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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 28 November 2024

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: Just to let Members know, it is the birthday of the Clerk of the House, who is 50 today. Happy birthday, Tom.

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Creative Industries

1. **Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help support the creative industries. [901503]

11. **Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to help support the creative industries. [901514]

14. **Dan Norris** (North East Somerset and Hanham) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help support the creative industries. [901517]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): This Government are prioritising the growth of our creative industries, which are vital to our economy and showcase the best of creativity and culture. In the last few days alone, I have been pleased to announce £13.5 million of funding for two new clusters in Liverpool and the west midlands.

Samantha Niblett: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer, and I just want to expand on it. In South Derbyshire, we have the Melbourne festival of art and architecture, which turns 20 next September, and the brilliant CircularityHUB, where people of all abilities can go to use the media studio. However, when it comes to young people wanting careers in the creative industries, what more can this Government do so that we can thrive in these industries at home, not have to get out to get on.

Lisa Nandy: I am aware of the huge ambition that my hon. Friend has for South Derbyshire, and the contribution that its people can make to our arts and culture and creative industries. This Government are supporting those aspirations with a £3 million expansion of the creative careers programme, so that young people can find those jobs and get access to those opportunities.

With the Education Secretary, we are reviewing the curriculum to put arts and music back at the heart of the national curriculum, where it belongs.

Jo Platt: Many individual artists in places such as Leigh and Atherton have great difficulty in accessing funding streams. In many cases, the trickle-down from larger institutions does not work and holds back creative growth. Can the Secretary of State outline how funding will reach grassroots artists, empowering them to thrive and play a central role in growing our local economy?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. She has done amazing work over the years with the Leigh Film Society and other thriving organisations that are leading the way. From the conversations she and I have had, I am well aware of the importance of grassroots societies and venues in places such as Leigh and Wigan, and we are determined to put rocket boosters under them. We are already working on supporting grassroots music venues and supporting voluntary action around a levy. In addition, we are helping to channel funding to those smaller organisations so that they can create the pipeline of talent that enables people from places such as Leigh to go on and make a national impact.

Dan Norris: “Vengeance Most Fowl” is not just what the public inflicted on the Conservative party at the general election. It is also the name of the Aardman Animations Wallace and Gromit film coming out soon, which will be shown on the BBC on Christmas day and on Netflix around the world. What are the Secretary of State and her wonderful team doing to promote animation not just across the west of England and in my constituency, but across the UK, so that it can get to even better and greater heights in the future?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I am very happy to be the Gromit to his Wallace. This Government have already announced new tax reliefs for British films and special effects, but we are determined to do more. I know that, as the Mayor, he has championed this issue across his region. We are working closely with Mayors and local councils to put rocket boosters under their local growth plans, so that whether it is animation, music, arts, sport or creativity, we ensure that every part of the country benefits from its success.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Culture Secretary welcome the news that, thanks to levelling-up funding, Malvern theatres in the west midlands will be expanding? Planning permission was granted last week, which will give lots of young people an opportunity to get jobs in the creative industries. When the new theatre has been built, will she come to open it and meet some of those young people?

Lisa Nandy: I would be delighted to do so. I thank the hon. Member for her support for theatres, arts and culture, and for always being a strong voice for them in this place. One reason that we have prioritised expanding the creative careers programme is that we are determined that as many parts of the country as possible play their full part in the growth success story that is our creative industries, and that young people in such communities

get access to those opportunities and go on to have flourishing careers. I would be delighted to come and open the theatre when the work is finally done.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Bath is a city of music, but so many of the musicians in the city and across the UK face enormous bureaucratic barriers when they want to perform in the EU. Can the Secretary of State update me on what progress has been made on this issue?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that incredibly important issue. We have heard the message loud and clear from the music industry that the deal that was struck on touring is having a difficult effect on many artists from the UK. We are also aware that that works both ways, and we need a much improved agreement with our friends in the European Union to ensure that their artists can come and perform here and our artists can freely go and perform there. My right hon. Friend the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office is currently undertaking those negotiations, and we are determined to resolve the issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her enthusiastic response to the questions. In my constituency, and for Ards and North Down borough council, the creative industries are really important, whether that be arts, metal sculptures or music, and Ulster Scots runs through the veins of all that. May I invite the Secretary of State to come to Northern Ireland and my constituency of Strangford to observe and enjoy all that we have? She will never see anything else like it.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the hon. Gentleman and I am very aware of the enormous contribution that the whole of Northern Ireland makes to our creative industries. I confess that my favourite TV show in the world is “Derry Girls”, so if he can arrange for the Derry Girls to be present, I would be delighted to visit.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Small music venues such as the Frog & Fiddle in Cheltenham are part of the lifeblood of the creative industries, but the Music Venue Trust has warned that after years of economic pressures and the recent Budget, more than 350 venues are on the brink of closure. How are the Government supporting small music venues, and what steps will they take if the voluntary levy on arena and stadium tickets is not agreed by the large venues whose participation is vital?

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question. My constituency of Wigan is home to The Verve, and it is difficult to know where such a band would now cut their teeth in the industry, because many of the live music venues that they played in as an up-and-coming band have disappeared. I very much recognise the problem that he raises. He will know that this Government have supported the voluntary levy that the industry has backed, but if that levy is not implemented we will be forced to take action. My hon. Friend the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism will be writing to the industry in those terms this week.

Tourism: Coastal Towns

2. Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the contribution of tourism to the local economies of coastal towns. [901504]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Tourism is vital to our coastal towns, and if we are to reach our target of 50 million international visitors to the UK by 2030, we will need to do far better at improving tourism numbers in our coastal towns.

Luke Myer: The coastal village of Skinningrove is home to a fantastic tourist asset, Land of Iron, which is the leading ironstone mining museum in the country. I am campaigning for it to receive national status as the national ironstone mining museum. Will Ministers consider meeting me to discuss that request, and would they like to visit?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend challenges me a bit. The Rhondda has the best mining museum in the UK, but I am prepared to concede that in England he might be right. But there is an important point: our mining heritage is part of understanding the country that we have been, and the country that we can be in future. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend. Arts Council England has a specific way of giving a national name to museums, and that is one thing that he might want to apply to it for.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Tourism and hospitality contributes more than £500 million and a fifth of all jobs in North West Norfolk. Why are the Government hitting those businesses with higher business rates and a jobs tax?

Chris Bryant: It would be good, would it not, to have an NHS that works in this country. It would be good to have an economy that works, trains that run on time, and a country that functions so that when tourists come here they have a good experience, rather than sitting on a platform waiting for a train that never turns up on time. I am determined to ensure that we get to 50 million visitors to the United Kingdom. Last year, we had just 38 million visitors. If we are to secure that increase we must have a country that welcomes tourists to every part of the country, not just London and the south-east.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): The Budget has created a perfect storm for hospitality and tourism businesses across the country. UK Hospitality is sounding the alarm, saying that the Budget is a “blow” for the tourism and hospitality sectors. According to the Minister’s impact assessment, how many jobs will be created as a result of lowering the national insurance threshold, and how many businesses will close, as we suspect they will? What does his impact assessment tell him will be the impact on ethnic minority communities, women, and those with disabilities for whom the tourism and hospitality sector is a huge employer? Will he tell the House whether he even has an impact assessment for one of the most damaging and regressive taxes that we will ever see?

Mr Speaker: With that list of questions, I think the shadow Minister needs a debate.

Chris Bryant: The irony is, we have already had two debates on these issues in the last fortnight—thanks to you, Mr Speaker.

First, I welcome the hon. Member to his place and his new responsibilities. I look forward to working with him.

The truth of the matter is that the tourism industry has really struggled over the last few years, partly because of Brexit and partly because of covid. Under the last few years of the Conservative Government, it did not get back to its pre-covid level of 41 million visitors to the UK—it is now at 38 million. As I said, I want us to get to 50 million by 2030. The only way we are going to do that is if we significantly improve the offer at every stage of the experience of visitors coming to the United Kingdom.

Yes, there are undoubtedly challenges for the hospitality industry—I said this in a speech yesterday afternoon—but the thing that really worries me is that historically we in this country have seen a job in the industry as something that someone has to do when they have not got another job. I want to change that so that it is a career to be proud of; something respectable that someone might do for their whole life.

Gambling Operators Levy: Society Lotteries

3. **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Whether she has had recent representations from society lotteries on the potential merits of zero-rating those organisations under any future statutory levy on gambling operators. [901505]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): As set out in a written ministerial statement yesterday, the Government will introduce a statutory levy on gambling operators, which was a commitment made as part of the gambling White Paper in 2023. Society lotteries will be charged the levy at the lowest rate of 0.1%. I know that they are a vital fundraising tool for many charities, community groups and sports clubs up and down the country.

Wendy Morton: I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The Minister clearly recognises, as we all do, the contribution that society lotteries make to our constituencies through various organisations. Does she recognise that not-for-profit society lotteries will have to fund any levy due from their charitable return, which the sector, and I think many of us, feel amounts to a charity tax?

Stephanie Peacock: My understanding was that the levy came after the money had gone to good causes, but I am not the Gambling Minister, who sits in the other place. I will happily arrange a meeting for the right hon. Member with the Gambling Minister.

Community Wealth Fund: Dudley

4. **Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure the community wealth fund supports communities in Dudley constituency. [901506]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): The Government are committing to ensure that the community wealth fund delivers meaningful benefits across England. That is why we have allocated £87.5 million of dormant assets funding towards it. We will set out our position on the key design principles of the community wealth fund shortly.

Sonia Kumar: Given that Russells Hall in Dudley ranks on the local index in the top 2% of areas with the greatest need and that nearly half of working-age residents rely on benefits, will the Minister confirm what steps the Government will be taking to target places like mine that are doubly disadvantaged?

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I know Dudley well, and I know that she is a strong advocate for the area she represents. I reassure her that the Government are committed to supporting those places in need through the community wealth fund. We are working at pace on the details and delivery of the fund and will set out the next steps in due course.

Horseracing

5. **Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): What plans she has to support the horseracing industry. [901508]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): I know that the hon. Gentleman is a huge champion for horseracing, and the Government are well aware of the value of horseracing to the UK, which supports 85,000 jobs, has an annual economic contribution to the economy of £4.1 billion and is the second-best attended sport in Britain.

Nick Timothy: Mr Speaker, I am not sure if it is in order to raise the travesty of the refereeing decision last night in the Aston Villa-Juventus match, but I thought I would give it a try.

The Secretary of State has been warm about the horseracing industry, and I am grateful for that; it is a vital part of the economy in West Suffolk and nationwide. I have previously raised with her and her ministerial team the need to reform the betting levy and affordability checks. I would be grateful for an update on the timeline for any action on that.

Lisa Nandy: We believe that the horseracing betting levy is vital for the financial sustainability of the sport and its thousands of fans. I can update him that the Minister for Gambling recently met representatives from horseracing and betting to encourage a voluntary deal that fairly reflects the relationship between racing and betting. We expect an update from the British Horseracing Authority and the Betting and Gaming Council on progress by the end of the year.

Mr Speaker: Let's hope that the shadow Minister will not fall at the first hurdle.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The horseracing industry has been left in the dark by this Government, following the Chancellor's disastrous Budget. The Office for Budget Responsibility warned

that the national insurance rise would cost, on average, £800 per employee. With 20,000 employed across the country, the Government's jobs tax could cost the horseracing industry £16 million and the gambling sector up to £100 million, even before the new levies. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether her Department has made any assessment of the impact of the increase in national insurance contributions on the industry? How many jobs will be lost? How many training yards and courses will close? How many of the 500 independent bookies will shut?

Lisa Nandy: Let me gently say to the hon. Gentleman—who I welcome to his place—that he is well aware that in the decisions that we took in the recent Budget we protected the smallest businesses. More than half of businesses will pay either less or the same as they currently do. We will take no lectures from the Opposition about how to run the economy, after 14 years, given the mess that they left this country in. It really does take some brass neck to stand at that Dispatch Box and attack the Government.

