bizarre that this Government wish to hammer them. It will also create a two-tier charity system in which some charities can be disfavoured fiscally even while complying with their charitable obligations and serving their communities. It is a new and most unwelcome example of state overreach, and I will be voting against the Bill this evening.

7.55 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Ind): I will base much of my contribution on the latter part of this Bill, which deals with private schools. However, before I go into that, I welcome the changes that the Minister is proposing through this legislation that will massively benefit our high streets. The reality is that the past 14 years saw our high streets devastated by the previous Government. In particular, I welcome the permanent lowering of business rates in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, which I think will be a huge boost to our high streets.

On the schools part of the debate, it would be remiss of me not to start by mentioning the 14 years of brutal Tory cuts that have led us to this moment, in which state schools are hanging on by a thread. They were abandoned for 14 years by a Government who brought zero investment to schooling—who simply watched the sector struggle through the covid-19 pandemic and left school buildings laden with asbestos or crumbling concrete. They knew that teachers were paying out of their own pockets for school supplies and food for hungry students, but instead of supporting them, the previous Government chose to attack public workers who were close to breaking point. Teachers have long paid the price, leaving the education system in droves, and can we blame them, given the treatment they have had over the past 14 years? In my constituency of Bradford East alone, 95% of schools have faced cuts to per pupil funding—cuts of £15.6 million since 2010. That is over £680 less per pupil.

As such, it is refreshing to finally see a Government share my values and my commitment to not leave state schools at breaking point, with a clear plan to deliver a much-needed lifeline directly to those schools by ending private schools’ eligibility for business rates charitable rate relief and VAT relief. The Minister was right to note that VAT relief is dealt with in a separate piece of legislation that is yet to come before this House, but both are connected in this debate, so I will also make mention of the VAT relief that private schools currently enjoy.

Frankly, the £1.5 billion that will be raised will go towards improving the education and life outcomes of all children by funding the recruitment of thousands more teachers and much-needed breakfast clubs for children. Many will welcome the Government ending the discount on education that the richest schools and the richest parents currently get, because what kind of Government arrange concessions for the wealthiest while working-class children go hungry as they learn?

[Imran Hussain]

Despite some of the arguments we have heard and will hear, that is not a society that champions freedom of choice; it is one where the wealth bracket of someone's parents, their postcode and their school determines the success of their life. If we let this inequality entrench itself any longer, we will never be able to end it.

I fully understand and endorse the spirit of the decision to close the tax loophole on private schools, but I also note the growing fear and concern in my constituency and other constituencies, particularly for the smaller independent and faith schools that, as we should also recognise, provide excellent and often specialised schooling for children. That is why I am pleased that the Government have confirmed that, where private schools are charities that provide education for children with education, health and care plans, they will retain the charitable relief, as they rightly should. My view is that the impact on smaller independent and faith schools should be considered too, and I firmly believe that it is not in the spirit of this legislation to punish them. We should draw a clear distinction.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to highlight the impact on small schools, which often have pretty low fees, so is he going to vote against the Bill tonight? The spirit of this legislation is to hit everything in the private sector, as if every institution was Eton, when he knows and we know that they are anything but.

Imran Hussain: The right hon. Gentleman is a brave soul because he often tries to defend the indefensible. He and I have often sparred between these Benches, but I would say to him that the place he comes from and the place I come from are distinctly different. I support the spirit and ethos of this legislation because I do not think it is right to give tax concessions and subsidies to the richest in society while the poorest of our kids go hungry in schools, so we come from different places. If he lets me make the point about where I am coming from about genuinely smaller and faith schools, I think it may at least answer part of his question.

When we talk about these schools, let us be clear that the average fees for some of the smaller schools are about £3,000, which is a great deal less than the average. They are maintained through community support and donations, and they are not in the same league as the Etons of this world. They do not reproduce class inequalities, and in fact they enable some of the most deprived communities to flourish. It would be a travesty if these schools were inadvertently punished by a decision designed to tackle the same inequality that some of them work so hard to break down.

If we do not consider the impact on them, the schools charging the lowest fees, which are often located in extremely deprived communities, will suffer and, sadly, the children whose working-class parents have often saved up for many years to get them into these schools will have to leave. Again, while I of course support children moving from that sector into the state sector, the reality is that 14 years of underfunding and under-investment have left us with serious capacity issues in the state sector, which is something Conservative Members may want to address when they speak.

I want to take this opportunity to recognise the massive contributions that faith schools make to society. I have a number of Muslim faith schools that do some excellent work in my constituency, and I want to put on the record my thanks to them for all they do. I must therefore urge Ministers to put in safeguards for smaller independent and faith schools, many of which, sadly, will not survive the policy in its current form. This can be achieved, because I believe the money that would be generated from the smallest of these schools is not at a level that would have an impact on the overall spirit of this legislation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you are staring at me in a very telling way—although there is no time limit, I know that look. To conclude, I agree wholeheartedly that we cannot keep funding tax breaks for the top end of society while neglecting the rest. This is something I have spoken on and championed my whole life, and I believe this policy is the right one for our state schools. However, I must urge the Government to reconsider, and not let smaller independent and faith schools, which are some of the lowest-charging schools, to pay the price. I must urge Ministers to listen to their concerns, and put in safeguards as this and other relevant Bills progress through to their next stages.

8.6 pm

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and the fact that I own a high street café.

I am proud that there are so many independent shops and high streets in my constituency of Frome and East Somerset. Midsomer Norton, in particular, epitomises the traditional British high street, with haberdashery, hardware and craft shops. On the other side of the constituency, people need only take a stroll through Frome to stumble across independent cafés, bookshops and tailors. We know that high streets are the centre of local economies and places for community cohesion. They are idiosyncratic to the needs of the communities they serve, and offer local jobs and training opportunities. They also provide social goods. For example, Denude is a zero waste shop in Frome that helps support the local community to live more sustainably.

Yet for the last nine years, small businesses and local high streets have felt the burden of economic instability and other pressures. The shops and businesses that still exist have fought hard to protect themselves, and they have in many ways defied the odds. They have had to adapt to changing consumer trends, compete with the rise of online retail giants, navigate covid-19, and survive the mini-Budget and the subsequent impact on mortgage rates and disposable income, which is still being felt. While still feeling the impact of all this, some businesses will in the short term have to pay both high business rates and national insurance contributions. Small businesses have proven that they are excellent at adapting, but I really do fear the impact that some of these changes may have on our local high streets and independent shops.

Businesses I have spoken to over the last few months often use the phrase that they are “only one bad month away from closure.” While permanently lowering business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure is a step in the right direction, it is still not enough to help our flourishing

high streets thrive again, and we know that many important small businesses fall outside these categories. The Lib Dems want to see a complete overhaul of the business rates system. Instead of targeting small businesses, which are the backbone of our high streets and local communities, we want to replace business rates with a new, fairer levy on commercial property owners rather than their tenants. Small businesses can adapt, but not endlessly, and I fear that at the moment too much is being thrown at them with insufficient support.

8.8 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): At the general election, businesses in my community were crying out for change. They felt the need for stability and certainty after more than a decade of chaos and incompetence had hit them all hard. One of the things they welcomed was Labour's pledge to reform business rates and ensure that the online giants, which suck so much out of our local economies, would pay their fair share. Small town high streets such as those in Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate desperately need the support that a change in business rates will give them. It is vital that we create a fairer business rates regime to support investment and protect our high streets.

More widely, I heard real anxiety on the doorstep about the need for more teachers in our schools and access to quality education, so often unavailable for the 94% of children who go to state schools. Reforming business rates for private schools, which serve only 6% of the population, makes sense; it is carefully costed and will make a difference to so many children in Thanet and across our country.

I hope, in particular, that this reform is a driver to increase access to the creative disciplines so that children can learn to expand, develop and harness their imaginations, appreciate the arts in all their forms, with good-quality creative education delivered by qualified teachers who love their subject. It should go without saying, but it does need to be said, that children raised with good-quality creative education have the potential to go on to contribute to our local economy through the creative industries, including by starting their own businesses.

Our business rates system has disincentivised investment and created huge burdens on our high streets. The Conservative party created a cliff edge for high street businesses across the country as temporary reliefs were due to end. Providing certainty through a 40% relief rate and the freeing of the small business tax multiplier is very welcome.

I welcome the Chancellor's intention to permanently lower rates for retail, hospitality and leisure; this is crucial for constituencies such as East Thanet, where creative industries and tourism businesses are crying out for help. I have been working with the Ramsgate empty shop campaign to revive the town's high street. Despite its wonderful heritage, thriving creative community and extraordinary environmental assets, Ramsgate's local economy is far too seasonal, and that makes running a business all year round harder. That in turn has driven many businesses to the brink and left the high street echoing with the silence of empty shops. Spaces that should be seen as an opportunity for entrepreneurs have become a sign of desolation. That must change.

The importance of business rate changes is also highlighted in the other aspect of this Bill: the removal of private schools rates relief. Every parent wants the best for their children; that impulse is not exclusive to those who choose to send their children to private school. There is nothing wrong with ambition. If we are to enable all families to fulfil their ambitions, we must ensure that they all have access to the very best quality education. It is our duty as a society and a country to ensure that all those children's talents, aptitudes and interests are nurtured.

Vast swathes of working-class children do not have access to the kind of education that would be genuinely transformative. For example, the last Government cut back radically the amount of arts education in state schools, locking working-class children out of the opportunities to find their talent, tap into their imagination, and learn how to play an instrument, express themselves through dance, wield a paint brush, work with clay or look deeply and critically at the world around them and respond to it. They pursued a curriculum that damaged the prospects of those children.

In contrast, private schools know that creative education is good for children's wellbeing and academic outcomes. That is why they put so many resources into developing it. That is why they allocate the resources, build the assets and invest in the teaching staff to ensure that their children get that access to the creative arts that contribute to society in every dimension.

Unsurprisingly, 40% of those working in the film, TV and music industries were educated at private schools. Who knows the amount of untapped talent in the 94% of children in state schools that we have lost as a country because of the actions of the last Government. It is estimated that the creative sector in the UK is worth £125 billion and employs 2.3 million people. We are limiting ourselves as a country by not giving every child access to creative education. Imagine how much more we could be producing in economic prosperity as well as greater wellbeing if those children had the same access that the 6% have. So, yes, it is right to find that money from the private schools who serve the 6%. Yes, it is right that we find the money for more and better teachers in state schools with a love of the arts; with an enthusiasm for sharing their appreciation and skills; and with an aptitude for spotting talent, rewarding effort and encouraging creativity.

Those small businesses in my community also want to know that the children in our schools become young adults as fully rounded products of our education system, with their imagination, skills and discipline developed ready for the kind of work in the creative industries that drives our economy locally, nationally and globally. If for nothing else, I urge the House to vote for these changes for our children, our small businesses and our economy.

8.14 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): The Liberal Democrats would like to see a much more fundamental reform of business rates. Although there are promises of further steps, it is disappointing that our new Government, with such a large majority, are not being more ambitious now.

[Charlie Maynard]

Our high streets will remain in deep trouble. The retail, hospitality and leisure sector will now have only 40% relief instead of 75%, but sectors such as manufacturing, which is having such a difficult time adjusting to a post-Brexit world, will get zero relief. National insurance contributions will be greatly increased, with taxes having to be paid before a business even makes a profit.

On top of that, we all know that our high streets—such as Witney's beautiful high street, as seen in *The Times* today—are being eaten alive by online retail. We need to do much more to level the playing field between online and offline retail, but this adjustment is a very, very blunt instrument for doing so. We need to be much more precise about going after big tech and taxing it appropriately.

There are a few steps that we would like to see. A commercial landowner levy that taxes just the land value of commercial sites, not productive investment, has worked very effectively in Australia, Denmark and Estonia. A land value tax is much more effective at capturing the publicly created uplifts in land value, rather than leaving it to landowners to pocket them, sometimes with enormous gains. This is largely how our Victorian forebears built our railway network, and it is how countries around the world, ranging from Japan and Korea to much of northern Europe, fund new transport links—something that we want to do between Oxford and Witney.

Scrapping stamp duties on commercial land would make our market in land simpler and more efficient. Switching the tax to the owner rather than the tenant would spare 500,000 small and medium-sized enterprises the admin burden of property taxation and would save money and time in collecting the tax. Ending the exemptions on empty and derelict premises would incentivise action rather than inaction.

We very much hope that the new Government will follow through on their promises to take further substantial steps. After all, they have the votes.

8.17 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Over the weekend, I watched my second favourite film. At the end, the main character, or at least the main character in my opinion, utters the immortal line that “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

When I consider the ending of tax exemption and charitable status for private schools, I often consider that line. We want all children to have the best chance in life to succeed, and 94% of children in the UK attend state school. Like every child, they deserve the highest quality of support and teaching. I also believe that ending the tax break on private schools will help to raise the revenue needed to fund our education priorities for the next year.

But then I realised that the phrase “the needs of the many” does not quite cover it. The Conservative party talks about choice, but there are really only two reasons why parents would choose to pay tens of thousands of pounds each year to send their children to private school rather than state school—maybe three if they go to Eton. Those reasons are longer opening times and boarding facilities, and a lack of faith in local state

provision. We want to take away the choice to go to private school, but not in the way that the Conservative party keeps parroting; we want to make state schools so good that no one feels the need to send their children to private school. There should be no necessity for private schools.

I think all Members in the Chamber, even on the Opposition Benches, will acknowledge the issues with SEND funding in schools. It has been underfunded. I was lucky enough to visit Newhall primary school in my constituency on Friday. I saw the work it is doing to support its SEND students, even though it is not a specialist SEND school. However, it could only do that with a small number of students. Imagine what it could do with additional funding opportunities: it could help so many more.

What many people fail to recognise is that these private schools have the choice to absorb some of the tax. We are not here to punish students or parents. Schools can choose to absorb some of the tax, in the same way that the state sector has been asked to do for the past 14 years.