Grassroots Sport

6. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Ind): If she will make an assessment of the contribution of grassroots sport to communities. [901509]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Grassroots sports make a huge contribution to communities up and down the country, providing sport and physical activity opportunities, and a chance to socialise and learn new skills while supporting people's health and wellbeing. The Government are supporting people to get active through our £123 million multi-sport grassroots facilities programme.

Imran Hussain: Grassroots boxing gyms, like many grassroots sports, offer their local communities unparalleled benefits. They are community hubs, they build skills and confidence and become safe spaces for young people to grow their talent. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on boxing, I was delighted to launch two reports earlier this year that highlighted its huge social benefits. Unfortunately, these gyms remain very unfunded and rely almost entirely on the goodwill of volunteers. Will the Minister meet me and the all-party parliamentary group to discuss including dedicated grassroots funding in the sports strategy?

Stephanie Peacock: I know the hon. Gentleman is a huge advocate for boxing, and I was pleased to speak with him about it a few weeks ago. I have seen at first hand the impact that boxing can have. England Boxing was given £6.8 million by Sport England in 2022. I would be delighted to meet him to discuss the issue further.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The Minister knows that grassroots sports provide enormous health, economic, welfare and community benefits. That is why today, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee is launching an inquiry that we are calling "Game On" into community, grassroots and school sports, and the

interventions needed to improve them. What conversations is the Minister having with her counterpart in the Department for Education about how to work collaboratively to build a lifelong love and passion for sport, given the benefits for young people's health and wellbeing?

Stephanie Peacock: I am incredibly grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for that important question. We work closely with the Department for Education; I chaired a roundtable with the Schools Minister on grassroots sport and how to get sport into schools. I also convened a meeting on women's sport, where representatives from the Department for Education were present. I would be delighted to discuss it further, and I know the Secretary of State would, too.

National Youth Strategy: Youth Sector Organisations

8. **Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to incorporate information collected by youth sector organisations into the national youth strategy. [901511]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): The Government are co-producing a new national youth strategy with young people to grip the challenges of the generation. When I entered the Department I was shocked to find no single youth strategy. The last Government funded a lot of good youth work, but I think we can all agree that the challenges facing this generation are immense, and we need to do far more to support them.

Natasha Irons: On Tuesday, I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs, where we discussed this Government's plans for a national youth strategy with more than 80 young people and organisations from across the sector, including grassroots organisations such as Reaching Higher from my constituency, which supports young people and families across Croydon. The national plan for young people is urgent, but the 73% cut to funding for youth services under the previous Government has resulted in 4,500 youth workers leaving the sector over the past decade, according to the National Youth Agency. Can the Secretary of State outline how her national youth strategy will support youth workers and attract more people back to that vital work?

Lisa Nandy: The youth strategy is an opportunity to look afresh at the training, recruitment and retention of youth workers. My hon. Friend will know that my first job before I came to this place was at the youth homelessness charity Centrepunt. I am aware of the vital work of youth workers—they are a lifeline for young people, and those relationships matter disproportionately to whether a young person succeeds or fails. My Department works with the National Youth Agency to fund training bursaries for individuals who may otherwise be excluded due to cost. We are aware that some of the people who make the best youth workers have had those experiences. We are very committed to working with her and her all-party parliamentary group to ensure that we get this right.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Young Devon provides essential services for young people across Devon, including supported accommodation and mental

health provision. When I met Young Devon staff on Friday, they told me the increased employers' national insurance contributions will cost the charity at least £90,000 just to stand still—that means 100 fewer young people counselled and eight fewer beds offered. What conversations has the right hon. Lady had with the Chancellor to ensure that charities such as Young Devon do not have to reduce their valuable services as a result of the Budget?

Lisa Nandy: It is lovely to hear about the work that Young Devon is doing, which the hon. Lady is supporting in her constituency. The Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), who has responsibility for civil society, has held a number of roundtables with the sector on this issue to ensure that we are providing the right help and support. The hon. Lady will know that in the Budget, the Government announced plans to raise the threshold at which businesses and charities pay contributions, so that half of charities—the smaller charities—will pay either less or the same as they currently do. Charities can also benefit from relief on employer contributions; that is worth around £6 billion a year. This Government are taking action to protect the sector, and when we launched the civil society covenant a few weeks ago, we made it clear that we want a genuine partnership with charities. They are welcome at the heart of Downing Street. That is why my hon. Friend the Minister for civil society will continue that work.

Grassroots Football Clubs: Financial Resilience

9. **Jodie Gosling** (Nuneaton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve the financial resilience of grassroots football clubs. [901512]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): As set out following the Euro 2024 final, the Government are committed to supporting grassroots football clubs and facilities. The Government are investing £123 million this year to deliver pitches for grassroots football across the UK. Alongside that, the Government are supporting the Football Association's ambition to double the number of three-star community clubs across the country.

Jodie Gosling: I thank the Minister for her detailed answer, and for all the work the Government are doing to support grassroots football. We have many grassroots football clubs in my constituency, including Nuneaton Town and Nuneaton Griff, and we understand their importance and contribution to the town. Both clubs have struggled recently, especially in securing a ground; they have to share one with their competitors in Bedworth. While we appreciate their hospitality, we would like to meet Ministers to talk about how to bring football home to Nuneaton.

Stephanie Peacock: I recognise the huge contribution to communities made by grassroots clubs such as the ones my hon. Friend has mentioned; I have seen that at first hand in my constituency in Barnsley. I appreciate the number of challenges those clubs face, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the options available.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Grassroots football is supported by medium and large community-based football clubs, such as AFC Fylde in my constituency, Chorley FC in your constituency, Mr Speaker, and Wigan Athletic in the Secretary of State's constituency. Wigan sadly posted a £13 million loss for the last financial year. How does the Secretary of State think the club can make itself more financially resilient, given the significant impact that the need to pay national insurance contributions will have on their finances?

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. That is why we are continuing the work of the previous Government by introducing our own Football Governance Bill to hopefully put football on a sustainable footing.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): Kettering Town FC are currently the leading FA cup goal scorers, and are in the second round of the men's FA cup on Sunday. Will the Minister join me in wishing the Poppies the very best of luck in that game? What steps is she taking to improve the financial resilience of local clubs such as Kettering Town FC?

Stephanie Peacock: I will of course put on record that I wish the team good luck and send them my huge thanks and congratulations. The work that we are doing to support grassroots football, through our multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, will hopefully grow the grassroots game.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister will be aware that there is a sub-regional stadia strategy in Northern Ireland. Will she have discussions with my colleague, the Minister for Communities in Northern Ireland, to see what assistance, information and additional resources can be deployed to ensure there is widespread development of grassroots football in Northern Ireland?

Stephanie Peacock: I have previously had discussions with my counterpart in Northern Ireland and I will be delighted to do so again. I am hoping to visit Northern Ireland in the coming months.

Listed Building Status: Community Groups

10. **Ben Goldsbrough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help support community groups to secure listed status for buildings. [901513]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Historic England assesses applications for listing. I want that process to be as simple as possible for community groups up and down the land, so they can steer a balance between preserving what is truly valuable and leaving communities with decaying, listed eyesores.

Ben Goldsbrough: In Long Stratton, there is a beloved former local authority building called South Norfolk House. It has won numerous awards for its innovative architecture and its ahead-of-its-time design focus on energy efficiency, but it has been refused listed status.

This could be a fantastic community asset for the town; it could be an arts hub. Will the Minister meet me to discuss its future?

Chris Bryant: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend. I always have to be a little bit careful about decisions that might end up coming to me, in case I have queered the pitch. I pay tribute to Councillor Race, who has spent a great deal of time on this matter. Many community groups up and down the land have tried to do precisely the same thing: bring a historical building back into community use. Obviously, we want to support that wherever possible, where it is sustainable in the long term.

Topical Questions

T1. [901521] **Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): My Department is firing on all cylinders. In the last few weeks, we have launched the national youth strategy; introduced the Football Governance Bill; appointed Baroness Shriti Videra to chair the Creative Industries Council; and launched two new creative clusters, in Birmingham and Liverpool. Also, yesterday I announced a levy to tackle harmful gambling.

Manuela Perteghella: Sports clubs in my constituency such as Shipston rugby club and Stratford sports club are doing fantastic work with young people, but for rural constituencies like Stratford-on-Avon, where sports play a vital role in youth engagement, the impact of extreme weather events means that many sports clubs consistently lose access to their facilities due to flooding throughout the year. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether the new youth strategy will consider the challenges posed by the climate on youth sports activities?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Lady will know that for young people in particular, the climate crisis is an enormous priority. As she knows, we have announced that we are co-producing and creating the national youth strategy with young people. I would be amazed if the impact of climate change on the things that matter most to them is not an essential part of that strategy.

T2. [901522] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Amanda Mountain is a phenomenal artist, painting the most outstanding designs and then placing them on stationery. However, Temu and SHEIN are ripping off her work, and many artists' work, in breach of intellectual property controls. They are undercutting her business, at serious cost to her. What steps will the Minister take to protect artists and their businesses, and ensure that online retailers are held to account?

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Copyright and the protection of artists' moral and economic rights is an absolutely essential part of ensuring that they are properly remunerated for their creativity. We will do everything in our power to make sure that the copyright regime remains, is strong, and is strongly enforced.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and a very happy birthday to the Clerk of the House.

As we have heard time and again today, and in the past few weeks, the Government's jobs tax could cost £2.8 billion to the Department's sectors—to the arts, sport, music, hospitality and tourism. Was the Secretary of State blindsided by the Budget, as the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs claims, or was she aware of that? Has she, as we have asked several times, done a sector-by-sector impact assessment? If not, why not? If so, will she publish it?

Lisa Nandy: I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that unlike the previous Government, we do actually like one another and work together across Government, so I had a number of discussions about the Budget with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in advance. She is very aware of the importance of creative industries, and of all our sectors, to the UK economy. That is why we have put them at the heart of our industrial strategy and our economic plan. We are working closely with the industries to make sure that they continue to thrive.

Stuart Andrew: So it sounds like the right hon. Lady did know, which is interesting, given that she cares about charities as much as I do. They face a £1.4 billion bill. When they needed help the most, we gave them £100 million. Her Government are now going to take 14 times that amount back from them. We heard yesterday that the Teenage Cancer Trust will have to find an extra £300,000, and Marie Curie reports having to find nearly £3 million. Where does the Secretary of State suggest that such organisations find the money to pay this charity tax, and who will fill the gaps if charities have to scale back on their work as a result of this Government's decisions?

Lisa Nandy: Under the last Government, charities faced a perfect storm. Not only did they receive very little support from the Government—in fact, they were silenced and gagged, and were told by one charities Minister that they should be “sticking to their knitting”, which, in my view, was deeply offensive—but they had to deal with the rising pressures of the cost of living crisis, and the mess that the right hon. Gentleman's party was making of running the country. Our Government are determined to take action on this, and we were elected on a pledge to do so. As I have told the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues previously, we are protecting our charities, as was announced in the Budget, and I will take no lectures from the Conservatives on how to run this country.

T3. [901523] **Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): In 2021, the UK exported £9.1 billion-worth of creative goods and £45.6 billion-worth of creative services, but we can and must do better. May I press the Secretary of State on what she is doing to support the creative industries' co-ordinated strategy for growth?

Lisa Nandy *rose*—

Chris Bryant *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Which one? Who wants it?

Lisa Nandy: You can see how eager we are, Mr Speaker. We are champing at the bit to support the creative industries. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) will know, we have announced

a series of measures over the last few months to support these industries, including tax credits for independent film and special effects. We are broadening the curriculum to ensure that there is a pathway enabling young people to work in the creative industries, and we have held an international investment summit, to which the industries were central. We will be announcing more in due course.

T4. [901524] Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Council-owned arts centres in my Oxfordshire constituency, such as Cornerstone in Didcot and the Beacon in Wantage, face rising energy and staffing costs. Given that most external funding sources do not support operating costs, will the Secretary of State press her Cabinet colleagues to back multi-year funding settlements for local government, to help art and culture to thrive?

Chris Bryant: Yes!

T5. [901525] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Since the announcement of my Sale of Tickets (Sporting and Cultural Events) Bill, which makes provision for transparency on ticket prices, I have been deluged with suggestions and support worldwide from people who do not want another Oasis-style ticket scam. Will Ministers meet me to discuss working together on this, given the chance that on 6 December, Opposition Members' shenanigans will sink the thing without trace?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an issue that is so important to fans throughout the country. The Government, including my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary, have acted decisively in announcing a consultation in order to consider how best to put fans back at the heart of ticketing, not whether to do it. We will say more about this imminently.

T7. [901527] Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): May I commend the report from the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, entitled "The future of news"? It highlights the threat from the unauthorised use of news content to train AI models. Will the Secretary of State consider, as a matter of urgency, strengthening the legislation in this area, and consider the introduction of a licensing scheme, as the report recommends?

Lisa Nandy: I know that this matter is of huge concern not just to the right hon. Gentleman but to the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), and to many other Members. As he knows, the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism has responsibilities in both this Department and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and has taken a keen interest in the issue. We have read the report and are considering its recommendations, and I will shortly be in a position to update the right hon. Gentleman on the action that the Government intend to take.

T6. [901526] Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Hazlerigg Victory Club is just one of many fantastic football clubs in my constituency that are run by local champions for the benefit of our community. They have said that pitches are too often of poor quality, and are eye-wateringly expensive to hire. How can we ensure that that the big Dan Burns and Grace Donnelly's of the future have access to appropriate facilities?

Lisa Nandy: Our Government are acutely aware that there are not enough facilities in communities in the UK to keep pace with demand. We know that these facilities are a visible symbol of whether we value our children and young people, whether we value those communities, and whether we stand with them. We are working with the Football Association and the Premier League to create new state-of-the-art facilities across the country to inspire the stars of the future, and I would be glad to discuss that further with my hon. Friend to ensure that it is of benefit to her.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): In Brighton Pavilion, we love our grassroots music venues, and we often need to make robust use of the "agent of change" principle to protect them when it comes to licensing and planning, but it is hard work to enforce that and ensure that it happens. Is the Minister having any discussions with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about putting the "agent of change" principle on a statutory footing?

Chris Bryant: Those meetings have already taken place and will continue to take place. The hon. Lady makes a very good point. I have visited Brighton Pavilion many times, so I know that other music venues there can, I hope, come online in the near future. I know that the Secretary of State met Ed Sheeran last week—she has told me about it about 25 times—to discuss precisely that issue.

T8. [901528] Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): A recent report by the Federation of Small Businesses Wales highlights the thriving creative businesses that exist in coastal areas like mine. What can the Secretary of State do to increase awareness of them and ensure that the next round of the creative clusters programme focuses on areas such as Clwyd North?

Lisa Nandy: I was very pleased to visit Blackpool recently to see the incredible work that Blackpool pleasure beach is doing. Coastal communities have an enormous role to play in our creative industries, and we are absolutely determined to do everything we can to support them. They have a very special place in the life of the nation; I think most people holidayed there as children. We hope that they continue to thrive, and I will be in a position to update the House soon.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): Mountbatten hospice, which serves my constituency and Hampshire more widely, receives 70% of its income through charitable donations. It has told me and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) that its viability is under risk because of the national insurance contributions policy that this Government have brought forward. Can the Secretary of State outline what pressure she will put on the Treasury to make sure that the policy changes? The charitable sector is in real danger because of this Government's decisions.

Lisa Nandy: My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary and I have already had a discussion about the situation facing hospices. He is acutely aware of it, and is working with the hospice movement in order to provide the best possible support.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Newton Aycliffe youth football club on being runner-up in FA club of the year in Durham, and will she join me in congratulating all the parents, volunteers and young people involved in grassroots sports?

Lisa Nandy: I thank my hon. Friend for being such an outstanding champion of his community, and I extend my warmest congratulations to Newton Aycliffe. He is right to highlight the invaluable contribution that families make to the success of young people. They often pitch in as volunteers and coaches, and take children and young people to matches come rain or shine—I imagine that in his neck of the woods, like mine, it is more often rain than shine. I am really glad that they have such a good champion.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The Minister with responsibility for sport graciously met me to discuss the future of London Irish in my Spelthorne constituency, and she undertook to ensure that the club would get the meeting with Sport England that it so desperately desired. Can the Minister give us an update?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I was grateful to the hon. Gentleman for coming to speak to me about this issue. I will speak to my officials and make sure that we approach Sport England very speedily.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I would like to highlight the richly deserved King's award for voluntary service that has been given to the 60 volunteers at Newby and Scalby library in Scarborough. The library's services are innovative, including a summer reading challenge for children, an IT buddy service and a garden growing produce. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Newby and Scalby library on its award, and on the enormous contribution that it makes to our community in Scarborough?

Lisa Nandy: I am very happy to congratulate Newby and Scalby library. I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the enormous work that libraries do in helping to promote children's literacy in this country, which could not be more important.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church-owned Hospices: Assisted Dying

1. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment the Church has made of the potential impact of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill on Church-owned hospices. [901476]

10. **Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): What assessment the Church has made of the potential impact of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill on Church-owned hospices. [901487]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): Churches nationwide provide chaplaincy and grief counselling services to hospices, patients and their families. Many modern hospices started off as Church-affiliated institutions thanks to the pioneering work of Dame Cicely Saunders. They are largely now affiliated to Hospice UK, which supports over 200 hospices across the UK, including the Royal Trinity hospice, near my constituency of Battersea. Only a third of adult hospices in the UK receive funding from the state. The rest rely on charitable support, and there is considerable concern that the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill may divert much-needed funds from frontline care.

Rachael Maskell: Hospices have charitable aims to provide palliative care at the end of life, but these could be compromised by the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which comes before the House tomorrow. What consultation and impact assessment of this measure has there been with hospices that have a faith foundation? I am hearing that some hospices need an exemption, or they might close.

Marsha De Cordova: I do not believe there has been consultation with any faith-connected organisations, and I do not believe that an impact assessment has been carried out. However, Hospice UK, the body to which most Church-associated hospices are affiliated, has surveyed providers, staff and practitioners, who have expressed concerns about the Bill's implementation. They are concerned about the following: who will qualify; the impact on those working in hospices, palliative care and end of life care; the ability of providers and staff to opt out; the practical operation of a conscience clause; the financial impact on the future funding of hospices; and the lack of public awareness of end of life care and the available choices.

Paulette Hamilton: Can my hon. Friend confirm whether Church-owned hospices will work with independent hospices and other organisations to mitigate the potential impact of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, and to issue a statement from across the sector?

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend for her question on this incredibly important issue. I refer her to my previous answers, but it is also worth highlighting that, in recent years, the General Synod of the Church of England has twice voted by large majorities against changing the law on assisted suicide. The Association for Palliative Medicine and Hospice UK, to which most chaplains and Church-owned hospices are affiliated, remain opposed to any change in the law. The sector is particularly concerned about the funding challenges such a change would bring, as was highlighted in a Select Committee report. The report showed that funding for palliative care services fell by almost 5% in countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, where legalised assisted dying is in place, compared with a 25% increase in countries where it has not been legalised.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Does the Church Commissioner agree that hospices are about comforting the dying and surrounding them with care? Is that not the very antithesis of the state involving itself in sanctioning and assisting suicide?

Marsha De Cordova: If we think back to the founder of hospice care, it was founded on the principles of faith and Jesus Christ. It is only right that those principles of care and compassion ring true in ensuring that hospice care is there for those who need it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The very ethos of Church-owned hospices is the sanctity of life, on which the Bible is very clear. Church-owned hospices will reflect that in what they do. Does the Church Commissioner share my concern about the potential conflict that could arise between Church-owned hospices and this House following the outcome of tomorrow's debate on the assisted dying Bill? Does she share my concern about the sanctity of life and agree with me about the importance of making sure that we keep people alive?

Marsha De Cordova: Hospices and palliative care play an important role in end of life care. I believe that we need to fund those services properly before we consider moving towards legislating for assisted dying.

Historic Places of Worship

2. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to preserve historic places of worship. [901478]

4. **Rosie Wrighting** (Kettering) (Lab): What progress the Church Commissioners have made on reducing the backlog of works to restore parish churches and cathedrals. [901480]

Marsha De Cordova: The national Church institutions have invested £11 million in the Buildings for Mission fund, which provides money for repairs, specialist advice and grants to parishes of up to £12,000 for small-scale urgent work. Buildings for Mission can also be used to pay for essential improvements to church missions and ministries, such disability access, toilets or even a community kitchen.

Bradley Thomas: My constituency is home to many historic churches that continue to be much loved by their communities. They include St John's church in Bromsgrove, which dates from 12th century but was predominantly constructed in the 14th and 15th centuries. The church has had to raise many hundreds of thousands of pounds for the upkeep and maintenance of its spire. Key to that is the listed places of worship grant scheme. What conversations have taken place between the Government and the Church regarding the preservation of that scheme?

Marsha De Cordova: St John's church in Bromsgrove is a perfect example because, having raised the funds, it is preparing to undertake urgent work to its spire, with an anticipated project cost of roughly £452,000, but it could reclaim around £90,000 through the listed places of worship grant. As the hon. Gentleman probably knows, the scheme has paid out £317 million since it was introduced in 2001 by the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and has assisted over 13,000 places. The scheme currently receives around 7,000 applications per annum and has a budget of £42 million. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has assessed the scheme on numerous occasions. It delivers the fairest possible system of making grants.

Rosie Wrighting: St Andrew's parish church and Holy Trinity church in my constituency are both listed buildings that provide vital community services. The former is saving for a heat pump and the latter for a new roof. They were hoping to use the listed places of worship grant scheme to undertake the work, but because the scheme is due to expire next year, their future is uncertain. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the many churches across the UK and Kettering for the work that they do to serve our communities? What plans are there for the future of the scheme?

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for the churches in her constituency. I am pleased to hear her mention that St Andrew's church is upgrading its heating system; hopefully, it will benefit from some funding from the listed places of worship grant scheme. As I am sure will be said again in this question session, the scheme makes a huge difference to churches. Many have to do a lot of fundraising in their communities, but being able to rely on the scheme helps to cover some of the costs.

Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme

3. **Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to mitigate the impact of the potential withdrawal of the listed places of worship grant scheme in March 2025. [901479]

6. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent discussions the Church has had with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on whether the listed places of worship grant scheme will continue after March 2025. [901482]

Marsha De Cordova: The listed places of worship grant scheme, which is clearly dominating questions today, enables VAT to be refunded for repairs to our oldest and most precious churches and religious buildings. Without access to the scheme, parishes will find it harder to fund essential repairs, and they will have to spend more time on fundraising and less time on the needs of their local communities. I understand that the Bishop of Bristol and the National Churches Trust have written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to ask for a meeting. I hope that my right hon. Friend will meet them in the near future, as time is of the essence.

Katie Lam: In rural areas like the Weald of Kent, our churches are vital public buildings, providing somewhere not just for the spiritual life of our villages and towns, but for their civic life. Given the impending withdrawal of the listed places of worship grant scheme, what is being done to support churches like St Mildred's in Tenterden? It plays a vital role in the town, especially now that the town hall is closed for refurbishment, and it relies on the scheme to make essential repairs. The hon. Lady has spoken about the importance of the scheme, but will it be extended?