Graham Stuart: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman listened to the speech of the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). Many private schools actually charge less than the funding that goes to state schools. Every school is not Eton. What does the hon. Gentleman have to say about the most vulnerable schools and the children therein? Should the proper design of any policy not be grounded in looking at the most vulnerable rather than the strongest?

Chris Vince: It is very exciting to take my first intervention from an Opposition Member, but I think the right hon. Gentleman fails to recognise the point that I am trying to make. I am saying that we need to support the state sector to be as good as it possibly can so that parents do not feel the need to send their children to private school.

The Conservatives groan when we mention the £22 billion black hole, but I do not even need to mention the £22 billion black hole—in fact, I will not mention the £22 billion black hole. What I will say, however, is that we have high streets that are already boarded up and school buildings left crumbling. I visit state schools in my constituency all the time and I see children of all ages and abilities full of compassion, intelligence and potential. I had the fantastic opportunity to visit St Mark's Catholic school in my constituency again last Friday. The students asked fantastic questions. If they are listening now, I emphasise that they can aspire to achieve everything they want in life. However, classrooms are overfilled and underfunded. Paint is peeling off the walls, and some schools—not that particular school—have faulty heating. Despite all those things, the pupils could not be filled with more excitement or more desire to learn and understand.

I can see that you are looking at me, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I had better get on. Labour is making the fair choice to support small business, to give every child the chance to succeed and to protect the public finances. I will finish with a line from my favourite film of all time, “A Matter of Life and Death”. At the beginning, David Niven says:

“Politics: Conservative by nature, Labour by experience.”

I am delighted that on 4 July, plenty of people went to the polls with that view.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Curiously, the hon. Member did not explain the movie he referred to in opening his speech.

8.22 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): The Carrdus school in my constituency is a small private school—it is not an Eton and it is not a Harrow—but it has already announced that it may be forced to close mid-academic year because of the Budget and this Bill.

I met the headteacher the other day. She is a passionate leader who is absolutely devastated by this. She mentioned many of the points that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) made about the four main areas. She explained that 80% of the school's costs are on staff salaries, so the increase in employers' national insurance contributions is crippling. The changes to business property relief are challenging, and imposing VAT on school fees means that the uplift in fees is unsustainable for many parents. They simply cannot absorb this tax.

After these consistent hits, the school faces little choice but, potentially, to close. That means that 110 children, including children with EHCPs, will now have to plan to be rehomed into different schools, with all the disruption that that causes. The burden also falls on our local councils, which now have the responsibility to find different state places somewhere that will take those children with EHCPs. This is happening when council budgets are already stretched. Our state schools are at capacity, and this will lead to more harm for many children.

The hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) mentioned the importance of creative opportunities. I entirely agree that the arts are vital, but the Budget also hits opportunities for access to the creative arts. The Northamptonshire Music and Performing Arts Trust is a charitable organisation that offers children of all backgrounds access to lessons, but the increases in employers' national insurance and the business property reliefs make it so much harder to offer those lessons. NMPAT is genuinely struggling. It would be devastating to lose such opportunity for our next generation. Regardless of politics, we must remember that it is our children's education that is being penalised by these measures.

8.24 pm

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): I want to speak specifically about the removal of charitable tax status from private schools. We know that the total proportion of schoolchildren who are in private school is 6%. That means that 94% of children are not. Does that 6% still matter? Of course those children matter. I believe that every child should have access to a high-quality education; I say that having spent years working on the frontline in state education under the previous Labour Government, where the framework for all children's services was "Every child matters".

Forgive me if I feel a little angry about some of the chuntering that is going on, because I worked in frontline education when the coalition Government came in. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were working together—and in the first 18 months, what did they cut? They cut the education maintenance allowance, which supported some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged

children I was working with to go to sixth form. The disadvantaged subsidy pathfinder project: cut. The National Careers Service: cut. School sport partnerships: cut. Youth services: cut. Sure Start services: cut. Sure Start maternity grants: cut. That was all within the first 18 months. That caused the rot to set in within our education system, and it is the very reason why I am standing here today.

At the school gates in the morning—this is a bit of reality—when I drop off my son, I stand side by side with parents juggling jobs and home life, who have ambitions for their child that know no boundaries. Every parent I have ever worked with wants better for their child. Whether someone is financially able to send their child to private school does not change that, yet there is a huge disparity in choice. State schools are struggling. Department for Education figures released in January this year show that last year 13% of local authority maintained schools were in deficit. That is 4% higher than in 2021-22, and there are reports that 19 of those schools are in Nottinghamshire.

In my constituency of Sherwood Forest, the Stop School Cuts campaign estimates that 69% of schools have faced cuts to pupil funding since 2010. That is having a huge impact on the lives of children in my constituency and on their health, wellbeing and mental health. One area of my constituency has the highest rate of male suicide in the whole country.

I regularly meet schools in my constituency. I see how hard the staff work to ensure that children still get a quality education despite the challenges that they face. One of the main challenges is funding. I want to illustrate what that means in day-to-day life. Leen Mills primary school is a fantastic school serving its community and some of the most disadvantaged children living in my community. It is unable to afford acceptable buildings and classrooms for its children to learn in—ones that facilitate learning and are comfortable for pupils and staff. Pupils have to walk outside between buildings—temporary buildings—to use the toilets in all weather, come rain or shine. That should not be the case, yet it is so hard for the school to meet the most basic requirements without having to put up a fight.

The changes to private schools' charitable tax status will generate additional funding so that we can improve our public services for all children and young people. With more funding for schools such as Leen Mills primary school, all pupils, no matter where they live or how much their parents have, would have the right to access a safe and comfortable learning environment.

The changes are also about making sure that we have enough teachers, in particular ones who know and understand SEN provision. We know—I have seen it—that if we better invest in our public mainstream schools, that will drastically impact pupils with SEN and those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. It should not ever be that a parent's only option is an independent private school. That is an indictment of the previous Government—the rot set in with the coalition Government—whose failed education system continues to fail children.

The truth is that education in the state sector has been neglected. How do I know? I see it as a parent. Today, there is a 20% difference between pupils who have access to free school meals—an indicator of poverty—and those who do not at GCSE. That is not an education system achieving as it should.

[Michelle Welsh]

I see this every day as a parent, as a governor and as a professional. When we get it right, education changes lives and transforms whole communities. This Government will once again transform education so that every child—including every child in my constituency—matters, because education should be a right, not a privilege.

8.31 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Since becoming a Member of Parliament earlier this year, I have been heartened every time I have heard Ministers confirm that business rates reform is planned. I know what impact business rates can have on town centres through my work as a council leader and my time owning and operating a high street business for nearly 14 years in my constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole—I do not any more, so I do not need to declare that as an interest. But that was why I was so disappointed to read the Bill, which simply tinkers around the edges and does nothing to fix the foundations of our town centres or about the inequity of business rates between physical and online businesses.

I welcome the higher rate aimed at large warehouses, but it does not go far enough. Those online businesses have sucked the life out of our high streets, and if what the Bill proposes is the extent of the change, it will not support anyone.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is not just favourable business rates that benefit online businesses; they can use tax loopholes to avoid paying the taxes that small businesses pay as a proportion of their profits. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government have other mechanisms for raising such funding?

Vikki Slade: I agree with the hon. Member and thank him for his intervention. I was just about to say that we need a proper tech tax on online businesses, which should be ringfenced to stay in local communities, where councils could use it to support town centres in a way that works for them.

Many councils are not able to keep the business rates accrued in their areas; they are set externally and sent elsewhere to support other communities. That is not understood or even appreciated by local communities. I cannot remember the number of times that, as a local government leader, I was shouted at by people saying, “You’re making all that money as a council.” People think that the councils own the businesses and the properties and that they set the rates. The fact is, they are set elsewhere, and councils do not have the power to provide discounts without having to plug the gap not just for their own areas, but for what they send to Government. That is what real reform would look like.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): The hon. Member is making some wide-ranging points. I think the Government’s policy in this area is excellent. I remind her that there are a range of other policies that local government can implement. I commend my own local council in Reading, where there has been a lot of work to try to keep local small businesses active in the town centre through planning and a range of other things. It is really important to work with the business community. Would she like to comment on that?

Vikki Slade: Absolutely. We were looking to work with the rental auctions that are coming in. When I was the Lib Dem spokesperson in a Westminster Hall debate a few weeks ago, I was encouraged to hear that they are coming through. I hope that that happens quickly, and that they do not have the loopholes that I feared they would have.

I will move on to my concerns about this policy. We need to ensure that those who profit from businesses pay. Business rates as described in the Bill are not just related to the rateable value but are explicitly linked to the rental value. They bear no relationship to the type of business, its profitability or its broader benefits to the community or to society. I would like to give an example, which I know is accurate because the figures come from the business that I used to own. It predates the retail, hospitality and leisure discount, but that it is not guaranteed to be continued anyway. I think the numbers will startle you.

We owned a café on a high street in an affluent community with an older population, with competition from several sources, including a Costa franchise and a church café, which of course pays no rates. The rent on our café was £25,000 a year. Our rates bill was £19,000. That meant that I was not eligible for a penny of small business rate relief, so my rent and rates bill was around £4,200 a month. In a ward less than three miles away, a café on that high street was being marketed with a rental of just £12,500, and a rateable value of £11,000. Thanks to small business rate relief—I am sure you will say that is a great thing, and it is—it paid no rates, so its fixed outgoings were £1,900.

I am sure that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, do not think that we could charge 2.5 times more for a tuna mayo sandwich and a cup of coffee than the café down the road. That is the problem with the way that business rates work. This inequity, and the pressure it put on my business and all those I represented when I chaired the Broadstone chamber of trade and commerce, is what got me into politics. As sad as that is, that is why I got involved and why I stand here today to say to you that the Lib Dems want you to go further. We want business rates replaced with a proper landowner levy, so that it is not the tenants who pay but those who really benefit from the property—the people who own it. The Bill may be a reasonable start, but it does not go far enough. I would love to see you go further.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I say to the hon. Lady that I know she will not have intended to do so, but she said “you” repeatedly, and it was very unclear whether she was addressing me. I suspect that the last time it was to the Minister.

8.36 pm

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Charitable tax relief is meant to be for organisations that do something for the good of society. They get tax breaks because they are supposed to benefit the public, especially those who need it most. But when we look at private schools, we start to see a problem. These schools are not serving the wider public. They charge eye-watering fees, and the vast majority of people simply cannot afford to send their kids there.

Here is the real issue: private schools are benefiting from a process that should be supporting the whole of society. They get tax breaks worth millions of pounds every year, and what do we get in return? An education system that reinforces and upholds structural inequalities. Meanwhile, state schools—the ones that serve the vast majority of kids—are left to scrape by, struggling with overcrowded classrooms, outdated resources and ever-decreasing funding.

The Bill is redistributive, and it means that the moneys going into private schools will be far better spent improving the chances of all children. I want fairness, as do my constituents, and an equal chance for all our children. Those on the Opposition Benches say, “Private schools give scholarships, do charity work and help kids in need.” But let us be honest: that is a drop in the ocean. Here is the kicker: private schools are not even charities in the true sense of the word. They might not make a profit, but many of them are run by private companies that make money off investments and land. We all know that the largest private schools in the country have no shortage of cash, yet they still get subsidies that could be used to fix the mess left by the previous Government in our state schools. They do not provide a benefit for the public good; they just prop up inequality and drain resources from the schools that serve the vast majority of children.

I welcome the fact that we are taking a good, hard look at the way education works, and we are putting our money where it does the most good: raising aspirations and opportunities for all our children, no matter their background. That has to be our focus.

8.39 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who spoke for the official Opposition—he is no longer in his place—described the Conservative Government’s approach to supporting business. I was going to say that I listened to him with interest, but I think incredulity would be a better word. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), who is no longer in his place, was rather harsh on the Conservatives. He said that they never followed up on their commitments on business and did not have a clear policy on business. The Conservatives had a very clear and pithily described policy on business: it began with f, had k in the middle and ended with the word “business”. And believe me, they delivered on that policy with their post-Brexit trade deal. In case the message had not been rammed home hard enough, they confirmed it with a Budget that played helter-skelter chaos with the economy.

I therefore sympathise with the new Government’s approach in terms of the Budget they are trying to set and in terms of establishing stability. That is something I would want to support, but I am disappointed that I will not be able to vote for the Bill because of the effect it will have on towns like Wellington and Taunton, which will be hit by a triple whammy. Those towns support some great independent schools, which are charities: Taunton school, Wellington school, King’s College and Queen’s College. They sustain around 1,000 jobs in the constituency, many of which are now under threat. Many workers at those schools—cleaners and catering staff—are worried about what is going to happen.

There are then the very serious effects of the rise in national insurance contributions on small businesses, particularly the many small businesses whose rateable value is over £51,000. That is quite typical for SMEs in a high street in this country—at the smaller end, I would suggest. The owner of Mr Miles Tea Room, a superb place to go in my constituency, has written to tell me about the combined effects of the Budget on his business:

“Firstly, all my staff will now see a reduction in the hours they will be scheduled. As a result, no doubt, some will leave. Where many of my employees already earn over the current minimum wage, I will not be able to increase their pay rates by as much as I have done in the past. Secondly, any full-time employees who leave our employment will only be replaced by potentially 2 or 3 part-time employees. Thirdly, I will not be investing in any capital equipment in my kitchen or new decor in my restaurant. Fourthly, there is a serious potential for me to operate on shortened trading hours, thus reducing the vibrancy of the Town Centre.”

He goes on:

“I was cautiously optimistic that a new Labour Government couldn’t possibly be worse than the previous Tory one in terms of lack of support for SMEs. Sadly, in the space of 3 short months this Government has already proved my optimism was misplaced and there will be many casualties over the next 12 months as the new measures take effect.”

I urge the Minister to reconsider both the effect on independent schools, and I am a great supporter of the state school system—

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): There is an independent school in my constituency, Kingswood House school, which has around 50% of its pupils with special educational needs. Many of those pupils do not have an education, health and care plan. Does my hon. Friend agree that schools providing support to so many SEN children should retain their charitable rate relief?