Marsha De Cordova: As the hon. Lady will agree, I am not the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, so I cannot give her a decision on that. However, she rightly highlights the vital role that churches play as a cornerstone of all our communities, up and down the country, alongside their role of providing community

and spiritual leadership. Like her, I hope that the scheme will continue. I congratulate her and her colleagues on writing to the Secretary of State, and I hope they will get a response in the near future.

Blake Stephenson: On Bedfordshire Day, I want to put on record my appreciation for everyone who works so hard in our county to make it such a wonderful place. That includes constituents who are passionate about preserving St Botolph's church in Aspley Guise. They are working hard to raise tens of thousands of pounds for their tower restoration project and expect work to start early next year. However, they are concerned that without the listed places of worship grant scheme, works will become much more expensive and may not be able to proceed. Will the Church Commissioner meet me to discuss how we can continue to support historic churches such as St Botolph's?

Marsha De Cordova: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating all those who work in our communities and churches. I will be delighted to meet him to see what assistance can be provided for the parish. I understand that St Botolph's has a target of £175,000 for extensive repairs to the tower. It has already secured £141,000 in donations from the local community and is awaiting decisions on a number of grants. I congratulate the whole congregation and the community on their fundraising efforts to reach that huge figure. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point and shares a good example of why the scheme is so important.

People Housebound due to Disability: Church Support

5. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What steps the Church is taking to support people that are housebound due to a disability. [901481]

7. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps the Church is taking to support people that are housebound due to a disability. [901483]

Marsha De Cordova: I welcome the timely questions from my hon. Friends as we are in the middle of Disability History Month. The Church has started a project to support local parishes to adapt their buildings to make our churches more accessible. It includes standardising signage to make accessibility obvious, training for church leaders and staff, and a grant scheme for adaptations. The Church also continues to develop worship and educational resources, which are available nationally to people who are housebound and their carers.

Anna Dixon: In the report of the archbishops' commission on reimagining care, which I chaired, we recognise the important role of churches and faith communities in supporting older and disabled people. The report asked the Church of England to consider developing resources and capacity in local churches "to adopt an asset-based approach to engaging with disabled people and older people in their communities."

Can my hon. Friend update the House on what action the Church is taking to fulfil that recommendation?

Marsha De Cordova: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for chairing the archbishops' commission. Along with the pastoral visits made by clergy, resources are made

available nationally for disabled people or those who are housebound. They include Sunday services broadcast online on YouTube, each week from a different parish, which have thousands of unique viewers each week and for which British Sign Language interpretation is available. There is the DailyHope telephone line and the Everyday Faith app, with readings and reflections, which is used by 3 million individuals and has been downloaded over 14 million times. There is also the Daily Prayer app, with morning and evening prayer, which has reached over 2.75 million unique listeners since 2021.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Churches Together South Tyneside does amazing work through its Happy at Home hub, providing a range of services to the lonely and the isolated. Will my hon. Friend expand a little more on the Church's wider pastoral duties towards those in the greatest need?

Marsha De Cordova: Again, I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the wonderful work taking place in her constituency. Churches together groups do a fantastic job in tackling the scourge of isolation and loneliness. There are other projects that started recently to support parishes with the physical accessibility of their buildings, including church halls and other facilities. Without the LPW grant scheme, the adaptation of some of our most historic churches would be harder to deliver at pace.

Historic Church Preservation: Northumberland

8. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): What steps the Church is taking to ensure the preservation of historic churches in Northumberland. [901484]

Marsha De Cordova: The historic churches of Northumberland are among the oldest and most architecturally significant in our country. Any church can apply for support from the £11 million Buildings for Mission fund. The diocese of Newcastle is very grateful for the support of the Northumbria Historic Churches Trust and other local grant-making bodies. My hon. Friend may also want to encourage his parishes to approach some of these excellent charities.

Ian Lavery: St Mary's Church in Woodhorn in my constituency has not been in operation for worship since 1973. It is one of the oldest, most historic churches in Northumberland, if not the country. It is under the care of Northumberland county council now, but it is in a dilapidated state. Can my hon. Friend give me some advice on who I can contact within the Church to see whether it can support the church to ensure that it is part not just of the history of our wonderful county, but of its future?

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend rightly highlights that St Mary's church in his constituency is one of the oldest, and it is a charming example of wonderful architecture. I understand some of the challenges that he mentions, as the church has been closed for a long period of time. It would be wonderful to see churches such as that reopen—we would all like to see churches open as opposed to closed, as many of them are. As a grade I listed building on the National Heritage List for England, it is eligible for grants for repairs and renovations. I am happy to write to my hon. Friend with a list of grant-making bodies. I will ask Church House for further advice on who he can speak to, as well as working together to see whether we can get his church reopened.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): It is not just in Northumberland where there are many historic churches. The village of Ashby cum Fenby in my constituency has recently shown that the local community will come together to support their local church, but vital to that is leadership. With priests spread throughout so many different parishes, it becomes more and more difficult to provide that leadership. Can the hon. Lady give an assurance that the Church will do all it can to ensure that our smaller villages are not neglected, and that there are regular services and leadership by the ordained priest?

Mr Speaker: There is only a tenuous link there, so good luck with that.

Marsha De Cordova: I agree with you, Mr Speaker, but I congratulate the hon. Member on trying so diligently on that question. What I will say is that I will happily write to him with a response to that, if that is okay.

Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza

9. **James Asser** (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): What assessment the Church has made of the effectiveness of the Anglican Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza. [901486]

Marsha De Cordova: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for turning our attention to Gaza. Only 12 of Gaza's 36 hospitals are still in operation, offering mainly basic care. The Anglican-run Al-Ahli hospital has remained operational despite facing huge difficulties, thanks to

the dedication of its hard-working staff and the leadership of its director, Suhaila Tarazi. Last week, it was announced that the hospital is to receive £3.4 million of support from the UN Development Programme as well as the Palestinian American Medical Association, but this vital work cannot begin without an immediate ceasefire and a pathway to peace.

James Asser: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. Hon. Members will have noted the progress that has been made on a ceasefire in Lebanon, but, as she has just mentioned, without a ceasefire in Gaza the £3.4 million that has been allocated to the Al-Ahli hospital by the UN Development Programme will not be spent. Given the scale of the humanitarian crisis, the desperate need for medical aid and the onset of winter, that is likely to lead to further suffering and a greater number of deaths.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We all welcome the ceasefire arrangements between Israel and Lebanon, but we need a ceasefire in Gaza. The community in northern Gaza is reliant on the Anglican Al-Ahli hospital for much of its healthcare. The hospital is seeing more than 1,000 emergency patients a day, and has to use the library and historic church as wards, given that the rest of the hospital has been largely destroyed by the Israeli forces. A ceasefire is essential, but we also need humanitarian aid to get in, as well as vital medical supplies, fuel and other resources, so that the rebuilding of infrastructure can begin. We know that there are huge challenges in relation to access being given at checkpoints in Gaza.

Business of the House

10.35 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 2 December includes:

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

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

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

THURSDAY 5 DECEMBER—Debate on a motion on detained British nationals abroad, followed by a general debate on improving public transport. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 6 DECEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 9 December will include:

MONDAY 9 DECEMBER—Remaining stages of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill.

TUESDAY 10 DECEMBER—Committee of the whole House on the Finance Bill (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 11 DECEMBER—Committee of the whole House on the Finance Bill (day 2).

THURSDAY 12 DECEMBER—General debate on Lord Etherton's independent review into the treatment of LGBT veterans, followed by a debate on a motion on the performance of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 13 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

Jesse Norman: I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing a very happy Thanksgiving day to all our American friends and family, and a happy big birthday today to the Clerk: the Joe Root of the parliamentary estate. Huge thanks to him for his stylish and expert first century—half-century, I should say!

Mr Speaker, a man of your wide culture and extensive learning will doubtless be familiar with the film "Mad Max". I am no expert, but the image that it conjures up of a desolate, chaotic landscape with wreckage strewn everywhere is the perfect metaphor for the Government's recent Budget.

Let us take hospices, for example. In Herefordshire, we are blessed to have the extraordinary St Michael's hospice. St Michael's supports hundreds of in-patients a year with end of life care, and thousands more as out-patients and with visits in the community. It has a dedicated staff, assisted by some 800 volunteers. This is extraordinary. I shudder to think what it would cost the state to provide that kind and quality of care—certainly more than £20 million a year. What has this Labour Budget done to St Michael's hospice? The changes to national insurance alone will cost the hospice an extra £250,000 next year, but that is only part of it. At the same time, the Budget has directly and indirectly pushed

up the wage bill by a further £450,000. That is £700,000 annually in extra costs—a vast amount for an organisation that offers incredible care, and actually saves the NHS £20 million a year. Hospices in almost every constituency will be affected, and so are the interests of almost every colleague in this House.

This disastrous outcome was clearly never intended by the Treasury. It is another completely unnecessary blunder with potentially tragic consequences. As with GPs, pharmacies and mental health and social care charities, no compensation whatsoever has been offered for this tax raid. When will the Government publish a proper impact assessment and explain why none has been offered?

There is a direct link here to the issue of assisted dying. In the words of the Health Secretary, no less,

"I do not think that palliative care, end-of-life care in this country is in a condition yet where we are giving people the freedom to choose, without being coerced by the lack of support available."

That care is now being deliberately worsened by his own Chancellor. Personally, I feel strongly pulled in both directions by both sides, but one thing no one can be in any doubt about is that the Government have no business trying to rush this legislation through the House by proxy. The text of the Bill was published barely two weeks prior to our vote tomorrow. No impact assessment or legal issues analysis have been published. Far from public debate preceding legislation, legislation has preceded debate. That is completely the wrong way around.

We can be perfectly clear about this. All Members of Parliament were recently sent a dossier by the promoter of the Bill entitled, "Your questions answered". Unfortunately, far from answering key questions, the dossier fails even to touch on a whole series of important issues. Those include the Bill's impact on the medical profession and the relationship between medical staff and patients, its impact on the provision and regulation of the different drugs and drug cocktails required, the record to date and protocols to be used in case an initial attempt at assisted dying fails, and what the inevitable for-profit industry exploiting the new law will look like and how we should feel about it.

As the senior judge Sir James Munby highlighted, there are a host of questions about involving the judiciary in the process and the balance of probabilities test for coercion. Most profoundly of all, there is the question of what choice and dignity actually mean in different contexts. None of those matters is even mentioned in the dossier purporting to give the answers. Whatever one feels about the issue of assisted dying itself—as I say, I feel very pulled in both directions—this absence of debate, especially with so many new Members in the House, is a matter of the gravest public concern. As the House well knows, the Government themselves are all over the place on the issue.

In asking for an assessment of the Bill's likely impact on the NHS, the Health Secretary was doing exactly the right thing: preparing civil servants and clinicians for what could be a huge change and asking them to look at a crucial question that has not even been addressed, let alone properly answered. As for the Justice Secretary, she was attacked by none other than her own Labour predecessor Lord Falconer of Thoroton for imposing her views, but his lordship somehow missed that she was also making the argument that it was inappropriate

in principle for the state to get involved in what many term “assisted suicide”. That too is yet another issue that has barely been discussed. I ask the right hon. Lady whether she shares my view that it is a tragedy that colleagues are being asked to vote without full and proper consideration of the vital issues I have mentioned.

Lucy Powell: I join the right hon. Gentleman in congratulating the Clerk of the House on his very special birthday. As someone recently on the other side of that same special birthday—obviously, I know I do not look it—I welcome him to the half-century club, and I hope his party is as good as mine was. We will leave that conversation for another day.

This week, we marked White Ribbon Day. I am proud that this Government have pledged to halve violence against women and girls. I am also proud to have announced the debate on Lord Ehterton’s review of the treatment of LGBT veterans today. I am particularly pleased for my friend and Manchester resident Carl Austin-Behan, who, after years of decorated service in the RAF, was dismissed the day the RAF found out he was gay. He deserves recognition and much more, as do many others.

I know that the shadow Leader of the House is fairly new to opposition, like most of his colleagues, but I gently say to him that the idea of opposition is to oppose the Government, not his own record in government. Last week he attacked our plans to meet climate goals, yet when he was the Minister with responsibility for decarbonisation, he seemed to take a very different view, touring the studios to champion net zero. Here we are yet again: he is attacking our plans on national insurance contributions, but I checked the record and noticed that when his Government raised national insurance contributions—and not just on businesses but on workers—he was the Financial Secretary to the Treasury at the time, and said in defence of the measure, from this very Dispatch Box:

“It is a profoundly Conservative thing to do”—[*Official Report*, 8 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 326.]

He seems to have been for it then but is against it now. I am not sure what his position is—I am quite confused about it.

May I say to the hospice that he mentioned, and to the many hospices like it, that we have made a record investment in the NHS? The hospice sector was left on its knees by the right hon. Gentleman’s Government. As he knows, the Health Secretary will soon come to the House to explain how the record allocation of resources that he has received will be distributed, including to the hospice sector.

The right hon. Gentleman raises the assisted dying issues that we will discuss tomorrow. I must say, I think it is regrettable that he has chosen this opportunity to raise those matters in such an unnecessarily political fashion. This issue generates very emotive responses on both sides, and I hope that tomorrow’s debate will be conducted in a respectful, considerate, non-partisan and non-political manner. He asks about time and scrutiny, which I have mentioned before. As Leader of the House, I am very confident that the Bill will undergo sufficient scrutiny and will have sufficient time for consideration.

As I have said before from the Dispatch Box, the Government will of course implement the will of the House, whatever it may be. And, as I have also said before, should the House choose to give the Bill its Second

Reading, the Government will of course work with the Bill’s promoter to ensure that the Bill and the policy are workable, operable and implemented. That will mean working with the promoter on tidying up any measures where necessary. The Department of Health and Social Care is getting to work straightaway on what the Bill will mean in terms of implementation, assessment and the documentation that the right hon. Gentleman highlights. Should the House decline to give the Bill its Second Reading, then of course that work would not happen. As I have said before, after several weeks in Committee, the first opportunity for the Bill to return to the House will not be until the end of April—that is a considerable amount of time for the Government to do that work and consider the Bill further.

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): This year marked the 51st anniversary of the Summerland disaster on the Isle of Man, in which 50 people, including 11 children, lost their lives after a fire engulfed the Summerland leisure complex. My constituent Valerie Daniels and her younger sister were both impacted by that horrifying tragedy. Two young men from Warrington died in the fire. A report into the disaster was released in the following year and catalogued a series of failures—from the design of the building to the fire safety regulations—but to date no individuals or groups have been singled out for blame for what happened. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the issue, so that survivors and the families of those who lost their lives can finally get justice?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about that tragedy that affected my hon. Friend’s constituents. These are incredibly pertinent issues, ones that we should be debating in this House. She might want to raise them as part of the Grenfell inquiry debate that will take place next week; if not, I am sure there will be other opportunities for her to raise them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Yesterday marked Fuel Poverty Awareness Day, and just last week Ofgem unveiled another increase to the energy price cap for this winter—an increase of 1.2% in January 2025. This follows a 10% rise in October and multiple occasions on which the Government have failed to prioritise energy support for this winter. For example, the warm home discount scheme will not benefit households until 2025, and financial energy support for 1.2 million pensioners was removed under changes to the winter fuel payment. Recent polling from the Warm This Winter campaign has found that almost half of those polled—47%—are worried about how they will stay warm this winter. When can the House expect a statement from the Government on tackling fuel poverty this winter?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. I also noticed that her leader is out on the airwaves today with a separate campaign. I wish him well with that and hope that he is not another one-hit wonder when it comes to those issues.

We have inherited a really difficult situation when it comes to energy supplies and energy prices. As the hon. Lady knows, the energy price cap is set by Ofgem, and reflects its consideration of how energy was bought a few months ago. We are taking this issue incredibly

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seriously, which is why we have a plan to get to net zero by 2030. It is only by switching our energy supplies to renewables that we will be able to bring prices down for longer and have the energy security we so desperately need.

The hon. Lady asked about the situation this winter, particularly for pensioners and others. She will know that there is the £150 warm home discount, as well as cold weather payments that will get triggered. We have extended the £1 billion household support fund into this winter; that payment of either £150 or £200 is now being made in places such as Manchester to those on council tax support, so just above the pension credit threshold. We have also seen the biggest ever increase in the number of people applying for pension credit, so we are taking action. We will support people this winter, but more importantly, we will take the long-term action that we need to get our energy bills lower.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Liverpool women's hospital in my constituency offers the only specialist gynaecology and maternity services in the country, yet those services are under threat due to the NHS case for change. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to consider the necessity of retaining those specialist services at the current Crown Street site?

Lucy Powell: I am very familiar with the important services in my hon. Friend's Liverpool constituency that she describes. The hospital programme we inherited from the previous Government was a work of fiction, and we are determined to make sure that any commitments around local hospital services are both deliverable and fundable. That is what we are setting out to do, but I will certainly make sure that the Health Secretary has heard my hon. Friend's plea today, and that she gets a full reply about her local hospital.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to the Leader of the House's native city on Saturday night, and I thank her club for the hospitality of allowing us to score four goals with none in return. By the way, that makes a net aggregate of seven to nil across our visits to Manchester.

On behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for the Chamber. In addition, if we are granted Thursday 19 December, that will be a full day's debate on the Christmas recess Adjournment. In Westminster Hall next Tuesday we will debate the domestic production of critical minerals, and on Thursday we will debate pelvic mesh and the Cumberlege review, and then there will be a further debate on the financial sustainability of higher education. In addition, Mr Speaker, with your agreement, on Tuesday 10 December there will be a debate on rare autoimmune rheumatic disease.

Right now, the spiritual leader of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness—it runs Bhaktivedanta Manor in Elstree, the largest Hindu temple in this country—is under arrest in Bangladesh, and Hindus across Bangladesh are being subjected to death, with their houses and temples being burnt. There was today

an attempt in Bangladesh's High Court to rule that ISKCON should be banned from the country, which is a direct attack on Hindus. There is now a threat from India to take action, and we have a responsibility because we enabled Bangladesh to be free and independent. Whatever the change of Government has been in Bangladesh, it cannot be acceptable that religious minorities are persecuted in this way. So far we have had only a written statement from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Could the Leader of the House arrange an oral statement on the Floor of the House so that we can bring to the world's attention what is going on in Bangladesh?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Member for that, and I hope he had a good time in Manchester. I do not know whether he was there for the football, but I was at the Man City game on Saturday—the less said about that, the better. If he is looking for the allocation of time for future business, he should please not mention the Tottenham game to me ever again, thank you very much.

The hon. Member raises an important matter, which was also raised with me on a previous occasion by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We have such a debate today, albeit about Pakistan, and he is absolutely right to highlight these issues. We support freedom of religion or belief everywhere, and that includes in Bangladesh. I will certainly ask Foreign Office Ministers to look at coming forward with a statement about what is happening to Hindus in Bangladesh.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Amir Khan's beloved daughter Sanna was in her first year at university when she died in her sleep from sudden unexpected death in epilepsy, also known as SUDEP. Ten people every week die of SUDEP, many of them young people, yet with the right research and more public awareness, this number could be reduced. Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate on this under-reported issue, to give some comfort to families such as Mr Khan's?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises an important issue that has been brought to him by his constituents, and may I send my condolences to Sanna's family and friends? I did not realise quite how many people were affected by SUDEP, and I think this would make a really good Adjournment debate. The Government are committed to supporting people with epilepsy and their families, but I think he should consider a further debate to highlight these issues.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Members may recall that large parts of Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire were flooded after heavy rainfall in September, including Grendon in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House ask the Environment Secretary to make a statement to the House on when local authorities can expect to receive the extra funding to aid recovery that he promised when he visited my area, given that in the meantime, with Storm Bert, areas such as Bugbrooke in my constituency have been flooded severely again?

Lucy Powell: I know that the hon. Member has raised the issue of flooding in her constituency before. I was really pleased that the Environment Secretary came to

the House on Monday to give a flooding update to the whole House. If she was in attendance at that statement, she would have heard about the very challenging circumstances of our flood defences that we inherited from the previous Government. We are taking quick action to establish the flood resilience taskforce and to put in extra resources for additional flooding support, but I will ensure that he has heard what she has asked.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): My constituents John and Susan recently got in touch with me about their son Tom. Tom is an autistic man who lives in an assisted living facility and receives one-to-one support seven days a week. John and Susan told me that he will never be able to work. Tom's benefit is being moved from employment and support allowance to universal credit as part of the managed migration process. Despite his needs not changing, Tom will be £1,300 a year worse off. Will the Leader of the House allow time to discuss what assessment the Government have made to ensure that disabled people's quality of life is considered throughout the managed migration process?

Lucy Powell: That sounds like an important constituency case, and I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions gets my hon. Friend a full response on why her constituent is finding himself worse off under the managed migration process. If my hon. Friend were to apply for an Adjournment debate on that, I am sure she would get it.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I have constituents who live on the Somerset levels who are 90 years young. They have limited mobility and do not have mobile phones. Three months ago BT cut them off in the process of changing their landline to digital—something they did not request. They do not even have broadband, and they lost access to their emergency alarms. It took a month of pleading by their son and neighbours, and masses of calls. BT said that they were a priority as vulnerable people, but nearly a fortnight ago the landline went off again. Openreach says there is nothing wrong with their copper line, and everyone is trying to get them sorted out. All they want is a decent service on their landline and their old number back. May we have a debate about what BT's priority register actually means, and how it might improve its service for more vulnerable residents?

Lucy Powell: For the hon. Lady's 90-years-young constituents such issues are incredibly vital and important. We must ensure that the transition to digital is completely inclusive, and that those who rely on landline and analogue systems are also supported, especially when they live in a rural community such as the one she describes. I am sure BT will have heard her question, and if not I will ensure that it has and that it gets a proper service back to those constituents who need it.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): My original question was answered in the clear reply from the Leader of the House to the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), but do not worry—I brought a back-up.

Thanks to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, we have £50 million of investment for Eden Project Morecambe, and yesterday I spoke to Ministers about the importance

of renewing our high streets. May we have a debate on how we ensure that local businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises thrive in the context of large new attractions such as Eden Project Morecambe?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that refreshing question—normally as politicians we like to repeat questions that have come from others, so she has definitely got a gold star for that. As someone who spent many childhood holidays in Morecambe, I am very familiar with it, and I am delighted that the Eden Project, other programmes, and the money that the Government have brought in will revitalise that gorgeous seaside town. I am sure she will be able to raise such issues in forthcoming questions on many occasions.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Annandale Distillery in my constituency? Built in the 1830s, it was abandoned in 1919, but brought back to life with much love and passion by Professor David Thomson and Teresa Church in 2014. It now not only produces excellent whisky, but has brought a huge economic benefit for the Annan area and the wider south of Scotland.

Lucy Powell: I join the right hon. Gentleman in celebrating the 10th anniversary of Annandale Distillery. I was not actually invited, but I do get invited to many places—I am a bit of a lightweight and whisky is not my tippie, but I am sure that if I am in the area I will pay it a visit. This Government are pleased to support the Scotch whisky industry, which is why we are providing up to £5 million to reduce fees for Scotch whisky, along with other measures. I hope the distillery welcomes that.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Jo Pyke is a counsellor at a local cancer charity. She has stage 4 mucosal melanoma. Tumour-infiltrating lymphocyte therapy, which is only available in the USA, could save her life. Our community is fundraising to get Jo to America, but Jo and many others need that therapy here in the UK. Will the Leader of the House use her good offices to help Jo fight this awful disease?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of Jo's plight. It is awful to have such a terminal and difficult disease, knowing that although therapies are available, they are not yet available for my hon. Friend's constituent. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has heard her question, and I am sure the whole House will support Jo in her fundraising efforts to get to America.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Following my question in the Chamber last week, I received confirmation from the Transport Secretary that funding ringfenced for a new train station in Aldridge had been moved and put towards funding the Labour Mayor's pet bus nationalisation project. With that in mind, will the right hon. Lady set aside time for a debate on the restoring your railways programme and city region sustainable transport settlements to enable us to have greater insight and scrutiny of the Government's vision on transport? At the moment, they are clearly bypassing Aldridge.