Gideon Amos: I absolutely do agree with my hon. Friend. I am also concerned about the influx of children going to local authorities to apply for EHCPs because they will now need them to get the discount, and about the massive effect that will have on already overstretched local authorities. I worry about how they are going to cope with those applications, over and above the SEN crisis at the moment.

I am a great supporter of state schools, partly because of the record of the Liberal Democrats, who not only ringfenced the education budget in the first years of the coalition, but injected £1.25 billion by inventing the pupil premium, which now injects £3 billion—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) shakes her head, but these are the facts.

Michelle Welsh: The pupil premium funding was actually disadvantage subsidy pathfinder funding, introduced by the previous Labour Government. The hon. Gentleman’s party just changed the name.

Gideon Amos: The pupil premium was new money, and it went into the state school sector. It was £1.25 billion in the first year, and it is worth £3 billion now. It was in the Liberal Democrat manifesto and was delivered as part of our priority for state schools—but I do not believe in state schools just because of party policy. All four of my children attended great state schools in my constituency: Parkfield Primary School, Bishop Fox’s School, and the

[Gideon Amos]

fantastic Richard Huish College. The idea that the only way to improve state schools is to level down independent schools shows a shocking lack of imagination and a very disappointing approach to education, and education should not be taxed.

The Minister said earlier that those of us who were going for a different approach should be willing to make clear where we would raise the money, and he was right to make that point. The Liberal Democrats have made the same point, and they have made tough decisions in the past. In our manifesto was a very clear Budget spending plan to restore the tax on the big banks' profits. It was slashed and then taken away in 2018, but simply restoring that single tax would raise £4.2 billion for the economy. I urge the Minister to adopt the principle that if the broadest shoulders should bear the biggest burden, that should apply in the business sector as much as anywhere else. The big companies, the big banks, the giant online retailers, should be bearing the burden of this Budget, not the small high street firms like Mr Miles in Taunton High Street and the other businesses we have heard about, so I urge the Minister to think further about this.

8.46 pm

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): National non-domestic rating multipliers: is there any more interesting topic for nearly 9 o'clock on a Monday night? *[Interruption.]* Quite right: absolutely not. I am sure that the regular readers of my blog would say much the same.

Our system of taxation and local government is the product of evolution and not of design. It has its roots in Elizabethan forms of taxation that have been inherited and altered during the passage of time to adapt to modern realities, and what we are talking about today is yet again adapting to those modern realities. Like many other Members, I am a former local government leader, and I might well have been one of those who were bending the ear of the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray), in asking for this change, because it is well overdue. We have heard town centres described as the heart of the community. What do we actually mean by that? Without a clear public space where the whole of society interacts, towns lack identity and a common sense of bonds between them. They tend to fall apart, and we see social degradation.

Council leaders such as me have spent the last 14 years trying to adapt to the new realities of our economy, spending a fortune in public money and investing countless hours—including countless officer hours—in trying to reinvigorate our town centres to ensure that they live on for the next generation, not simply because that is what we think best but because, overwhelmingly, it is the response that people say they want for their areas. They want their town centres to be vibrant again, and to be a fundamental part of their communities. The problem is that no matter what we do on the ground, no matter how much effort we put in, we simply cannot overcome the huge cost disparity between online retailing and physical retailing in the high street.

One would expect that, where these challenges exist, the state would use the levers at its disposal to encourage an extra boost for what we consider to be socially beneficial, as opposed to what we consider to be detrimental

to society. The proposals under discussion do exactly that. They ensure that the parts of our community that our constituents want, which are fundamental to their identity, survive into the coming decades, while also ensuring that those that no longer have the profit margins they once had—surprise, surprise, in Elizabethan times the most profitable businesses were buildings next to the local church—are given a comparable break.

We have heard a great deal from Opposition Members about what parties in government over the last 14 years could, would or should have done given the opportunity, but I am sorry to say that they did not do any of it. As a council leader during that period, I was regularly making the case for changes. We were promised changes at various times, but they never happened. The one thing that we did end up with was full business rate retention. My local authority collects £120 million worth of business rates each year and we get to keep £4 million, which puts paid to the idea that words have any real meaning when they are used in connection with some of these policies.

This is the single biggest change that can be introduced to ensure that our high streets survive in the future. I am very proud that, regardless of whatever idealised form the Opposition may wish to imagine could exist, the policy being delivered in the Bill enables us to support the businesses that our communities desperately want, and will ensure that businesses that can afford to carry a bigger load do so.

8.50 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I rise in support of the majority of the amendment tabled by the Liberal Democrats. Reducing the high street business rates relief from 75% to 40% will devastate the small businesses on my high streets in Batley and Dewsbury, and many of them will not be able to absorb the costs, resulting in job losses and closures. My primary topic, however, will be the implications of the Bill for private schools that do not draw their students from the richest families in our society.

When I spoke out against the introduction of VAT in previous debates, I was accused of not wanting the best for 94% of students in our country. I absolutely love state schools, and I visited Boothroyd primary academy during UK Parliamentary Week last week. The children were so excited to meet me, but I think I was more excited to meet them and their teachers. I also visited a private faith school that charges, I believe, less than £3,000 per pupil and spoke to the pupils there. There are private schools that serve poor working-class families, and there is a reason why these families have chosen to send their children to such schools. Parents would be penalised if we removed that choice. The other challenge that I have in my constituency is that schools are bursting at the seams, with very few, if any, places available to parents. Many children are going to their second or third-choice schools, away from their catchment area.

Let me come back to the removal of private schools' charitable status, which is an extra burden on top of charging VAT at 20%. Students at such schools overwhelmingly come from low-income families, and this reality often gets lost in the debate about private schools. We are all very aware of their elitist nature. With average fees of over £15,000, rising to £50,000, they service only the children of the wealthiest. It is not

the children of the wealthy, however, who attend independent schools in constituencies such as Dewsbury and Batley, where faith schools are often the only option for families who cannot get their children into local state schools due to demand, or where state schools cannot meet their religious and spiritual needs. Those families are overwhelmingly from low-income backgrounds, and the removal of business rates charitable rate relief from private schools will result in a further increase in their fees, in addition to the proposed VAT. For wealthy families, that might not be a problem. For the families in my constituency, it is a major problem.

In addition, the measures will pose a risk to the future viability of many private schools, which often charge just enough to exist. I ask the Government to consider that class is a reality in the discussion about private schools, but not in the way it is commonly presented. In many communities, faith-based schools are not the preserve of the wealthy; they overwhelmingly educate the children of ordinary working-class families. The Government's impact assessment of the proposals shows that the average cost, per school, of the removal of charitable status ranges from £27,000 to £179,000 a year for faith schools.

This issue is more complicated than measures to raise tax, and it feels to me that some important subtleties have been lost in the debate. For many of my constituents, faith schools not only provide high-quality education; they also provide children of faith with the relative freedom to express their faith and identity without fear of stigma or recrimination. I feel that none of this reality was properly considered when we discussed VAT on private schools, and now, through abolishing business rates charitable rate relief for private schools, that imbalance continues. The Government have an opportunity now to redress that imbalance, and I request that consideration be given to extending the exclusions for special needs schools to include faith-based schools that draw their students from low-income backgrounds. One easy solution would be to exempt from VAT schools that charge below per-pupil state school allowance, and allow them to retain their charitable status.

8.55 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): Last week I visited Jacqueline, a franchise owner who, through sheer hard work and working her way up through the ranks, now runs a number of restaurant outlets in and around Mansfield. I witnessed at first hand her dedication to her business through the manner in which she motivates her staff as a business leader. For leisure and hospitality businesses such as Jacqueline's, trading is tough, and has been made harder by the circumstances they were trading in—namely, the uncertainties surrounding business rates under the previous Government.

Locally, I stood on a platform to focus on five specific issues across Mansfield and Warsop, one of which was to help improve our town centre. Many in my local town centre are represented by the Mansfield business improvement district, and when I meet up with them, as I often do—sometimes together with representatives of the Shopkeepers' Campaign—business rates come up time and again. It is clear that we need a fairer system that does not put an unreasonable burden on the small businesses that power our high streets, and that is why I welcome the reforms to business rates that are being made through the Bill.

The Bill will bring certainty and fairness to the retail, hospitality and leisure businesses that have been disproportionately disadvantaged by the current system. I am further pleased to see that the Bill creates the powers needed to ensure that we can make good on our promise to introduce permanently lower rates for those retail, hospitality and leisure properties that make up the backbone of our high streets, including in my constituency of Mansfield, and to pay for this with a higher multiplier for the most valuable properties.

As well as speaking with local businesses every week, I also visit schools across my constituency. Last week I visited a primary school that has not turned on the heating in the main part of its building for over 18 months and is reliant on the benevolence of local businesses to provide an essential breakfast club. It simply should not have to be that way, with schools relying on local businesses, and I am sure that it will not be that way under this Labour Government.

In my Mansfield constituency, more than one in four pupils are eligible for and claiming free school meals, and the schools they are taught in are crying out for additional resources to help those young people. We cannot afford to offer tax breaks to private schools operating as businesses when our children's state education system, which is relied on by over 95% of the children in my constituency, is crumbling. That is why I will be voting to support this Bill, which will end those tax breaks on private schools and help to raise the revenue needed to fund this Government's education priorities.

8.59 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): This Bill has several issues, but its glaring failure is the lack of immediate support for the many small and medium-sized businesses outside the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors that are important to our national economy and our local high streets.

The Government claim that they would like to have a level playing field between the high street and the online giants, but this Bill fails to properly address the issue. Many small businesses fall outside the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors and will therefore see no benefit from the Bill. These small businesses need their tax burden to be reduced too.

Labour's plan to increase national insurance contributions and business rates will prove too much for many small businesses, including charities in my constituency that tell me their increased national insurance contributions will seriously affect them and reduce the amount of money they can spend on supporting the residents of Wokingham.

Small businesses in my constituency have seen a huge increase in both rent and costs, and they had to do their best to survive under a Conservative Government who trashed the economy. As a result of Conservative policies over the last few years, a household with a mortgage now has at least £6,000 a year less to spend on our local high streets where our friends and neighbours work. What these small businesses need now is a proper overhaul and reform of the business rates system, not a Bill that meddles around the edges to provide ineffective and short-term solutions, and they do not need an increase in employer's national insurance contributions.

[Clive Jones]

My constituency has approximately 3,585 businesses outside the retail, hospitality and leisure industries, which is roughly 70% of the businesses in Wokingham. This make-up is not too dissimilar from the national picture, so the Bill will be ineffective for businesses across the UK.

The Bill fails to offer support to the vast majority of businesses that desperately need their tax burdens to be reduced. It is clear that this Bill does not do enough, and so many businesses and charities that are so important to our high streets will be left to absorb all the extra taxation levied on them by the Government.

This Bill will not fix the broken business rates system, and it will seriously damage the retail and small business sector in our economy.

9.3 pm

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I am pleased to speak on this Bill, which introduces the powers required to reform business rates. The Government are committed to a fairer business rates system that protects the high street and supports investment, and I welcome the fact that, in the Budget, the Chancellor set out her intention to permanently lower rates for the retail, hospitality and leisure properties that make up the backbone of our high streets, including Queen Street in Morley. Of course, this will be paid for by a higher multiplier for the most valuable properties.

However, I want to focus on another aspect of the Bill. I am a teacher, so I will talk about the provision that removes the charitable relief on business rates for many, but not all, private schools. This runs alongside our general election commitment to introduce VAT on private school fees, which we will be discussing on Second Reading of the Finance Bill on Wednesday. Both measures will, of course, increase funding for state schools.

During the general election campaign in July, and in the years leading up to it, I spoke to many parents in my constituency about the removal of tax breaks for private schools. Whatever their stance was on the policy, it was clear to me that every single parent I spoke to wanted the best for their children. It did not matter whether they considered themselves wealthy or not, whether they earned enough to send their children to a private school or not, or whether they lived in New Farnley or Thorpe. Every single one of them wanted the best education for their children.

Like, I suspect, almost every Member of this House, I want an amazing education for every child, irrespective of where they come from or who they are. That is exactly what Government Members are committed to delivering, using the revenue that this Bill, and the Finance Bill on Wednesday, will raise. We live in a country where 94% of all children attend state schools. I fully accept that the parents of the 6% of children who go to private schools have worked very hard to put them there, but you know who else works hard, Madam Deputy Speaker? The parents of kids who go to state schools. They work just as hard in their jobs and professions, yet some may never be in the financial position to send their children to private schools. Those children deserve the best too, so it falls on the Government to take the decisions necessary to improve our state schools.

State schools were plagued by so many crises under the previous Government. I saw the SEND crisis, the concrete crisis and the recruitment and retention crisis myself. In my previous job as head of maths at an inner-city school, if I put out a job advert I would be lucky if I got one applicant per position, and that was not just because of me. That must change, and we must raise the money to change it. Taken together with our commitment to introduce VAT on private school fees, which I accept we are not debating today, the extra net revenue raised from this policy will be essential to recruit the 6,500 new teachers we promised the electorate we would recruit in the general election. Every child deserves to be taught by a qualified teacher in every single subject.

Alongside our commitments to roll out free breakfast clubs, invest in SEND provision, rebuild the school estate, and increase per pupil funding in real terms, we are choosing to back our children, back our schools and back our country. Given the crisis in SEND, I welcome that those in private schools mainly concerned with the provision of the education of children with EHCPs will retain their charitable business rates relief. By removing the tax breaks enjoyed by most private schools, however, we can invest in our state schools. I will be able to say to the parents I spoke to in Leeds South West and Morley that we are giving their children the education they deserve. I will be able to say that we took decisive action to break down barriers to opportunity for all, and by voting for today's Bill and the measures in the Finance Bill, I will be able to say to them that we found the funding to fund our state schools properly.

I know that Opposition Members are opposed to these changes. However, the Leader of the Opposition has also stated that she does not object to the positive parts of the Budget, including our investment in education, so my question to Opposition Members would be: "How are you going to pay for it? What exactly is your plan? We know what you oppose, but what do you support?" I think that the Conservatives have made something like £12 million of uncoded commitments every single hour since they elected their new leader. It is hard not to conclude that we are dealing with the same old Conservative party. It is no longer a serious party of government; however, Labour is.

Education is central to our mission of expanding opportunity, enriching our society and empowering our students to be the best possible versions of themselves. Whether they live in Churwell, Gildersome, East Ardsley or Lofthouse does not matter. This Labour Government are getting on with our mandate of delivering change and ensuring that all our children have the opportunity to fulfil their true potential.

9.8 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I grew up helping my mum on the shop floor of small gift shops, and my memories of the wonderful work that she did to build that business and the staff she employed is a real benefit to my life. I also saw how hard she worked and how hard things got. She went down from four shops to one, then came across the classic problem of whether she was able to keep her shop open and battle with online retailers. The costs went up, business rates were too much, and she decided to close and go online.

Frankly, I am tired of us not taking support for small businesses seriously and making a change. This Government had an opportunity to make a difference, but they have squandered opportunity when it comes to business rates reform. I see the impact on businesses in my high streets. I have the privilege of representing several magnificent high streets, in Tring, Berkhamsted, Harpenden, Wheathampstead and Redbourn, but businesses there are struggling yet again. Michelle from Graze Life told me time and again about the impact the cost of business rates had on her business; eventually, she closed her high street shop down. I spoke to Peter from the Oakman Group, a booming business that started in Tring in 2007. The company is a rising star and has received prizes for being one of the best places to work for employees, but Peter now says it is on the edge of extinction. He employs 1,200 people but he says the Budget, including business rates changes, will have an impact of up to £2 million on his business, so he will look to close many of his premises.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): My hon. Friend mentions several businesses in her constituency that will be impacted by the changes. I spoke recently to a small restaurant owner in my constituency. They have six restaurants across the south of England and they say that the business rates changes, plus other Budget measures, will cost their business £150,000 just to do what they are doing today. Does she agree with me that that will not encourage such businesses to invest in the UK, open new restaurants and help grow the economy, which we all want?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely. That is the message I am hearing again and again. Another business owner in Tring said that they would love to open on the high street but they just cannot afford it. The broken business rates system is affecting our businesses, the people who work there and our communities, which are losing out on fantastic local businesses.

The Minister talked about building a confidence to invest, but business rates directly tax capital investment, rather than taxing profits or fixed stock of land. That needs to change. I reiterate the Liberal Democrats' call for absolute reform of business rates and the introduction of a commercial landowner levy. That will tax the land value of commercial sites, not productive investments, and boost that productive investment, support our local businesses and help communities and local employers.

Many families have written to me about the changes to charitable rate relief for private schools. I support the calls from the Government Benches to improve all state schools, but parents decide to send their children to private schools for many reasons, including special educational needs, supporting their children's specialist skills or because of bullying. We have a choice about how we raise that money. Instead of taxing the banks, is it fair to be taxing the education of other children to raise that money?

9.13 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Just a few weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition highlighted a £2.4 billion black hole in the local government budget, arising from the recent Budget. Some £3.7 billion of extra spending

was announced, with only £1.3 billion of funding to pay for it. And in this Bill we begin to see how this Government propose to fill that gap. First, they came for the pensioners; then they came for the farmers; then they came for the students; then they came for the employers; and now they are coming for our high streets, our pubs and our shops, with another whammy of tax rises.

Let us not pretend that this is an essential step. The choices that were made by the Chancellor and this Government in their Budget are driving up inflation and borrowing costs, with the Government borrowing a record amount last month. They are driving up employment costs and councils will be hit, just as they are hitting the rest of our economy.

I reflect that the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), said in 2023:

"Pubs are the beating heart or the anchor of many communities, and the place where people can get together to tackle loneliness and isolation."—[*Official Report*, 5 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 238.]

Indeed, those are sentiments that many Labour Members have expressed in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall recently. But all those Members who came here to express their support and champion their local pub are about to vote for a Bill that, on average, will put up its taxes by more than £5,500 a year. All this from a Government who promised to replace business rates! Indeed, Rachel from accounts—I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, I mean Rachel from complaints admin—went so far as to promise in 2021 to abolish them.

We all know from personal experience, whether in our own families or in our former lives in local government, the value of the diversity of our education system. We know about the increase in attainment brought about by the huge growth in the number of independent schools, in the form of academies, started under the last Labour Government and developed under the previous Government. But we continue to see this spiteful class war attack on schools, and this Bill continues Labour's war on education.

Several Liberal Democrat Members have mentioned Britain's former membership of the European Union, and of course this measure to become the only country in Europe to tax education would be illegal under EU law. The Bill still does not fully consider the needs of our special needs schools. Many have a mix of fully private and EHCP-funded pupils, and the balance will change over time. An example is the Gesher school in my constituency, which provides for a significant number of children on the autistic spectrum. One year nearly 100% may be privately funded, and the next year the vast majority will be EHCP-funded. The Bill simply does not usefully answer the question of how such settings will pay their taxes.

Several Members around the Chamber, including on the Labour Benches, have set out their serious concerns about the impact on small faith schools. The Government face ongoing legal challenges on the subject, which is incredibly important if our country is to have the diverse base of education that many Muslim communities in particular have struggled to find in the established mainstream state sector.

Labour Members have poured scorn on our education system, but I remind them of the transformation in state education standards over the past 14 years. Having

[David Simmonds]

been a local authority lead member for education for that whole time, I would be the last person to claim that everything in the state sector was perfect. However, we saw amazing progress on closing the disadvantage attainment gap in England under the previous Government, in the context of our progress in international league tables. When we left office, class sizes were stable at 26, which is less than the statutory limit that the previous Labour Government introduced.

As in any democracy, we must ask whether the harm that the policy does to some families and to some children's education is outweighed by its benefits. We should reflect that if every single penny raised by these policies finds its way to state school budgets—although we already know that that will not happen, because they will also be funding the big increase in Ofsted bureaucracy that the Secretary of State set out for us a few short weeks ago—it will cover less than half the cost of a single teacher in each of those state schools, at a time when pupil rolls in England are falling. It is quite clear that the motivation for this policy is spite and class war, and that it has nothing whatever to do with standards in our schools.

If that were not enough, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) has set out the very serious concerns about this plan that we hear from across business and particularly from the retail sector and licensed trade, from the Association of Convenience Stores, which represents the small corner shops that enable our residents to access the goods they need at all hours of night and day, to the very biggest retailers such as Sainsbury's, which have set out in detail the damage that this Budget and this Bill are already doing to workers' pay and to the prospects for investment, for pay growth and for training and employment growth in this country.

In reflecting on what we can be proud of from the past 14 years, I draw the House's particular attention to the fact that when the Conservatives left office there were 4 million more people in work in this country than when we took office; youth unemployment was half what it was when we took office; and the proportion of people in this country earning their own living had grown exponentially. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) have set out very clearly the importance of getting it right for our communities. We need to ask whether what is proposed today will generate the transformation. Under the last Conservative Government's 14 years in office, we saw a 70% increase in school funding, with 77.9% per-pupil growth alone over the past few years, above inflation. It is clear that we have a decent and honourable record on investment in education.

Our retail sector is the largest part of our private sector employment, with nearly 5 million workers. It is clear that businesses in that sector, from the largest to the smallest, are looking at the impact that the Bill will have on their bottom line and are translating that into lower jobs, lower growth and less investment. They are warning this Government very clearly, as Opposition Members do.

I invite the Minister to intervene. Will he tell me whether he is willing to promise that small business rates relief will be maintained? So far, the Government

have refused to answer that question, causing a huge degree of concern among small businesses of all kinds up and down our high streets. As the Government move to introduce higher multipliers on business rates, we have to ask whether that signifies that they will also move—as the Labour Government in Wales have done already—to introduce additional higher council tax bands for our residential properties?

It is very clear that as well as coming for the pensioners, coming for the students, coming for the farmers and coming for the employers, the Government are coming for every council tax payer and business rate payer in this country. That is not to fill a black hole, because as we know, the black hole does not exist—[HON. MEMBERS: "Read the OBR report!"]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order.

David Simmonds: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will take the hint. I am sure that Government Members have read the views of the Office for Budget Responsibility as avidly as Opposition Members.

Politics, we know, is about choices. We are proud of the choices that we made, which have enhanced quality of life, wages and the economy in our country. We are deeply concerned about the impact that the Bill, and the wider Budget of which it is a part, will have on our national economy and the prospects of our people. We are concerned about the damage that it will do to the life chances of our children. We are concerned that it continues to leave a black hole in our local government finances. For those reasons, we recognise that this is not really a Budget; it is a bodge-it. That is why we will vote for our reasoned amendment tonight.

9.23 pm

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this enthusiastic and impassioned debate. Whether they were speaking from the Government or the Opposition Benches, their speeches were genuinely rooted in the communities that people live in and that we represent. In a way, it has brought out the best of Parliament, but we could not quite avoid the party politics and the rewriting of history from the Conservative party.

Shall we really take lessons on saving the high street from the Conservatives, who oversaw mass bank closures and the decimation of retail on the high street, with 6,000 pubs closing in local communities? They are now the farmers' friends, but when they were in government they oversaw the closure of 7,000 agricultural businesses. Where were they when the energy market and labour supply challenges were decimating farmers? They were nowhere to be seen. Now, though, they come riding on the horse—[*Interruption.*] Would the shadow Minister like to intervene? Come in, please.

David Simmonds: Because he was here for it, as I was, the Minister will recall the last Government's massive intervention in the energy market to keep our lights on in this country. Will he tell the House whether the Government will keep the small business rates relief? Will he answer that question?

Jim McMahon: I can answer this question: it is the impact that matters. Whatever Opposition Members say as the farmers' friends, the truth is different: 7,000 businesses closed on their watch. That is what the evidence says.

Let me move on to the reasoned amendment. This Government are fully committed to protecting and supporting our valuable high streets. The fact is that retail, hospitality and leisure rates relief was due to end in its entirety by the end of March 2025, which would have meant a cliff edge for businesses. At the Budget, we stepped in to prevent that by extending the relief further this year by 40%, with a cash cap of £110,000. We have also frozen the small business rates multiplier for 2025-26. Taken together with the small business rates relief scheme, that means that more than 1 million properties will be protected from any inflationary increases next year. That is 1 million properties protected by this Government.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): By the Minister's logic, are we to assume that support on business rates for hospitality and retail is to end in April 2026?

Jim McMahon: That really was not worth giving way for. I have literally just said that 1 million properties will be supported against inflationary increases next year. The 40% will continue, with a cap of £110,000. That is exactly what this Bill is intended to do. If the hon. Gentleman supports it, he can join the Government in the Aye Lobby and vote for it.

We know from businesses that the current scheme of discretionary relief does not provide the certainty needed. That is why the Bill will enable a permanent tax cut for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses from 2026-27 through new lower multipliers, ending the year-by-year uncertainty that the previous Government hardwired into the system. That is doing what businesses have been calling for. That rebalancing—from out of town to in town, from online to on street—is exactly what people have called for in communities and in business, and Opposition Members know it. Their frustration is that they did not do it in the 14 years that they had in office. It is down to us to take the steps that are needed in government now, and we are happy to do so.

The reasoned amendment raises concerns about the impact on schools in the state sector. I can assure the House that protecting and improving state education is at the forefront of the Government's mind. In fact, we estimate that only 2,900 more pupils will enter the state sector as a result of the removal of the business rates relief for private schools. Let us be clear about what that means in reality: that goes down to about 300 a year. In any given year across England, 60,000 pupils will move between schools; this is 300. We need to keep that in context, because we have heard a lot of scaremongering about the transfer, but that is what the evidence says. That evidence is placed in the House of Commons Library, in case Members want to take time after this debate to go and look. There might even be enough time to find the documents before the vote if they want to bring themselves up to speed.

Importantly, this is about providing much-needed investment in the state school sector. Just how many parents say, "We need specialist support for SEND,

because the mainstream provision is not adequate"? How many parents—by their own admission, among Opposition Members—choose to pay for private education because they do not have faith in mainstream provision? Despite what Opposition Members have said about the glory years of the past 14 years, the truth that parents and pupils on the ground feel is very different, and they know it. We have to repair mainstream provision so that parents and pupils can go with confidence to their local school, knowing that they will get the support that they need—support for all pupils, not just some.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the impact on faith schools. I want to offer some comfort. Of course we value and understand parental choice, but based on the evidence submitted through the HMT consultation, as well as the analysis undertaken by the Department for Education on removing the charitable rate relief, it is not apparent that private faith schools will be affected by this measure any more than non-faith schools. There is no evidence of disadvantage.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the Minister give way?

Jim McMahon: I want to make progress in the time that I have, and to wind up within the 10 minutes.

The key point is that all children of compulsory school age are entitled to a state-funded school place if they need one, and all schools—and they know this—are required to follow the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 relating to British values and to promote an environment that encourages respect and tolerance towards families of all faiths and none.

A number of Members have rightly mentioned SEND provision—it has been a significant part of the debate, for understandable reasons. We have ensured on the face of the Bill that private schools that are charities and "wholly or mainly" provide education for pupils with education, health and care plans remain eligible for business rates charitable rate relief. Furthermore, private schools that benefit from existing rate exemptions for properties that are wholly used for the training or welfare of disabled people will continue to do so. Taken together, we believe those policies mean that most private special educational needs schools will not be affected by these measures at all.

We recognise that some pupils with special educational needs and disabilities will be in private schools, but without local authority funding in place, as it is judged that their child's needs can be provided for within the state sector. Of course, parents will still be free to choose whether to be in the state sector or to remain in the private sector—that is a very important point to make. Local authorities aim to process all education, health and care plan applications in time for the start of the next school year, but in special cases, the local authority is able to prepay one term's fees if the process is not complete. Likewise, some private schools will forgo the first term's fees for pupils who are expected to receive their education, health and care plan in the future.