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Lady, but I do not accept the premise of the question. The Government are doing more than ever to ensure that our railways are reliable and accessible. The Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill is, I think, to become an Act today. We are also bringing forward additional funding for buses, on which the Transport Secretary made a statement to the House, as well as bus reform. Part of our agenda for transport is about ensuring that local communities design those programmes for the needs of their local areas, and it is right that Mayors do that.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Last week, I attended the citizenship network launch at Parliament organised by Citizens UK and met people from my constituency who came to this country years ago to build a better life. They have lived and worked here, raised their families here and contributed to society and the economy, and having spent a considerable amount of money they still find themselves unable to become British citizens. Will the Leader of the House please make time for a debate in the House to discuss better routes to citizenship so that those who are legally entitled to be in this country can become British citizens like the rest of us?

Lucy Powell: Becoming a British citizen and routes to citizenship would make for an excellent Backbench Business debate. As I did not say it earlier, I will now encourage colleagues from across the House to really make use of the Backbench Business Committee and put in applications. That would be an excellent application.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I have already mentioned this morning that Bath is a city of music. Today marks the release of “Love is Enough”, a Christmas song written by six young carers and performed by Bath Philharmonia’s young carers choir and our Liberal Democrat leader—yes, he is branching out into music. More than anything, the release highlights the plight of young carers and the challenges they face, particularly when it comes to disruption to their education and social isolation. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Bath Philharmonia’s young carers choir and wish “Love is Enough” every success?

Lucy Powell: I wish the song “Love is Enough” from the young carers choir every success in its attempts to get in the charts. I have to say that I am not quite sure what is worse, or better: the leader of the Liberal Democrats in a wetsuit or in a Christmas jumper. I will leave that for the House to decide.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I very much welcome the Government’s recent introduction of respect orders, which are much needed. Indeed, in my constituency of Rossendale and Darwen, we have recently seen a big increase in antisocial behaviour, with a spike in places such as Rawtenstall bus station and Bacup town centre. Does my right hon. Friend agree that co-operation is key in such situations? On the one hand, it is vital that all incidents are properly reported to police, but, on the other hand, police should be proactively communicating with town centre businesses and residents, responding visibly to what they are experiencing and not just relying on arm’s length data. With that in mind, will she agree to a debate on effective town centre policing?

Lucy Powell: Yet again, my hon. Friend raises a matter that is really important to the constituents of Rossendale and Darwen. He is a regular attendee at these sessions, for which I give him great credit. He will know that just this week we announced new measures to bring in respect orders, which will see repeat perpetrators of antisocial behaviour subject to tough restrictions. That, together with our plans for an extra 13,000 neighbourhood police officers, will help tackle the scourge of antisocial behaviour in many of our town centres.

Mr Speaker: I call the ex-police and crime commissioner.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I echo my support for the issue raised hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh)—my sister had epilepsy and required lifesaving brain surgery when she was young, so I know the impact it has on families and individuals.

The Leader of the House will know that I previously asked her about the Typhoon assembly line at the Wharton site. Since then, I have asked questions of Defence Ministers in Ukraine statements; I have requested a meeting with the Secretary of State for Defence; I have met the unions; and I have submitted a written question to see whether the order for 24 Typhoon jets for the RAF is included in the Budget. It is not, and we have since heard rumours that the RAF may wish to have American-produced F-35s instead of British-produced Typhoon fighters.

I then submitted a further written question to ask what the plans are to support businesses such as BAE Systems to maintain the workforce that they need for the global combat air programme, and I have received an absolute word salad of an answer talking about partnership working and future procurement strategies. Can we have a statement from the Ministry of Defence on its plans for this important area for sovereign defence capabilities and for jobs in Fylde and across Lancashire?

Lucy Powell: It sounds like the hon. Gentleman has been incredibly diligent and innovative in all the different ways that he has tried to get a straight answer. I will look into the examples that he has given that have not been quite what he expected. He is in my region, and he is right that the Typhoon is an important part of the north-west defence industry. I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard his full question and I will ask that, at the very least, he gets a full reply, if not a statement to the House.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Tuesday was a proud day for Aylesbury, as Dylan Bachelet reached the final of the “Great British Bake Off”. A former student of Sir Henry Floyd grammar school, aged just 20, he rose to the occasion again and again throughout the series with his dough-lightful creations. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Dylan and thanking him for inspiring so many young people to achieve their dreams?

Lucy Powell: I love these questions. I congratulate Dylan, who I understand Paul Hollywood nicknamed the “flavour king”. In my office here in the House we have a weekly bake-off, so if Dylan wants to participate in or judge it he is welcome any time, but he must bring the cake.

Mr Speaker: Oven-ready questions are not acceptable.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Would the Leader of the House grant a general debate in Government time on attitudes to ceasefires? Following the welcome ceasefire in the middle east, Hezbollah supporters there tried to claim a victory yesterday, reminiscent of IRA supporters in west Belfast doing likewise. Could we have a debate to ensure that the general public know that peace is welcome, but not people trying to turn peace into a victory parade?

Lucy Powell: I think we can all welcome the ceasefire in Lebanon and hope that efforts for a ceasefire in Gaza are successful soon. At the end of the day, we all want a peaceful solution, and we need a political route to a two-state solution, so a ceasefire is only the beginning of a process. It is really important that trust is maintained and that we can work towards that long-term sustainable peace.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): If anyone wants evidence of what a Labour Government can do, they need look no further than the mineworkers' pension scheme. Within weeks of coming into office, the scheme got £1.5 billion returned, which has made a huge difference to nearly 1,000 of my constituents. Yet the British coal staff superannuation scheme, which is subject to similar arrangements, has not seen such a return of funds. Could we have a debate in Government time to get to the bottom of this crucial issue?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the Government's proudest achievements since the election is following through on their commitment to transfer the mineworkers' pension scheme and all the benefits that it has brought to constituents such as hers. I will raise the issue of the British coal staff superannuation scheme, and I will ensure that she gets a full reply.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Earlier this week, along with Members across the House, I attended the drop-in session organised by the Royal National Institute of Blind People. One of the stands at the session outlined the difficulties that blind and partially sighted people have in exercising their vote on election day. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on how blind, partially sighted and other disabled people are able to exercise their vote? Much work has been done in recent years, but there is still more to do.

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the accessibility of elections, especially for those with visual impairment or who are blind. It is a really important matter. I know that many of those in this House with disabilities find it difficult to vote here, as well—it gets raised with me often. We have Housing, Communities and Local Government questions coming up next week, and I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise this matter then.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): For many new Members, tomorrow is the first time we will debate a private Member's Bill. Together with other MPs, I have tabled a reasoned amendment that calls for an independent review and public consultation before the Bill should return to this House for further debate. Will my right hon. Friend explain to the House when a reasoned amendment, if

selected, will be considered, and reassure the House that this would not impact the time available for tomorrow's important debate?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, which she and I have discussed in private as well. As we discussed, amendments on Second Reading, while called reasoned amendments, do open with, "We decline to give this Bill a Second Reading"; should the amendment be selected, that would mean that the Second Reading debate and vote would not proceed. As I said to the shadow Leader of the House, I say gently to my hon. Friend that, as I have said a number of times now at this Dispatch Box, should the Bill pass Second Reading, the Government will work with the sponsoring Member, my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), to ensure that the Bill is operable and implementable, and that it will be implemented should the House wish it. That work will begin in earnest after Second Reading. Should the Bill not pass Second Reading, that work would not happen at all. I think hon. Members should consider that when considering the principles of the Bill, and not get too bogged down in some of the process.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): First, I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) for raising the issue of epilepsy. It is particularly important to me, as many years ago, I woke up in hospital, having had a seizure in my sleep. I know how life-changing it can be.

In October, as the Leader of the House may remember, I raised the issue of half a million British pensioners overseas whose pensions have been frozen. Many of those pensioners are originally from my constituency, and I have heard from further former residents since that occasion. The Leader of the House kindly offered to raise it with the relevant Government Departments. On behalf of the campaign, Anne Puckridge—a former war veteran who has been affected—is coming over next week for her 100th birthday, and had hoped to meet with leading politicians, including my own party leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), who will be meeting her next week. Unfortunately, I have heard this morning that the Prime Minister has declined to meet Anne, and is referring her to the Pensions Minister. I appreciate that, but Anne is very disappointed, as she feels that this issue really needs to be tackled by the Prime Minister, and she wanted him to hear what she had to say. I wonder if the Leader of the House could perhaps make further representations to the Prime Minister to see whether he will meet Anne.

Lucy Powell: I am sure the hon. Lady can appreciate that the Prime Minister's diary is not under my control, and is also incredibly busy. However, I will make sure that the Pensions Minister is able to meet her constituent when she comes over next week, and I will certainly ensure that the Prime Minister is aware of this matter, and that the Pensions Minister looks into it properly.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): The campaign for justice for the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—women has been truly commendable. I want to pay tribute to the tireless efforts of campaigners, including Angela Madden, as well as around 6,000 women in my constituency who have been affected. Following the Parliamentary and

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Health Service Ombudsman's findings of maladministration earlier this year, those women are still waiting for clarity on the Government's response, particularly regarding timely and fair compensation. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising the WASPI campaigners for their dedicated work, which has been amazing, and support my request to the Department for Work and Pension for an update on the progress being made to address the ombudsman's findings?

Lucy Powell: I certainly will share my hon. Friend's congratulations to the WASPI women, who have shown themselves to be some of the most formidable campaigners this country has seen for a very long time, and to Angela Madden, his constituent. As he knows, the ombudsman's report was published in March. It is a very serious, thorough and considered report that requires proper consideration from the Government. That work is being undertaken as we speak. I will ensure that Parliament is the first to know of the Government's response.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, you may know that I have long campaigned for the interests of the British nuclear test veterans, young men who, long before our lives, devoted part of their young life to witnessing the first nuclear test, following which their blood and urine was tested, presumably to see the effects that radiation had on them. Those records have been declassified, yet are not clearly available to remaining veterans and not available at all to their loved ones. May we have a statement on the matter from the Secretary of State for Defence, who, I understand, is not unsympathetic? The Prime Minister, when he was Leader of the Opposition, promised those veterans accountability and justice. They deserve nothing less.

Lucy Powell: The plight of the nuclear test veterans is one that gathers wide support across the House. In fact, it was raised just last week with the Prime Minister, in his statement on the G20, by my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey). He reiterated his personal commitment, and that of the Secretary of State for Defence, to working with the families and the veterans themselves to look at issues around records and other matters, such as medals. I will ensure that the House is informed of any progress in this area.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Cumbernauld airport in my constituency has been in the application process for vital instrument approach procedure for over 10 years. It has been subject to many delays by the Civil Aviation Authority and has been delayed yet again. This ongoing delay to the approval of the global navigation satellite system is putting future commercial operations at the airport at risk. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of local airfields to the delivery of public services?