Turning to high streets, the Government are wholly committed to rejuvenating our high streets. We want to support the businesses and communities that make our town centres successful. That is why through this Bill, the Government intend to introduce permanently lower rates for retail, hospitality and leisure from 2026-27,

[Jim McMahon]

in order to protect the high street. That tax cut will be fully funded and sustained through a higher tax on the most expensive properties—the 1% of properties that have a rateable value of £500,000 or more. The new tax rates will be set out in next year's Budget to factor in the business rate revaluation outcomes and the broader economic and fiscal context at that time.

We were clear in our manifesto that we would look at the business rates system and support our high streets, and we meant it. We know that our high streets and town centres are the beating heart of our communities, but over the past 14 years, they have struggled to keep their heads above water. Think about all those household names that have gone to the wall—that are a thing of the past, not the future. Think about all the banks and pubs that have closed, and about the shutters that have come down on shop premises that were once the lifeblood of where people live. The previous Government had 14 years to get this right, but they oversaw the decline and decimation of our high streets. People feel that in their hearts, because town centres are more than just a place to do business; they are a place for a community to come together. That is something the Tories never understood when they were in government, but it is something that this Government absolutely understand.

With the leave of the House, I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this important debate. This Bill is the first step on the road to transforming the business rates system. The measures within it will provide certainty and support to our vibrant high streets, enabling the delivery of a permanent tax cut that is sustainable and that finally levels the playing field between the high street and online. The Bill will also help break down barriers to opportunity, supporting all parents to achieve their aspirations for their children. We need to bear in mind, of course, that the vast majority of children in this country—over 90%—are in state schools. This investment will see them given the support that they need and deserve, and that, frankly, they have waited a long time for. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Because of a problem with the Division bells in Portcullis House, I am going to allow an additional minute for this Division.

The House having divided: Ayes 173, Noes 335.

Division No. 46]

[9.34 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	Bedford, Mr Peter
Allister, Jim	Bennett, Alison
Amos, Gideon	Bhatti, Saqib
Anderson, Lee	Blackman, Bob
Andrew, rh Stuart	Bool, Sarah
Aquarone, Steff	Bowie, Andrew
Argar, rh Edward	Brandreth, Aphra
Atkins, rh Victoria	Brewer, Alex
Babarinde, Josh	Brown-Fuller, Jess
Bacon, Gareth	Burghart, Alex
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Cane, Charlotte
Barclay, rh Steve	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
	Cartlidge, James

Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farage, Nigel
Farron, Tim
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gilmour, Rachel
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert

MacCleary, James
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira

Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Greg Smith and
James Wild

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy

Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia

Gwynne, Andrew
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, Dan
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mayer, Alex
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine

McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mohamed, Abtisam
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan
Onwurah, Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Mr Richard
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Robertson, Dave
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Mrs Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mr Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy

Shanks, Michael
Simons, Josh
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry

Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Anna Turley and
Keir Mather

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
That the Bill be now read a

Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 336, Noes 175.

Division No. 47]

[9.50 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam

Carns, Al
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
German, Gill
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glendon, Mary

Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, Dan
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, rh Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Louise
Jones, Ruth
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mayer, Alex
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris

McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote
 cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah

Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Sarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Anna Turley and
 Keir Mather

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farage, Nigel
 Farron, Tim
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Khan, Ayoub
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim

Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley

Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:

Greg Smith and
James Wild

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read a Second time.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (MULTIPLIERS AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 17 December 2024.

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

Consideration and Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Chris Elmore.)

Question agreed to.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (MULTIPLIERS AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS) BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act making provision about multipliers in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Chris Elmore.)

Question agreed to.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (MULTIPLIERS AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS) BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill, it is expedient to authorise any increase in the sums payable into the Consolidated Fund resulting from—

- (1) multipliers that are up to 0.1 higher than the relevant non-domestic rating multiplier;

- (2) the removal of charitable relief for private schools.—
(Anna McMorris.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate**PROXY VOTING**

Ordered,

That the following change be made to Standing Order No. 39A: leave out subparagraph 2(c) and insert:

“(c) complications related to childbirth or pregnancy, miscarriage, baby loss or extended absence for fertility treatment;”—(Lucy Powell.)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Act 2023 (Consequential Modifications) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 17 October, be approved.—(Anna McMorris.)

Question agreed to.

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

PUBLIC SERVICE PENSIONS

That the draft Judicial Pensions (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 15 October, be approved.—
(Anna McMorris.)

Question agreed to.

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

TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

That the draft Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 (Amendment of Schedule A2) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 17 October, be approved.—
(Anna McMorris.)

Question agreed to.

ADMINISTRATION

Ordered,

That Bob Blackman and Alberto Costa be members of the Administration Committee.—(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

FINANCE

Ordered,

That Steve Barclay and Dr Andrew Murrison be members of the Finance Committee.—(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Sir Desmond Swayne be a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Dame Karen Bradley and Sir Julian Lewis be members of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Ordered,

That John Lamont be a member of the Petitions Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Ordered,

That Rosie Duffield and Shivani Raja be members of the Women and Equalities Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Homeless Families: Relocation outside London

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

10.5 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise a very important issue that reflects not just a housing crisis, but a crisis of fairness, compassion and accountability, involving the relocation of homeless families outside London.

At first glance, it may seem unusual for someone like me—a Member of Parliament for County Durham, some 250 miles away from London—to seek this debate, but the unlawful actions of some London borough councils have transformed homelessness in London into a national crisis that has reached directly into my constituency. In recent months, I have been made aware of multiple cases of vulnerable families being pressured into relocating to my constituency by London borough councils such as those in Redbridge, Hillingdon and Enfield. The families are being forced to choose between homelessness in London and moving hundreds of miles away, isolated from their communities and support networks.

A recent case involved a young mother being threatened and coerced by Hillingdon Borough Council to move to County Durham. In an email to her housing officer, she wrote:

“Now I am scared. I feel anxious and completely pushed into a corner...that if I don't take this accommodation, I will be discharged from your books and made homeless. I don't understand why you are doing this to me and my son. All I wanted was your help in finding a place, as you have put me in temporary accommodation in Slough and then you rang me today offering me a place in County Durham miles away from anyone and everything I know. You said I have to give you decision tomorrow or I must get out of the place I am in, be discharged from the Council's books, sleep on a friend's sofa and look after myself, how is this fair, like I said I am scared.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for initiating the debate. This is happening not only in London boroughs, but in my constituency. The current system means uprooting children from their schools and placing them in temporary homes that are too far away to make it work. In my constituency, a child being schooled in the Ards peninsula was moved to Enniskillen, nearly three hours away—away from family, friends and schools. It really does not stack up. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the educational needs of children must be taken into account? Indeed, they must be paramount.

Grahame Morris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The whole purpose of this debate is to draw attention to the fact that the actions of some—not all—local authorities are illegal and should be subject to some sanction. I hope we will hear a bit more about that from the Minister.

Is it right that a young mother and her child can be threatened with homelessness if she refuses to uproot her life and leave the community where she was born and raised, where she grew up and where she has lived all her life? There was no consideration of her needs, the welfare of her child, their health or their need to maintain family and support networks.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. A similar thing has happened in my constituency. Does he agree that the way councils are acting is inhumane? They are uprooting people's lives and relocating them to unfamiliar places, often into properties with not even the basic amenities. Does he agree that that needs to stop?

Grahame Morris: I completely agree. This is not care; it is coercion.

Homelessness is an ever-present spectre of our time. According to a survey by the *Big Issue*, two thirds of private renters are worried about paying their rent and the potential adverse consequences for their housing situation. At a time of desperate need, people should be able to trust their local authority to provide advice and support, but what do they find? They find a system in which some families are being threatened, intimidated and pressured into making potentially life-changing decisions in a moment of profound vulnerability.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He talks about the number of people who are vulnerable. In my constituency of Wyre Forest, we discovered that so many people were being moved from Brent to Birmingham that Birmingham filled up and they had to come to Kidderminster as well. This is a huge problem that has been going on for a long time. It is absolutely tragic for families who are separated from their family networks, their friendship networks and the possibility of getting a job.

Grahame Morris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am not suggesting that it is a problem that affects only Easington or County Durham; I am trying to highlight that it is an illegal practice. I hope to persuade the Minister that there should be redress and some sanction against local authorities that are breaking the law.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) said that the practice is immoral. It is certainly questionable, but it is also unlawful. In 2015, a Supreme Court judgment made it absolutely clear that local authorities

"have a statutory duty to provide accommodation in their own area 'so far as reasonably practicable'...The accommodation must be suitable to the needs of the homeless person and each member of the household, and the location can be relevant to its suitability...The obligation to secure accommodation as close as possible to where the household had previously been living was strengthened by Supplementary Guidance on the homelessness changes in the Localism Act 2011 and on the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012 ('the Supplementary Guidance'), including the need to seek to retain established links with schools, doctors, social workers and other key services and support."

How is it possible to retain established links to key services and support when a family is relocated to an unfamiliar location over 250 miles away?

Section 208 of the Housing Act 1996 requires that where someone is relocated out of the area, councils must notify the receiving local authority. However, that is not happening. In response to my representations, my local authority, Durham county council, said:

"We are aware of some households moving into County Durham with financial assistance from London Boroughs, largely discharging their homelessness duties into private rented tenancies. Placements

tend to be in selective licensing areas through a small number of managing agents—notably Reloc8 Lettings and Capital Letters. In accordance with homelessness guidance, councils who make a referral to another local authority area should notify the receiving authority, but this is generally not happening in these cases, and our referral numbers remain low."

The issue is not unique to Durham County Council. There has been nearly a decade's worth of press articles documenting cases of London boroughs—some London boroughs—breaking the law and secretly relocating families. I thank my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister for writing to council chief executives to remind them of their legal obligations, but I must be candid about this. I contend that council chief executives know their legal responsibilities and are choosing to break the law.

What we need is enforcement and accountability. I ask the Minister directly: what practical steps will she take to end these unlawful practices? What sanctions will be imposed on councils that continue to intimidate families, disregard their legal obligations and fail to notify the receiving authorities? The families affected by these actions deserve better, and so do the communities being asked to bear the burden of a broken system.

County Durham, like many areas, faces its own housing challenges, which were overlooked and ignored by the previous Government. Our council budgets are overstretched; we have limited means to raise revenues, owing to a low council tax base; and service demand, especially for social services and SEND provision, is overwhelming. Our north-east mining communities are resilient, but we do not have the resources to absorb the fallout of the London housing crisis without additional support.

Respectfully, I do not underestimate the task facing the Minister. The unlawful system of forcibly relocating vulnerable families through threats and intimidation was created by the previous Government. I am pleading tonight with the Minister not to allow it to persist under a Labour Government. Councils that knowingly break the law need to be held to account. I hope that she will explain how that is going to happen.

10.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this important debate. We can all agree that homelessness and rough sleeping levels are far too high, which has had a devastating impact on those affected and has caused serious harms to families, children and communities.

Addressing the current high levels of homelessness and rough sleeping is a priority for this Government. Like the Deputy Prime Minister, I absolutely recognise the pressures that local authorities face and the soaring costs of temporary housing. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, the challenge posed by out-of-area placements is also putting pressure on councils in many parts of the country, including County Durham.

Homelessness and rough sleeping have increased dramatically, as Members across the House will be aware. In England, homelessness is now at record levels. In March this year, more than 117,000 households, including over 150,000 children, were living in temporary accommodation. A third of the households in temporary accommodation—some 36,000 households—were in

accommodation in different local authority districts. That is an increase of 25% in the past year. My hon. Friend raises an important point about the impact on different areas: in Durham, as of 31 March this year, there were 128 households and 150 children living in temporary accommodation.

It is an absolute scandal that families with children are living without a permanent place to call home. As my hon. Friend poignantly pointed out, it is even more distressing that many of the families are forced to move away from the area they know—away from their friends, families, schools and healthcare providers. I know how disruptive and tough that is, because it has happened to constituents of mine, who have been moved much further away from where they grew up or where they were used to living. This is the scale of the challenge we inherited from the previous Government, but we are absolutely determined to address this and to deliver the long-term solutions that are desperately needed.

As my hon. Friend rightly said, the relocation of homeless families outside London is driven by wider issues to do with supply and the fact that many local authorities struggle to find accommodation for the homeless.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): We have an enormous homelessness problem in Birmingham, with some 25,000 families currently waiting to get on to the property ladder, but Labour-run Birmingham city council is selling the Commonwealth games development's approximately 1,400 family units, which could be used to accommodate these families. Birmingham city council, with the support of the commissioners appointed because of the budget deficit, will sell those units at a loss of some £300 million to the taxpayer. Would it not make sense for the Government to help retain those units and put them to proper use?

Rushanara Ali: I will shortly come on to the proposals we are considering to support councils.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington said, councils should place homeless households within their area in the first instance. Councils should place households in another area only if no suitable accommodation is available in their own area. However, the lack of affordable housing options, including temporary accommodation, means that local authorities often do not have a choice but to place people out of area.

Although I recognise the challenges that lead to families being placed outside the areas they are from, I am acutely aware of the impact on communities in places such as Easington, and the other places that colleagues have mentioned.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rushanara Ali: I am conscious of time, but I will give way if my hon. Friend is very brief.

Amanda Hack: I stress how devastating it is when families are moved so far away from home. A family from Islington have been placed in my North West Leicestershire constituency and, sadly, the older child is still in Islington. Families are being split, so I would appreciate a response.

Rushanara Ali: Thank you.

Earlier this month, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to local authority chief executives in England, asking them to remind their councils of the requirement to notify receiving areas when out-of-area placements are made, and to assure themselves that these notifications are being made. It is crucial that local authorities work in partnership to ensure that both host communities and the households placed out of area receive the appropriate support. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington highlighted some of the concerns about that. In legislation, local authorities are also responsible for safeguarding.

This Government are committed to delivering on a bigger agenda. We have set up a dedicated inter-ministerial group, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, to develop a long-term strategy to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, and the group includes a number of key Departments. We will deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation, to provide 1.5 million homes over the next five years. And the Budget made an extra £0.5 billion available for the affordable homes programme, which will deliver up to 5,000 new social homes.

There have also been proposals in relation to the right to buy and allowing councils to retain capital receipts so that they have the resource and flexibility to take action to increase supply, and a new five-year social housing rent settlement, which will give the sector certainty on funding and allow it to invest in tens of thousands of new homes.

We recognise that the supply of housing is crucial if we are to bring an end to the plight of those who face homelessness, and who are having to live in temporary accommodation and being moved away from the places that they call home. We are also committed to abolishing section 21 no-fault evictions, and the Renters' Rights Bill will give renters greater security and stability to stay in their homes for longer and avoid the risk of homelessness.

On resources, the Government will increase funding for homelessness services by £233 million next year, following the Budget announcement. That brings the total spend on homelessness and rough sleeping to nearly £1 billion in the year 2025-26. That increased funding will help to prevent families from becoming homeless and will reduce the numbers entering temporary accommodation, which is crucial. We have to tackle the root causes of temporary accommodation use and the issue of out-of-area housing. Alongside that, I have already announced £10 million of funding for local authorities for rough sleeping pressures. We have to recognise that some people end up going from temporary housing to rough sleeping, which is also a major concern.

Hon. Members raised the issue of sanctions. The legislation in relation to temporary accommodation requires that it be suitable for applicants and all members of their household. When determining the suitability of accommodation secured under the homelessness legislation, housing authorities as a minimum must ensure that all accommodation is free of category 1 hazards, as identified by the housing health and safety rating system.

Grahame Morris: The Minister is being very generous. The point that I am trying to make is not about sanctions against the tenants; they are the victims in all this, often moved against their will, with coercive methods employed. I do not know whether the Minister has ever seen the

[Grahame Morris]

film “I, Daniel Blake”, in which a young woman called Katie is put on a bus from London and lands in the north-east. That is the scenario that we are facing. Some of the London boroughs that I mentioned are knowingly breaking the law, and there is no sanction against them. They are not notifying the receiving authority; they are using managing agents and circumventing the rules.

Rushanara Ali: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s frustration. As I pointed out, the Deputy Prime Minister has already contacted local authorities and we will continue to keep what local authorities are doing under review. I commit to working with my hon. Friend to ensure that we support local authorities as much as we can. The resources that have been announced are key to reducing the need for local authorities to send their residents to other places far away from the area in which they should ideally be housed, but we recognise that local authorities face multiple pressures. It is important that we prioritise identifying where the barriers are in terms of house building, providing appropriate support to local authorities and ensuring that we monitor what happens in relation to the actions of specific authorities.

As I said to my hon. Friend, I am keen that we work collaboratively to ensure that local authorities take the necessary action to support those who are vulnerable. We all know the vulnerabilities of many of our constituents who are in temporary accommodation. It is key that they are kept as close to their network, including their schools and health providers, as possible. I sympathise with the points my hon. Friend makes.

Other hon. Members made interventions, which I hope I have covered. I am happy to continue the conversation on the specific issues they raised, but broadly speaking I hope I addressed many of their points.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington for securing this important debate, on a subject that affects not only his constituents but many others. As a London MP, I am concerned that we ensure that local areas have accommodation available to keep those in temporary accommodation close to their networks and support structures. That is why this Government are determined to take action across Departments in order to develop the strategy required to tackle the deep-rooted causes of homelessness, to ensure that we increase the supply of housing through our house building programme, and to use the funding that has already been made available for social and affordable housing.

If we do not tackle the root causes of homelessness, we will continue to have similar such debates. I am determined that we take the action necessary to address not only the short-term pressures, but the underlying causes that are creating so much harm and making the lives of children and families who are living in temporary accommodation an absolute misery. We are determined to tackle the challenges they face. I very much hope that I can work with colleagues who have a strong interest in this agenda, as we move forward to tackle the homelessness crisis.

Question put and agreed to.

10.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 25 November 2024

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Holidays in School Term Time

4.30 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 658365 relating to holidays during school term time.

It is a pleasure to address you, Sir Edward, in what is an important debate and my first attempt at presenting a debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I am chuffed to do so, because this subject is really positive. I am sure that everyone in this Chamber has fond childhood memories of family time away from home. When I look back, I have clear memories of spending a lot of time in north Wales with my family. I was fortunate that both my parents were teachers so, as soon as the school holidays came around, we were all available. I thank my parents very thoroughly for that.

Later in life, I followed mam and dad into the family trade by becoming a teacher, where I saw at first hand the impact that absence can have on attainment and progress at school. Often through no fault of the child or the parents, kids were unable to be in school and they fell behind, which made life difficult for them. I am sure all Members in this Chamber would want to avoid a situation in which any kid is unnecessarily held back for any reason, particularly attendance.

This issue is complex, and I have experience of both sides of it, as I am sure many Members have; I am sure that very soon we will hear a similar speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), who is also a former teacher.

There is a reason that this petition has received so much support from so many people from right across the breadth of the United Kingdom: who can say anything to a parent who wants to spend more time with their kids? It is so fundamental and so positive, and I think everybody would support that, which is why this petition was started and why it has been so clearly supported.

The debate is about those really positive things, but it boils down to an issue of affordability. Anybody who has looked into this will know of the significant increases in the price of holidays, whether domestic or foreign, whether travelling by air or by train. The price of holidays flies through the roof during school break periods, and that has a real impact on parents. They want to spend time with their kids away from home to build memories but, for far too many people, doing so in the 13 weeks of the school holidays has become unaffordable because of the escalating cost.

I spoke to the petitioners last Thursday, and they made it clear that they completely understand the importance of kids being in school. One of the first things they said to me was that they enjoy the fact that their kids come home from school, tell them what they did that day and are so full of life and the learning of the day. But the petitioners also understand the holistic benefits of kids

spending time away from a formalised learning environment for some self-directed time and a change of scenery, even if that is just some different walls.

However, one of the things the petitioner raised is that, unfortunately, a lot of families who want to build those memories are unable to do so during the school holidays because of affordability. They therefore have to take the kids out of school during term time, because they believe it important to enable their kids to enjoy their childhoods. However, parents can be fined for that, which leads to their feeling criminalised and as though they have done something wrong, although I am sure that everybody would agree that taking kids on a break to help them to build childhood memories is really positive.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is not just about the joy of the holiday; the problem is that there is no compassion in the system. I was contacted today by a resident who took their child out of school for two weeks because their grandfather is dying in India, and they have just been fined. They know that their child needs education, and they are passionate about it, but they face the risk that, because the grandfather is dying but has not died, they may get some sort of parenting order if they take their child out again for the funeral—he should go, as part of the extended family. That is ridiculous, so we need to recognise that this is about not just money but compassion.

Dave Robertson: It is hard to follow that intervention, because how could anybody disagree with that? Spending time with a dying family member at the end of their life is so important not just for those who pass away but for those who remain, because those memories live with us forever. I am sure those parents were between a rock and a hard place, but made the only decision that any of us would have made, despite the difficulties that they now face. It is clear from stories such as that and others that I have heard over the past few weeks that there is a real problem.

The petition mentions the equalities impact, and says:

“This can be a particular issue for...children that have additional needs”.

Parents raising children with additional needs may already face significant extra costs, whether because they have to buy things for the home, or software and other things to support their kids in school, or because they are simply fighting through a special educational needs and disabilities system that does not work and they face additional costs from having to raise things through tribunals.

In preparing for this debate, I was supported by our excellent Petitions Committee staff to meet members of the National Autistic Society, who said that they valued the opportunity to contribute to it. They said that, because of the issues in the SEND system, they spend a lot of time talking to people about the importance of kids being in school and helping parents to get their kids into school as often as possible. That is sometimes not easy, but a person should face no detriment if they spend some time with their kids, go away or, as the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) said, take some time for compassionate reasons.

[*Dave Robertson*]

We also met Parentkind, which highlighted some really interesting data from Wales. It recently carried out a consultation about changes to the school year, and a majority of the parents it surveyed support a change so that the long holiday period in the summer is shortened a bit and some of those weeks are moved to other parts of the year. But although 56% of all parents support a more evenly spread school year, 59% of those on a lower income are in favour. That may not seem like a huge difference—it is only 3%—but those parents are contained in the other number, so it is probably closer to 6%, and various other points can be made about the data. The important point is that people from lower income backgrounds—people who are not as rich as their peers—feel more strongly that stretching out and moving around the school holidays would be positive. Part of that may be that it is easier to arrange childcare when they do not need to do six weeks back to back, and part of it may be due to things that are happening in Wales—processes, festivals and things that I am not aware of because it is a while since I have been there. The cost of holidays might be one of the driving factors that led to that slightly different opinion between the two income brackets.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend think that there needs to be an impact assessment carried out by the Government on the way the current rules impact particularly on low-income families?

Dave Robertson: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. He is somewhat skipping ahead to the later parts of my speech, but I like him, so I will let him off. The Government need to do something about this, and as I will touch on later, there are a lot of proposed solutions. A lot of parents—obviously, the 250,000 who signed the petition in just three months, before the general election brought it to an end—think that there needs to be some type of solution. The petition proposes giving parents the opportunity to have up to 10 school days—two weeks—away from school with their children, but a variety of different things have been suggested. My hon. Friend has suggested another, and I am sure the Minister is listening.

As part of the preparation for this speech, I spoke to a range of organisations to take their views. Every single organisation that I spoke to recognised that there was an issue here, and that there was real value in kids being able to access a field of learning or a different experience from being at school in a formalised learning environment. I cannot say that any of them were absolutely jumping on and saying, “This is definitely a solution to that.” Actually, all the organisations I spoke to suggested slightly different solutions.

I spoke to the National Association of Head Teachers, which I thank for its helpful input. It suggested that returning some discretion to headteachers—as was certainly the case when I was in school and at the start of my teaching career—could be used to support parents, where appropriate. The headteacher would have the discretion to say no, should there be other issues with a child and their attendance. Parentkind kindly talked me through a significant amount of information on how the school year is organised, the potential for changing it, and whether that might be able to drive some changes.

The National Autistic Society recognised the issue, but emphasised how important it is to get kids into school. A lot of its work is on ensuring that kids are able to access education, but it recognised that there was maybe space for some work in the area. It suggested talking to market organisations and travel providers about whether we could change the affordability issue, which might then lead to a different situation for parents across the school holidays. The Centre for Young Lives was clear that the free market is not delivering for families. It is certainly not delivering for kids, and that is leading to some of the issues.

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point about the free market. We have a clear supply and demand issue. We have a huge glut during the summer holidays, and then a drought. I will give an example—I will not reference the British holiday destination, but it would be a firm favourite with most people. A typical family of four to six could spend five days there for £500 or £600 one week, but in excess of £2000 for the exact same holiday the following week because it is outside of term time. Does he agree that because of the supply and demand issue, giving discretion or allowing more variety in how schools use their time might be options worth pursuing, rather than trying to constrain business?

Dave Robertson: The hon. Gentleman has almost taken me to the conclusion I was coming to anyway, so I thank him for the appropriate segue. As ever, there are more solutions than problems for Government, but finding the right one is difficult. In the work and engagement I have done on this, it has really come through that there is a problem. There are lots of ideas about what we could do, and although it is unlikely that there is one instantaneous solution, there is potential around discretion, working with the market, and changing school days—although a significant caveat is that teachers are often parents too, and if they do not teach in the same local authority area in which they live, then moving the holidays around might cause them significant additional issues. There are also issues with teachers being able to afford holidays with their families.

It is a real vipers’ nest, and I do not envy the Minister having to try to find his way through it. There are probably more solutions than we need on this issue, and finding the right one will be a real challenge for the Government. I am very eager to hear the Minister’s response because, as I am sure a lot of people would say, the system is not working at the minute. Hopefully, we can use the great power of the British state to look into this issue and find a better way forward for parents and pupils.

4.45 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for introducing the petition and the debate in Westminster Hall. As I have said previously, I am a teacher of 30 years’ experience, but I also have fantastic and wonderful children in my family who have certain difficulties. In the past, it has absolutely been the best possible thing for us to go away on a family holiday for various reasons. We still think we did the right thing, so I see this debate from both sides.

As we have heard today, school attendance is absolutely vital to children's development, for not just their academic skills but their social skills, as well as their mental and physical wellbeing. I am proud to support a Government who are committed to properly resourcing our education system. However, with an absence rate of 6.7% last autumn, we risk far too many children being left behind, and we have a unique situation at the moment post-covid. There are more difficulties with school attendance and in addressing the mental health problems of children, so I appreciate that we are in challenging times.

As we have heard, there are some very good reasons why a child may be absent, and there are children and families in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South who are in difficult—but sadly not unique—circumstances, including bereavement. Bereavement is never just a one-off but often a long sequence of events, so the point from the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) was well made, and I thank her for it. Fines will not only beat those people down but fail to encourage attendance. If a family has a child with special educational needs and disabilities who is having a particularly difficult time, and who needs more time, the fine is not an incentive; it is a punishment for looking after their child.

As the petition clearly sets out, there are families for whom travelling outside term time is quite impossible. While costs are higher, planes and trains are also overcrowded, so it is not just about the costs, although there are families in financial difficulties. For children with special needs or in unique situations, travelling at very busy times can be challenging. We sometimes need family holidays in difficult times, and those difficult times do not respect term times, so taking our child out of school is the only option.

Again, this unfairly punishes already struggling families, and worse, it compounds an issue that already exists. I understand that there are still some exemptions at the discretion of headteachers, but as we have just heard, more needs to be done with them. From speaking to parents who have contacted me, and I spoke to one only this morning, I can say that that discretion is not always evenly exercised, so this is not hypothetical. In Stoke-on-Trent South, my constituents are 20% more likely to be living with learning disabilities than the national average. The parent whom I spoke to today has a neurodiverse child who, as frequently happens, went undiagnosed. As a result, he faced a series of circumstances in school, from which he experienced quite severe trauma, and he eventually became a school avoider. I want to stress that I know the mum of that family; they are good parents who have given up a huge amount for their child, and indeed they have a second child with special educational needs. The threat of fines does nothing to help them or their child, and it just adds stress on to stress.