Lucy Powell: Local aviation and local airfields are very important to local economies and the infrastructure of this country. I am sorry to hear of the long delay over many years, as my hon. Friend describes, to her local airfield. I will ensure that the Transport Secretary has heard her question today and that she gets a full reply about Cumbernauld airport.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House again for this opportunity to raise an issue of urgent concern. Earlier this week, on Tuesday past, I had the privilege of meeting Pastor Youssef Ourahmane, who shared troubling cases in Algeria. Pastor Youssef has been convicted of so-called "illegal worship" for leading his church. He faces a prison sentence and heavy fines, despite a lack of evidence of any wrongdoing. His case is one of approximately 50 spurious cases against Christians in Algeria in recent years, amid a systematic campaign of forced church closures. Will the Leader of the House urge her Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office colleagues to make a statement on what steps the UK Government can take, in collaboration with international partners, to advocate for the reopening of all evangelical churches in Algeria and to support religious freedom globally, including raising this issue with Algerian authorities at the very earliest opportunity?

Lucy Powell: Yet again, the hon. Gentleman has raised a serious issue relating to religious freedom. We regularly monitor the situation in Algeria, and we are aware that some groups have found it difficult to obtain the permissions that they need in order to operate. We will continue to raise these matters with the Algerian authorities. I note that the hon. Gentleman has been successful in obtaining a Backbench Business debate this afternoon on freedom of religion in Pakistan; I am sure he will continue to proffer considerable numbers of applications to the Backbench Business Committee, and this too might be a good topic for a debate.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Huge congratulations are due to the volunteers and voluntary groups who received the prestigious King's Award earlier this month, including six in Northumberland and one in my constituency: the Empire school of boxing, led by the phenomenal Les Welsh. May we have a debate in Government time to allow other Members to express their gratitude to the volunteers and voluntary groups in their areas? After all, they are the cornerstone of all our constituencies.

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the winners of the King's Award. I know from recipients in my own constituency how much it means to people to receive such a prestigious award from the King, and the boxing school in my hon. Friend's constituency sounds like a worthy winner.

The contribution of volunteers to our communities is often raised in business questions, so I think that if Members came together for a debate—and I see that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), is present—it would be very well attended.

Michelle Scrogg (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House will agree that patients, public and staff should be properly consulted when significant changes are being made to local NHS services, and that the NHS makes better decisions when it listens properly to the views of patients and the public, but unfortunately that has not been the case in my constituency recently. Significant changes are being proposed at Furness general hospital with no consultation at all. May we please have a debate to consider the NHS's duty to consult and the importance of listening to the views of local people when it is making decisions?

Lucy Powell: This matter is important to my hon. Friend's constituents and to many others. As she says, NHS England should be paying careful attention to the needs of local communities and listening to local community voices when considering reorganisations or changes in services in any area. My hon. Friend's is the second question of this kind that I have been asked today, and I am sure that were she to apply for a debate, it would be very well attended.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Three women a week commit suicide because of male violence against women, two women a week are killed by their current or former partners, and nearly four in 10 girls attending mixed schools have experienced some form of sexual harassment. In the year to March, there were 11,000 complaints about violence against women and girls on public transport. White Ribbon Day, which we marked earlier in the week, sends the clear message that dealing with this starts with men and the education of men. Given that it is clearly a cross-Government issue, may we have a debate in Government time on cross-Government solutions?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue in the week of White Ribbon Day. This Government are absolutely committed to the challenging and ambitious target of halving violence against women and girls over the coming years, with a cross-Government taskforce already looking into how we can deliver on that mission. It includes education, as my hon. Friend mentioned, because, as he rightly pointed out, the campaign starts with men. We will shortly introduce, in the Policing and Crime Bill, some of the measures that we have specified, such as a new criminal offence of spiking. I look forward to debating them with my hon. Friend.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): Members from across the House value and appreciate the vital work done by everyone working for the Ministry of Defence—not only our brave armed forces, but the Ministry's many dedicated civilian staff. However, the Ministry's permanent secretary indicated, without having consulted trade unions, that there is a plan to shed 10% of the workforce—that is 5,000 jobs—by the end of the Parliament. Will the Leader of the House please grant a debate in Government time on the importance of civilian staff in the MOD, and ask the Defence Secretary to meet the Public and Commercial Services Union on this important matter?

Lucy Powell: I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Defence has heard my hon. Friend's question. He made a statement to the House last week, or the week before—it was certainly very recently—about changes that we are making as part of our ongoing work on the strategic defence review. To be clear, the defence budget has been increased in this Labour Government's Budget, but we need to make sure that the resources are deployed on meeting the needs of modern warfare. That is why the strategic defence review is so important.

Satvir Kaur (Southampton Test) (Lab): Local newspapers such as the *Southern Daily Echo* play a crucial role in informing and championing our local communities. They also play an important role in holding to account businesses, public bodies and, of course, politicians. In places such as Southampton, however, journalists are

increasingly being subject to legal threats and intimidation, particularly through strategic lawsuits against public participation, which are often used by big business. Does the Leader of the House agree that a free press is a fundamental pillar of our democracy, and does she support my calls for more to be done to support our local media against intimidation and techniques such as SLAPPs?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that journalism and a free press are a fundamental pillar of our democracy, and that local journalism is an absolutely vital and trusted source of fact and truth in an age of misinformation and disinformation. Indeed, we saw the local press play a very important role over the summer during the riots, given the misinformation that was spreading at the time. She is absolutely right to raise the issue of SLAPPs and the consequences that they can have for local newspapers, such as those in her constituency. I think we had a Backbench Business debate on this issue recently, but I am sure that it will crop up time and again.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Visiting Hepworth junior and infant school, and Salendine Nook high school, during Parliament Week was inspiring. The students' enthusiasm for learning about democracy was evident in their thoughtful questions and active participation. It is clear that early engagement is crucial for fostering informed future citizens. Can we have a debate in Government time about children's involvement in the democratic process?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to raise Parliament Week and the vital role that it plays in educating our young people about the important institutions of our democracy, including Parliament. I do not know how many events he had in his constituency, but I had 37 in mine. I believe that, yet again, Mr Speaker was top of the list for number of events in his constituency. My hon. Friend will know that this Government have instigated an independent curriculum and assessment review. Citizenship education, and ensuring an education for life, are absolutely vital if we are to uphold our democratic institutions in the future.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyke-Smith) for mentioning "Bake Off". We need to give a shout-out to the excellent Georgie from Wales, who won the competition and whose star is surely on the rise.

Across my constituency of Monmouthshire, there are homes and villages without any broadband connection, including Whitebrook, which literally has no connection whatsoever. In some communities, such as the village of Llangwm, the providers are totally inadequate. I know how frustrating it can be to have no internet. I have been on a Zoom call when my children were playing on their Xbox, and we had a bit of a row because I had to ask them to get off. In an emergency or life-threatening situation, it is extremely difficult if people cannot make a phone call or get online. I recognise the excellent work that the Government are undertaking to expand access to broadband across Britain through Project Gigabit, but I worry for small rural communities that have yet to be reached. Will the Leader of the House find Government time for a debate on rural broadband?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to say that broadband is now a vital utility, as important as electricity, water and all the other things on which people rely, especially in rural communities like hers. I empathise with her on the battle for broadband bandwidth at home. I am afraid that this Government inherited quite a slow roll-out of full-fibre gigabit broadband. We need to accelerate the programme to make sure that rural communities like hers have the broadband access that they need, so that they can download a few more recipes, and maybe win the bake-off competition that the House is looking forward to.

Mr Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): My constituent Nicola Holdsworth sadly lost her mum a few years ago and struggled with grief. She was told that it would take eight months to see a grief counsellor, so she set up the Morley Grief Group. The organisation has gone from strength to strength in helping people in our community, and it now has more than 800 members. Local GPs refer people to it, and it recently won the community award at the BBC Radio Leeds “Make a Difference” awards. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Nicola and the Morley Grief Group, and will she allow Government time for a debate on the need for more grief counsellors—and, of course, the need to support volunteer organisations like Nicola’s?

Lucy Powell: I thank Nicola for setting up the Morley Grief Group at what must have been a very difficult time. She turned her grief into an award-winning voluntary group that supports others. My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of grief counselling. Provision of these services is too slow, which is why many people rely on voluntary and charity organisations. I am sure that this would make a very good topic for a debate.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): In some parts of my constituency, particularly Cowdenbeath, there has been a reported rise in violent and antisocial behaviour. Such behaviour is unacceptable and causes fear, injury and damage to property. I have written to the Scottish Government urging action. They must use some of the additional £3.4 billion from the Budget for next year to properly fund our local police. Does the Leader of the House agree that the SNP should also learn from Labour’s new respect orders, which will clamp down on antisocial behaviour and the menace of off-road bikes in England? Will she grant a debate in Government time to discuss these issues?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right to say that the Scottish Government have huge additional funds as a result of last month’s Budget. They have the powers, so they have no excuse not to tackle issues faced by her constituents in Cowdenbeath. The Scottish Government can certainly learn lessons from this Government, particularly on respect orders and from the work that we are doing to tackle antisocial behaviour.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Having sent birthday wishes to the Clerk of the House, will the Leader of the House extend her congratulations to the 1st Neilston boys brigade on its 70th birthday? It is a vibrant boys brigade at the heart of village life, giving great experiences to young people in my constituency.

Will she make Government time available to discuss the role that uniformed youth organisations play in our constituencies? She will know that many of these groups are struggling with heating bills, and have difficulty meeting the demand from parents, who want their children to have the experiences that these organisations offer. Finally, if the Leader of the House has any birthday wishes left in her reserves, will she extend them to the 121st Glasgow scout group in Clarkston and the 3rd Barrhead scout group on their centenaries?

Lucy Powell: If the House will indulge me, I congratulate the 1st Neilston boys brigade on its 70th birthday, and the 121st Glasgow scout group and the 3rd Barrhead scout group on their 100th birthdays.

My hon. Friend highlights the vital role that uniformed youth organisations play in giving our young people purpose, experience, teamwork and volunteering opportunities; we all see that in our constituencies. We see their contribution every year on Remembrance Sunday, as I did recently in my constituency. I pay tribute to these groups for bringing our communities together.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I agree with the comments about uniformed associations, which are absolutely true. One of the defining features of recent years has been the cost of living crisis, which has had soaring energy bills at its heart. While the energy price cap has offered people some protection, a loophole means that many heat network users still face significant price hikes. This issue was featured on the BBC’s “Rip Off Britain” last week. Hannah and Lucie in my Edinburgh South West office have done excellent work supporting residents who have this problem in Harvesters Way, Wester Hailes and the Green in Longstone. The Government are committed to addressing the inequality those residents face in January 2026. That is a positive step, but many residents feel that progress is still too slow. If we have to wait a year, I am keen that we make best use of that time. Will the Leader of the House commit to a debate in Government time to help inform the development of the planned changes ahead of 2026?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that Ofgem will be appointed the heat network regulator. Ofgem’s powers will include an ability to investigate unfair pricing and ensure that a consumer’s heat supply is maintained if their supplier goes out of business. I am sure that he will want to take the opportunity to raise this important issue at the next energy questions, in a couple of weeks’ time.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) in congratulating all the voluntary groups receiving the King’s award for voluntary service during the King’s birthday celebrations this year. I want to pick out Halesowen in Bloom, a fantastic community organisation in my constituency that has been making the town beautiful for a number of years. It has planted roses in the town centre and made places from canal boats to churchyards look really amazing. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time that allows us to recognise the importance of horticulture to the wellbeing of our communities, and to congratulate organisations like Halesowen in Bloom, which do such a brilliant job?

Lucy Powell: Halesowen in Bloom sounds like another great community group that plays a vital role in my hon. Friend's area by bringing together people with green fingers, giving people purpose—not just the volunteers—and creating a lovely, floral community. I am sure that if he banded together with colleagues, he could get a Backbench Business debate, in which he could put on record our thanks to all volunteers like those in Halesowen in Bloom.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I have been working tirelessly with industry leaders and transport Ministers to secure the future of the fantastic Hitachi train factory in Newton Aycliffe, which is home to hundreds of high-tech manufacturing jobs, but was left in the lurch by the dither and delay of the previous Tory Government. Can I secure a debate in Government time on how we build a sustainable future for our proud rail manufacturing industry, and rescue it from the mess it was left in by the Conservatives?