I want to take a little time to go deeper into that story, which I heard only today. That parent was taken into school and told, "Right, we need to talk about fines. We are going to take you down the court process." The threat of court was used against the parents, and as the child was having significant problems, when they tried to get him into school, he would have a meltdown. As we have all seen, if a parent is dealing with a very young child who does not want to do something, that child kicks and lashes out. The teacher saw the child being violent to their parents and it was even suggested that

they use the youth offender system with a primary school child. They do not need that sort of stress. In the parent support group my constituent was given advice—and other parents report this too—such as, "Try making your home life more miserable so that they want to go to school." That indicates the experience of parents who are fighting to do the best by their child, with children who do not want to go to school. They are just trying their best to manage, and the fines system is causing supreme difficulty for them.

I was a teacher for 30 years, so I know what it is like from the teacher's perspective. When there is absenteeism teachers have to try to catch up a child who has been away while still trying to teach the other children and bring them forward. There are the gifted and talented children who are flying ahead, the children who need more direct support, and then there is the child who has been absent for two weeks and is saying, "I don't understand anything, Miss, what's going on?" It is really challenging, so I understand the perspective of the school. The education system and the teachers want the other children as well as that child to get the best possible education, but it is challenging to work in those environments. I see that side of things.

I have also seen countless children and parents struggling with attendance, not because the child just does not want to go to school, but as part of a more complex and unique set of needs that cannot be solved with fines. For those parents, especially those on lower incomes for whom the fines will be more damaging, there must be exceptions. With 30% of children in my constituency living in relative poverty—again, above the national average—the whole fine and court process is too punitive. Having to travel at expensive times is difficult.

The process does not produce the intended outcome of improving attendance. It taxes an already overwhelmed system, and places further burdens on those who need support, not punishment. We need a balanced approach that tackles those who take their children out for unwarranted reasons—I understand that—but that supports families who are struggling to best help their children. Sometimes that means taking them outside school in schooltime, to have a break and some respite—it is not a holiday; it is a period of respite. I therefore support the principle of the petition.

4.52 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank those Members who have made contributions, and the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for bringing this debate before us on behalf of the petitioners. I thank the 250,000 members of the public who made their voices heard by signing the petition so that it could be heard in Parliament.

The UK is facing an absence crisis in schools, it is fair to say. While the pandemic gave rise to a huge spike in pupil absence, since the restrictions were fully lifted in 2022, absence rates have yet to drop back down to pre-pandemic levels. In fact, the general absence rate in the 2022-23 academic year was still over one and a half times higher than the rates recorded during the six years before the pandemic. Persistent absence—missing 10% or more of lessons over a year—does a huge amount of damage to children's education and prospects, both

[*Ian Sollom*]

academically and socially. To emphasise the point, 19.2% of children in England were persistently absent by that definition during the last academic year.

The Liberal Democrats have welcomed the Government's mission to lower school absence rates. The announcement of free breakfast clubs in all primary schools in England, in a programme due to roll out next year, is a very good way to start addressing the persistent absence problem.

However, the Liberal Democrats also believe that the use of increasingly punitive measures to tackle pupil absence more widely is wrong. Parents and other primary carers of children are responsible not just for their academic attainment but for their overall wellbeing and learning. Inflexible fines, which have also recently increased, are not the one-size-fits-all answer that they are often made out to be. Of course, fines work as a deterrent in many cases, but we have to encourage—demand, even—that schools first work with parents to understand the root causes of absences, which involves addressing the needs of absent children, and then work to find the solutions to get them back in school. Simply slapping parents with financial punishment for issues that are often completely out of their control is not the answer.

The petition concerns the specific issue of absence due to holidays. I am sure that no hon. Member here would doubt the importance of family holidays for children. Whether abroad or in the UK, the chance for a child to have a break from their usual routine, perhaps while visiting and socialising with relatives or seeing historical sites, is important. The hon. Member for Lichfield has fond memories of childhood holidays in Wales; perhaps he is a budding Dylan Thomas. Such experiences of other cultures are invaluable for personal growth.

For many families, organising holidays during the 175 days a year that their children are not expected to be in school is absolutely not a problem. Many parents can afford to pay the frankly enormously hiked holiday package prices during periods of high demand, and being packed into tourist attractions at the busiest times of year is just accepted as a fact of life. However, as other Members have already pointed out today, for some families those factors, particularly the financial ones, are completely prohibitive. For a child who is unable to go on holiday outside term time, the lesson in which they are tasked with writing an account of how they spent their summer may well be one they completely dread. Feeling excluded, singled out or sidelined in daily life is the antithesis of an inclusive education.

Does the Minister agree that the burden should not be on parents to shell out thousands of pounds on the additional costs of a holiday or risk facing inflexible fines, and that instead airlines and travel operators should stop taking advantage of such families? Nearly doubling the price of the same holiday package from one day to the next is simply exploitative and completely out of line with any surge in demand. We have talked in other contexts about surge pricing this year; it is exploitative.

The school holidays issue is indicative of a wider issue, which is that school absence is generally—indeed, inherently—linked to a family's financial situation. In the 2022-23 school year, 36.5% of children eligible for free school meals were absent from school, compared with only 15.6% of children who were not eligible. The Government's very provision of those meals and

the new breakfast clubs that I mentioned indicates that they see the correlation between a family's finances and a child's attendance. I therefore ask the Minister what the Government will do to relieve holiday-related financial burdens for those who clearly need it most.

Aside from financial concerns, we should also consider that term dates are decided by local authorities and schools, so we could encourage them to organise term dates in such a way that the largest number of families in their communities can benefit from the 175 days a year that can be used for holidays. For example, giving a lengthy Christmas holiday to a community where a large number of families are not Christian can mean that those communities are effectively barred from properly celebrating their own religious festivals, or face fines if they take their children out of school to do so.

Some schools have found a way around that issue by pushing together all their inset and training days, rather than spreading them out over the year, so that families have consecutive days to celebrate those festivals or even to book some time away together outside high-demand times. That indicates part of the answer: a way forward that is about collaboration, rather than simply punishment.

I am trying to highlight that, in many cases, it is not that parents are actively choosing to take their child out of school, but that their child has been forced out of the school system by factors outside their control. I have only scratched the surface of financial burdens, but we should not debate the issue without addressing the point of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) regarding the needs of pupils with SEND, to which group I would also add young carers or those with mental health conditions. Their needs are consistently not being met in the classroom or at home, because of the knock-on effect and pressure.

I will give an example from my constituency. Across Cambridgeshire, the rates of school absence for those with SEN support and those with EHCPs—education, health and care plans—are quietly rising year on year. I suggest that that is a direct consequence of inadequate SEND and EHCP funding, which, in Cambridgeshire's case, is stuck at levels decided nearly 10 years ago.

That is a multifaceted problem that needs to be tackled constructively, not punitively. The Liberal Democrats have long called for measures, particularly around mental health, such as having a dedicated, qualified mental health professional in every primary and secondary school, and giving local authorities extra funding to reduce the amount that schools have to pay towards the costs of EHCPs.

The bottom line is that we need to understand why a child is not attending school, whether that is because of holidays, the financial reasons that I mentioned, SEND or young caring responsibilities. Understanding that is the most effective step towards beginning to reduce the problem; we have to understand it if we are going to do anything about it. I suggest that the Government adopt the Liberal Democrat proposal of setting up a register of children who are not in school to build that understanding and, therefore, remove the underlying barriers to attendance.

The solution to this petition, and indeed the wider issue of school absence, is not to make children attend school, but to ensure that they are able to do so—not forcing but enabling them. The Government, parents and care

givers jointly have a duty to provide children with the education they deserve. Costly punishments are not the solution.

5.5 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I declare an interest: as a parent of two primary school children, I am acutely aware of the cost of doing anything fun with small children. Like other Members who have spoken, I wince when I look at the cost of going on holiday anywhere and see that it is radically cheaper just a few weeks before the school holidays, so I completely understand the motivation behind this petition and why so many people have signed it. I echo what the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) said about the importance of those memories. I will have the memories of being on the north coast of Scotland this summer with my small children forever.

I will come to what we can do to make it easier for parents, but I will first touch on the very good speeches and interventions from the hon. Members for Lichfield, for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) and for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom). I agree that we have a major school attendance issue, so we need to address the petition in that context.

People often think, "Well, if we're out a bit, it's not so bad. Being absent a lot is a problem, but is being absent a bit really a problem?" The statistical truth is that it is a big problem, unfortunately. If there is a 10% decrease in pupils' attendance at school, the number who get a GCSE grade 5 or above in English and maths halves: 55% of those in the 0% to 5% range of absence get grade 5 or above, but only 22% in the 10% to 15% range do so. What seems like not a huge decrease in attendance has a huge impact. As Members who are former teachers expressed well, those pupils lose the thread, start to fall behind and find it difficult to follow the sequence of what others have already learned, so the problems compound. That is why it is a problem for them not to be in school when they need to be.

When the Conservatives were in office, we took steps to address this major challenge, which has become particularly acute since the pandemic. Schools have always had a duty to keep a register of children not in school, but we worked with local authorities to make it more accurate and we committed to making it statutory. In January, we committed to double the number of attendance hubs to support about 1 million extra children with attendance.

We did things at different levels. We invested £15 million in one-to-one monitoring for 10,000 children with particularly severe attendance issues. For a wider group of pupils with quite serious attendance problems, we put an extra £200 million into the Supporting Families programme—an early intervention programme—taking the spending to £700 million a year. As the issue overlaps to some extent with special educational needs, we increased spending on the high-needs block by 70%—£4 billion extra a year. People may say, "It's not enough because the need is ever expanding," and I completely understand that. We need to do more, but it is worth noting that that money has gone in. We also need to tackle the root causes of the growth of demand. I am sure the Government agree with that and want to do more about it.

We were making progress on the attendance challenge. In school year 2022-23, we had 440,000 fewer persistently absent pupils than the year before, but there was still a long way to go because the patterns of attendance had not got back to pre-pandemic levels. In truth, even before the pandemic, although the proportion of pupils with good attendance was about 70% in primary school, in secondary school it dipped down in years 9 and 10 to just above 60%, and the problem was radically compounded after the pandemic.

There are a lot of different bits to this—people working from home with their kids there, or taking days here and there; people having the challenge of wanting to go on holiday; and much more serious social problems, with children who are routinely and significantly not in school a lot of the time—but we cannot lose sight of, and would do a disservice to parents if we did not share with them, the evidence that what might seem like small amounts of non-attendance have pretty bad effects on pupils' attendance.

I am absolutely not saying, however, that nothing can be done; Members have alluded to some of the ideas. The hon. Member for Lichfield did a good job of talking to all the different people who care about the issue. He mentioned the Parentkind idea about when the school terms are, and I have some experience of that in Leicestershire: we are out of step with everybody—for historical reasons to do with how the factories used to shut in Nottingham, Derby and Leicester, we finish our school year a week earlier than everyone else and go back a week earlier than everyone else.

The last Government looked at whether, as Members have suggested, we could do more to stagger school holidays around the country. Obviously, Scotland often has different holidays, but the challenge—I have direct experience of this—is where we have a border. There was a brief moment when schools in the city of Leicester and Leicestershire had their holidays at different times, which was a massive pain for parents, because of course if they had one kid in school, but one needed looking after at home, they could not go on holiday.

I think there is potential in staggering holidays, and I understand why local authorities might want to explore that to give parents the benefits of finding cheaper holidays, but I would add that caution is needed. If we create borders with parents' kids on either side of them, we can create problems for the parents, rather than making any of the problems better.

I am entirely sympathetic: the Government could do a huge array of things to make it easier to go on holiday, such as improve the cost of living for parents, and think about the taxes on holidays and on flying in this country. I am supportive of schools, and of course they have to be compassionate and sensible, in particular about bereavement as the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole pointed out, as well as using their discretion.

My own schools on the edge of Leicester do a good job of using their discretion to be sensible about the fact that they are often juggling the festivals of at least four different major world religions at the same time, which is not easy. We also have to be careful and honest with parents about the risks of deciding not to attend school and to miss a couple of weeks, which might not seem like a lot, but which we and the educators in the Chamber know can have a particularly bad effect on kids' education.

[Neil O'Brien]

We must balance our desire to make things cheaper for parents with our desire for children to get a good education. We must continue the work—which I am sure the Government will do—of ensuring that we get school absence under control, because it is such an important driver of overall achievement.

5.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and I welcome to his place the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), who made some very reasonable remarks. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for introducing the debate and all Members who have contributed, on both sides of the House.

Let me start by acknowledging the points made by Members across the Chamber on the issue of holidays in particular. I sympathise with families who, for a variety of reasons, wish to avoid the busier and more expensive periods. As we heard from Members, including a number of former teachers, school attendance is clearly an important issue that a lot of people in this country care deeply about.

This Government are acting decisively to tackle absence via a new approach rooted in responsibility, partnership and belonging. That includes supporting schools and recognising that they have important responsibilities to create a welcoming, engaging and inclusive environment for children, and it also include parents' legal responsibility to send their children to school every day that they can. That is why we will not automatically grant two weeks of term-time absence to every pupil.

Tackling absence from school is at the heart of our mission to break down barriers to opportunity. Sometimes, of course, children are too poorly to attend school, but we are currently facing an absence epidemic in this country, with one in five children persistently absent, missing the equivalent of a day every other week. Thanks to the hard work of the sector, there has been progress, but we remain a long way off pre-pandemic levels.

If children are not in school, it does not matter how effective or well supported teaching or learning is, as they will not benefit. That is why the Government have the highest possible expectations of all children's attendance at school, and why we will ensure that school is the best place for every child, with free breakfast clubs in primary schools so that every child is on time and ready to learn; better mental health support through access to specialist mental health professionals in every school; and inclusion for children with special educational needs and disabilities within mainstream settings right across the age range. We will make sure that parents are supported to send their children to school and that schools are supported to welcome them.

The reason that this such a top priority for the Government is that we know the overwhelming benefits of regular school attendance for children's attainment, mental wellbeing and long-term development. The most recent DFE data shows that an increase in absence is associated with dramatic reductions in attainment, with 18% fewer children who miss two weeks of the school

year achieving good GCSE results compared with those who are in almost every day. Other independent studies support that finding.

Some Members have questioned whether that evidence applies specifically to absence for holidays, and there is clear evidence that it does. Analysis undertaken by the Office of the Children's Commissioner in 2023, for example, shows that any amount of holiday during term time is associated with lower GCSE results. We also know that absence for term-time holidays cannot be seen in isolation. Children inevitably miss some school due to childhood illnesses, and based on the most recent census data, a child who is taken out of school for a two-week holiday every year and has an average number of days off for sickness and medical appointments will have missed the equivalent of a full year of school by the time they finish year 11 at age 16. Let me repeat that: a child who takes a fortnight's term-time holiday and has an average number of days off due to illness will miss a full school year over the course of their education.

I have spoken about how we are adopting an approach rooted in partnership and belonging, and I would like to highlight that term-time holidays do not impact only the child missing school. Children thrive on stability, and a steady churn of absences disrupts the learning of every child. The hard work by school staff to cultivate a sense of community and belonging is wasted, and teachers have to replan lessons, making it more difficult for them to cover the curriculum. Even if we assume that that takes just one minute per missed day, it adds up to the equivalent of 1,000 teachers working full-time on nothing else for an entire year. The impact of absence on other children is not spread equally; it hits the children who already face greater barriers to opportunity the hardest. Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research shows that in year groups where there was higher absence, disadvantaged pupils had worse attainment.

A number of hon. Friends and Members have raised points on children with SEND. We know that parents have struggled to get the right support for their children, particularly through the long and difficult EHCP process. We have announced extra funding for this year: over £1 billion to help schools with the additional costs that they face, including the costs of supporting their pupils with SEND. We will work across the sector to provide support for children with SEND and to restore parents' trust.

We know that some pupils face more complex barriers to attendance. This can include pupils who have long-term physical or mental health conditions or special educational needs and disabilities. However, those children have the same right to an education as any other pupil. It is also worth noting that the national framework for penalty notices strengthens protections for SEND parents in, for example, absence cases other than holiday, including an expectation that attendance support will have been provided before a penalty notice is used. Our updated guidance on attendance includes more detail about additional support where a pupil is not attending due to unmet or additional needs. It sets out clear expectations on how schools, local authorities and wider services should work together to access and provide the right support to improve attendance.

A number of Members raised issues relating to holiday prices and term times. Of course, we recognise the concerns that they raised on behalf of their constituents

about the cost of holidays at peak times. However, travel companies, airlines and hotels are private companies that set their prices based on their costs, competition and profit margins. The Government do not have the authority to dictate pricing strategies for private companies and businesses.

However, as has been mentioned, schools and local authorities have the flexibility to plan term dates, and to hold inset days and other occasional such days at less busy times of the year, which can help families to plan breaks at times that suit them. For example, I know of councils and school trusts, including in my constituency, that have trialled a two-week half term or slightly later summer holidays. Similar points were made by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom). I stress that we are interested in anything more that holiday companies and other businesses in the sector can do to make holidays in peak times more affordable for families.

Several Members made remarks about penalty notices, which came into force following a national consultation. They are designed to embed our support-first approach and to improve consistency and fairness across the country, but they should always be used as a last resort. On bereavement, our guidance requires schools to take a support-first approach. Schools have the discretion to authorise a leave of absence in exceptional circumstances.

In conclusion, I once again thank all Members for their contributions. I acknowledge the strength of feeling behind them and that family holidays can be enriching

activities, but we are not ashamed of the importance that we place on children attending school. Absence is one of the biggest barriers to success for children and young people. Minimising absence of any kind is crucial if we are to ensure that they reach their full potential, and we will continue to work in collaboration with the sector to take steps to achieve that.

5.22 pm

Dave Robertson: I realise that I may have omitted to say how much of a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship at the start of the debate, Sir Edward. I am happy to correct the record in this instance.

Although we have had only a small number of speakers, the depth of research that has been done, and the depth of understanding of the issue across the Chamber by Members from the vast majority of parties has shown that this is being looked at by individual Members, the Government and all political parties. It has been a very good debate, in that we have heard a lot of different viewpoints, and it was good to hear the Minister's response.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 658365 relating to holidays during school term time.

5.23 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 25 November 2024

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

International Treaty on Plastic Pollution

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Plastic pollution is one of the greatest environmental challenges that the planet faces. The world produces 400 million tonnes of plastic waste each year. Scientists predict that there will be a threefold increase in the amount of plastic entering the ocean between 2016 and 2040. A global agreement on plastic pollution is urgently needed to co-ordinate a response to this complex issue.

United Nations Environment Assembly resolution 5/14 initiated discussions to agree an internationally legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. An intergovernmental negotiating committee was established with the ambition of completing its work by the end of 2024. The fifth and final planned meeting of the intergovernmental negotiating committee is being held in Busan, in the Republic of Korea, from 25 November to 1 December 2024.

The draft treaty under discussion includes provisions on production and consumption of primary plastic polymers; problematic products and chemicals of concern in plastic; product design; waste management; emissions and releases of plastic into the environment; existing plastic pollution; just transition; financial assistance, technology transfer and capacity building; implementation and compliance; national plans; reporting; effectiveness evaluation and monitoring; awareness raising, education and research; health and final provisions on processes necessary for the establishment of an international treaty.

The Government have an ambition to catalyse the transition to a circular economy and the treaty is one of the key levers available to us to achieve the systems-wide changes needed to make that a reality.

Plastic waste has for too long littered our streets, polluted Britain's waterways and threatened our wildlife. This Government are committed to cleaning up Britain and cracking down on plastic waste. We will roll out extended producer responsibility to incentivise businesses to cut plastic packaging and the deposit return scheme to incentivise consumers to recycle.

The UK is an active member of the High Ambition Coalition, a group of 67 countries seeking an ambitious treaty that will end plastic pollution by 2040 by taking a full-lifecycle approach. At INC-5 we will continue to take a leadership role and work closely with other countries to push for agreement of an ambitious and effective treaty in Busan. The science tells us that in order to be effective we must take action at all stages of the plastics lifecycle, from production to waste management and emissions.

In developing the UK negotiating approach, we have worked closely with the devolved Governments and UK overseas territories, as well as a wide range of stakeholders, including producers, manufacturers, retailers, eNGOs and academia. On 6 November, I hosted a roundtable

on the treaty for leading businesses and financial organisations, ahead of His Majesty's international sustainability reception. Participants of the roundtable agreed a statement calling for an ambitious treaty that will create a more harmonised regulatory environment and a level playing field.

The UK remains committed to securing an agreement in Busan as a critical step towards ensuring the global action needed to end plastic pollution by 2040.

[HCWS247]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Pandemic Accord Negotiations and International Health Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): I would like to update the House on the most recent round of negotiations on the legally binding international agreement on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response—the pandemic accord—at the World Health Organisation (WHO), as well as the outcome of negotiations to agree targeted amendments to the International Health Regulations (IHR). The most recent round of pandemic accord negotiations took place between 4 and 15 November.

Pandemic accord negotiations:

As outlined in my statement of 9 September 2024, infectious diseases do not respect borders. The risk of another pandemic is very real—a question of “when” rather than “if.” All countries would benefit from strengthening our collective ability to prevent, prepare for and respond to the next pandemic threat. The pandemic accord is an important opportunity to establish a framework for a comprehensive new global approach to pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

Co-operation with countries around the world does not compromise our sovereignty; it strengthens our security, and no amendments to the accord have been proposed or agreed that would give the WHO powers to impose domestic public health decisions on the UK. The UK Government remain committed to negotiating a pandemic accord that enhances UK and global health security and is firmly in the UK's national interest.

Member states of the WHO have until the World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2025 to reach an agreement on the pandemic accord, following an extension agreed at the WHA in May 2024. Member states have reached provisional agreement on over 70% of the text, while negotiating on the principle that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.” At the latest round of negotiations, provisional agreement was reached on the issues of regulatory systems strengthening, and sustainable and geographically diversified local production.

On Monday November 11, a discussion was held by member states on whether to call a special session of the WHA in December with the aim of agreeing the accord before the new year. Given the number of outstanding issues on which consensus is yet to be found—including on prevention, One Health, technology transfer, and the pathogen access and benefit-sharing mechanism—and the legal form and status of the accord, member states chose not to call a special session in December.

However, the Government remain committed to working with others to secure an effective agreement as soon as possible and will continue to work towards the May 2025 deadline, with the option to conclude negotiations earlier if this is deemed feasible while still delivering a good agreement.

As negotiations continue, we will keep working closely with the devolved Administrations, the Crown dependencies and the overseas territories to ensure that the process reflects their interests, and we will keep engaging with civil society organisations, institutions, academia and the private sector. The latest public version of the text and other relevant documents can be found online here: <https://apps.who.int/gb/inb/index.html>.

The International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR):

The IHR are an important, legally binding technical framework that helps to prevent and protect against the international spread of disease. Amendments to the IHR, were agreed by countries at the World Health Assembly that took place from 27 May to 1 June 2024. The amendments aimed to reflect lessons learned from recent global health emergencies, such as the covid-19 pandemic, including by improving information sharing and collaboration for public health emergency response. On 19 September 2024, the WHO's director general formally notified all states parties of the official amendments adopted by the WHA. From this date of notification, the UK has 10 months to complete the domestic review of IHR amendments and then notify the WHO director general whether we wish to reject or reserve on any or all

the amendments by 19 July 2025. Adopted amendments—that we have not rejected—would then come into force for the UK in September 2025.

Department of Health and Social Care officials have been leading work across Government to confirm the implications of the amendments for the UK. Officials are also working with their counterparts in the devolved Administrations and in our overseas territories and Crown dependencies, to ensure that all relevant territories are considered. This analysis will inform the decision about which amendments are in the UK's national interest and whether we wish to reject or reserve on any or all of them before the July 2025 deadline. No decision has yet been made.

In parallel with the approach to the pandemic accord negotiations, respect for each country's sovereignty has been a fundamental element of the IHR amendments. The UK Government will of course only formally adopt amendments to the IHR that are in the UK national interest.

The latest available full text of the agreed IHR amendments can be found online here: https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA77/A77_ACONF14-en.pdf

Given the significance of the pandemic accord negotiations and the IHR amendments, and their potential to make our country stronger and safer, I am committed to keeping the House updated at relevant and important junctures.

[HCWS246]

Petition

Monday 25 November 2024

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

CCTV cameras along river banks in city centres

The petition of Jayne Reynolds,

Declares that all rivers in city centres should have CCTV cameras along their full length within city centres; further declares that local authorities should fund these; and notes that riverbanks should be well lit and filmed by day and night so that interventions can be made if people are near the river to prevent fatalities and so that families can learn what has happened to their loved ones when people go missing or bodies are found in the river.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take immediate action to ensure that all riverbanks in city centres are well lit and have CCTV cameras so that riverbanks are monitored to prevent fatalities and the film is made available to the relevant authorities if people go missing or bodies are found in the river.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rachael Maskell, *Official Report*, 16 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 948.]

[P003011]

Observations from the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):

The Government extend condolences to the friends and family of Leah Bedford and to those who have lost loved ones on public waterways.

The Government are committed to keeping all members of the public safe and support the appropriate use of technologies such as CCTV to give the public greater confidence about using our public spaces.

The two largest navigation authorities in England and Wales, the Canal and River Trust and the Environment Agency, have ongoing proactive public safety campaigns encouraging visitors to their waterways to be careful and safe around the water, using a variety of media, including social media.

Both the Canal and River Trust and the Environment Agency undertake public safety risk assessments. This includes determining where on their waterways the provision of public rescue equipment would be most beneficial. This is most often at the busiest locations, places where there have been previous safety incidents, or in other areas of particularly high risk.

Public rescue equipment on regulated inland waterways is also provided by the relevant navigation authority or riparian landowner, often working with local authorities in local water safety partnerships and other safety organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, the Royal Life Saving Society, and the National Water Safety Forum.

Local authorities have devolved powers and will work with their local communities to carefully consider views and ensure decisions are made closer to the local people, communities and businesses they affect. The majority of funding in the local government finance settlement is not ringfenced in acknowledgment that local areas know best how to prioritise spending within their communities. This includes funding for CCTV cameras.

Written Correction

Monday 25 November 2024

Ministerial Correction

TRANSPORT

Rail Performance

The following extract is from the statement on Rail Performance on 11 November 2024.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Commuters at Arlesey and Hitchin stations in my constituency are driven to despair by the shocking state of Thameslink services, with delays and cancellations an all too frequent feature

of everyday commutes. I welcome the urgency with which the Secretary of State is starting to tackle the long-term causes, from industrial disputes to fragmentation. In the interim, will she meet me to discuss how we can push Thameslink to do more to make sure we finally make these delays and cancellations a thing of the past?

Louise Haigh: I am grateful for those comments. Govia Thameslink had an improvement of 3% in its cancellations on last year, but it is still falling behind on punctuality.

[*Official Report*, 11 November 2024; Vol. 756, c. 528.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh):

Louise Haigh: I am grateful for those comments. Govia Thameslink had an **increase** of 3% in its cancellations on last year, **and** it is still falling behind on punctuality.

ORAL ANSWERS

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PETITION

Monday 25 November 2024

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Monday 25 November 2024

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**not later than
Monday 2 December 2024**

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Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Holidays in School Term Time [Col. 179WH]
E-petition debate

Written Statements [Col. 31WS]

Petition [Col. 7P]
Observations

Written Correction [Col. 7WC]
Ministerial correction