Lucy Powell: I could not have said that better myself. The Hitachi train factory and others were left in the lurch by the previous Government. This Government are committed to supporting rail manufacturing in the UK. We are developing a long-term strategy, and working on our industry strategy, to ensure that this manufacturing can continue.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): A number of my constituents living on St John's Road in Chew Moor have contacted me recently about flooding, potentially caused by ongoing work by Network Rail and its contractor on the nearby railway line. I welcome spades in the ground to improve infrastructure across the north—infrastructure that has been neglected for far too long—but will the Leader of the House find Government time for a debate on how we ensure that developers have to work with local communities to minimise disruption to local people's lives?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am pleased that the rail route between Wigan and Bolton, which I know well, is being upgraded and electrified. He is right to say that where works are taking place, contractors have to work with local communities, and resolutions should be reached swiftly. I will ensure that the Transport Secretary has heard his question and gives him a swift reply.

Madam Deputy Speaker, may I clarify something I said earlier in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon)? She asked me about a reasoned amendment in tomorrow's debate; I said that it would have the effect that I described "if selected", but I meant to say "if passed".

UK Leadership on Sudan

11.45 am

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement about the UK's focus on Sudan during the UK's presidency of the UN Security Council this month and about the humanitarian emergency in Sudan.

Eighteen months into this devastating conflict, the war that began as a power struggle between the Sudanese armed forces and the Rapid Support Forces has become one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes. Nearly 25 million people—half of Sudan's population—are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Sudan's neighbours are also struggling under the strain of hundreds of thousands of refugees. The UK is using every lever, including through our role on the UN Security Council, to convene the international community to alleviate suffering, pursue peace and hold those responsible for atrocities to account.

On 12 November, Lord Collins chaired an open meeting of the Security Council, calling for urgent measures to protect civilians. On Monday last week, the Foreign Secretary brought together partners in New York to agree on collective action to pressure the warring parties, remove barriers to humanitarian operations and ensure aid reaches those in desperate need. In partnership with Sierra Leone, the UK introduced a Security Council resolution that called for protection of civilians and full, unimpeded aid access. I am appalled that one country chose to block that vital resolution.

Russia's veto is a disgrace, but let me be clear: Russia's actions will not deter us. We will continue to use our role as UN Security Council penholder on Sudan to drive forward action to safeguard civilians and deliver lifesaving aid. The decision to keep the Adre border crossing open for three more months is welcome, but that must become permanent and it must be free of deliberate bureaucratic obstacles imposed by the SAF that are costing lives. The RSF must also heed international humanitarian law; indeed, all warring parties have no excuse but to do so.

Without urgent support, even more Sudanese people will die, not only from bombs and bullets, but from starvation, preventable illness and exposure. I met some of those who had fled from Sudan to South Sudan. What they told me about wading through floodwater for hours, children dying from diarrhoea in the rain and their desperation to find food will never leave me. That is why the UK is doubling its aid this year, providing an additional £113 million to support people in Sudan and those who have fled to neighbouring countries that are so generously hosting large numbers of displaced people. The funding will allow our partners to deliver food, water, shelter and healthcare where it is needed most. As part of that uplift, we are also providing £10 million to Education Cannot Wait, giving 200,000 vulnerable children in refugee and host communities a safe space to learn and support for their mental health as they endure this traumatic crisis.

The people of Sudan face a humanitarian emergency of horrifying proportions. Under our presidency of the Security Council, the UK is rallying international action. We are steadfast in our commitment to the Sudanese people to secure humanitarian access, pursue peace and

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deliver hope for a more stable and prosperous future. This Government will continue to do everything in our power, with our partners, to bring this devastating conflict to an end. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

11.49 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement.

I welcome this statement not least because it provides an opportunity to highlight what is a humanitarian catastrophe. Yesterday, I was fortunate to meet representatives of the World Food Programme. From speaking to them and to others in the sector, I know how crucial it is that we continue to raise the importance of this issue and to keep the situation in our minds.

This war, which is driven by a man-made power struggle, has already resulted in the world's worst hunger and displacement crisis. It is, as I said earlier, a humanitarian catastrophe. Any further deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Sudan will have dire consequences. There are already 25 million people—half the entire population of Sudan—in urgent need of assistance. Eleven million people have had to flee from their homes, and 7 million need urgent food assistance. There are reports of systematic human rights abuses, including sexual violence, torture and mass civilian casualties. What has been happening in Darfur is also incredibly disturbing.

The situation in Sudan is unconscionable. Red lines are being crossed in the prosecution of this conflict that countries such as the UK—the penholder on Sudan at the UN Security Council—cannot allow to stand. It is also firmly in the region's interest for the conflict to come to an end and the humanitarian crisis to be addressed. Further destabilisation in the region caused by this conflict must be avoided. Sadly, we are all well aware of the knock-on effect in the surrounding countries. The UK has already invested a great deal of diplomatic energy into trying to bring about a cessation of hostilities and to press for unhindered, safe humanitarian access to Sudan.

The previous Government also invested heavily in aid to Sudan to alleviate the suffering. I would like to take a second to pay tribute to my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who is not in his place today, for the leadership that he has shown in response to this crisis and for his commitment in government to the people of Sudan.

We understand that the new Government have announced further aid measures, which of course is welcome, but I would be grateful if the Minister could provide further details to the House on which trusted organisations she has partnered with for her emergency aid package. We note that she has said that the package will provide food, water, shelter and healthcare where it is most needed, but can she provide specific examples of the aid items she hopes it will deliver and at which areas of Sudan she envisages it being targeted?

The Minister will no doubt be fully seized of the problem of getting aid into Sudan in the first place, let alone the challenges of distribution. Can she assure the

House that everything possible is being done to ensure that this aid can be genuinely effectively distributed? What recent conversations has she had with partners to encourage other countries to provide support to the humanitarian response?

Turning to the warring parties, our position remains that there must be an immediate cessation of hostilities. We understand that the resolution the Government introduced at the UN Security Council with Sierra Leone was thwarted by Russia. However, we would welcome a further update on other avenues the Government are actively pursuing, including backing the Jeddah process. The Government and our allies need to be working around the clock to press the warring parties into a ceasefire and to exert whatever pressure they can to see the lifting of arbitrary obstacles to humanitarian aid delivery.

In conclusion, I am sure the Minister will agree that the status quo in Sudan is not sustainable and that it must change. The UK has a leadership role here. We must use it to its fullest extent.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her remarks and her clear concern about the situation. I hope that a loud and clear message has been sent that there is cross-party concern about what is going on. I was very encouraged by how she described the situation and the need for the UK leadership that we are determined to deliver.

I was very encouraged to hear that the right hon. Lady has met representatives of the World Food Programme to discuss these matters. I, too, met a number of its operatives when I was in South Sudan. They are working incredibly hard to get in the support that is needed. In fact, there was some coverage of this on the BBC this morning—very welcome coverage, given that there has not been a huge amount of media coverage of the situation—including interviews with some of the operatives.

The right hon. Lady talked about the growing body of evidence of serious atrocities and violations of human rights. The UK Government are extremely concerned about that. We were determined to ensure that we had a renewal of the mandate for the fact-finding mission. We were pleased that it was renewed, this time with increased support from African nations. It is important to get a picture of what is really happening, so that there is no impunity.

The right hon. Lady rightly referred to the regional impact. We have seen the impact on South Sudan, Chad and a number of other countries, including countries that were already in difficult situations in terms of food security. She talked about the work of the previous Government, for which I am grateful. As I said, this is a cross-party issue. We are determined to intensify that work, given the deteriorating situation, and to work with other partners to push this forward. We have seen leadership right across the UK on this issue, including from Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Edinburgh on her visit to Chad, which followed that of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell).

The right hon. Lady asked about the package for delivery of aid. We are working with UN agencies and Education Cannot Wait on targeted support for vulnerable children. She mentioned the need for specific forms of support. We have ensured that our aid, including water

and sanitation support, is being delivered in a way that recognises the prevalence of violence against women and girls. Disturbingly, many people in internally displaced persons camps, and in refugee situations, have been subject to that violence, so we have ensured that our support is tailored and effective.

The right hon. Lady asked about other countries we are seeking to work with. We have taken the matter up repeatedly with the African Union and worked to ensure that there is that engagement. The African Union is keen to work with us on this issue, and I have raised it in a number of bilateral engagements, as have many other UK Ministers.

The right hon. Lady talked about the Jeddah process. It has been extremely frustrating that we have not seen all parties to the conflict engaging in those attempts to broker peace. We have been clear that they must participate. Their failure to engage with a number of processes is effectively leading to a humanitarian emergency in Sudan. There has been forum shopping, and that must end.

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

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Yesterday, in the Committee's session on Sudan, Dr Eva Khair, director of the Sudan Transnational Consortium, made it clear that we should regard this not as a civil war but as a war on civilians, and she is right. Since April 2023, when the war started, 61,000 people have been killed, with 11 million people internally displaced—nearly a quarter of the population. Fourteen regions are at risk of famine, and the UN's fund is only 57% funded. I welcome the personal involvement of both the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Development, but I seek assurances that that commitment will continue, because we are the penholder and a former colonial administrator, which means that we have special duties when it comes to Sudan. Will the Minister give assurances about how she is convening the international community to stop the war and, importantly, to involve civil society in the debates?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those important issues and for the work of the Select Committee on these matters, including its recent hearing. She is right that the conflict has had a dreadful impact on civilians. We are determined to use every multilateral and bilateral mechanism and relationship that we have to seek the end to the conflict that is so desperately needed, an end to the restrictions on humanitarian aid, and an end to the atrocities being perpetrated against civilians. She talked about the UN mechanisms. We are determined to keep exercising leadership. As I said, Russia's veto will not hold us back from continuing to push hard to advance these issues. We are determined to make a change on them.

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

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement and for the UK's work at the UN Security Council this past month. The Liberal Democrats welcome efforts to secure a ceasefire in Sudan and join Members from all sides of the House in condemning Russia's attempts to stop one.

The UK should not accept that the consequences of the Russia veto are that we cannot act to protect civilians, so what actions are the Government taking? Given that we can act and we do not have to wait, will they consider a UK Sudan-wide no-fly zone, building on the one in place in Darfur? Does the Minister agree that we should not bestow legitimacy on warring groups? I understand that the RSF is days away from claiming that it is forming a Government. If it does, does she agree that it will be civilians who lose out?

We will shortly pass the rotating presidency on to the US. Will the Minister update the House on what conversations she and her colleagues have had with UN counterparts to ensure that this brutal conflict, which sadly has been ignored, is brought to an end so that civilians are protected? With the inauguration of President Trump just weeks away, what representations have we made against the division of Sudan? Will the Minister commit to doing all she can to raise the profile in the UK of that conflict?

When my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), raised the conflict at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister agreed that

"it is an important issue"

and that he did

"not think we discuss it enough in this House"—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 806.]

Will the Minister join the Liberal Democrats in calling on the Disasters Emergency Committee to start an appeal, just as it did recently for the middle east? The committee previously communicated to our spokesperson in the other place, Lord Purvis of Tweed, that this conflict is not deemed high-profile enough to start one.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the issues he raised. He will no doubt be aware that there is a UK arms embargo for all of Sudan, and there is also a UN arms embargo on Darfur. I hope that that helps fill out some of the multilateral and bilateral work that the UK has been engaged in on embargoes.

On the engagement of the armed groups—the warring parties—particularly in peace talks, I have discussed that matter at length with a number of members of civil society. Relating that to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), many of those civilian groups are very concerned that they need to be involved in the peace talks. I met a number of their representatives in Addis Ababa, particularly of the civil society grouping Tagadam, which we are supporting because that civilian voice is incredibly important. More generally, as I mentioned before, we also believe that all warring parties must prioritise taking part in the talks that are so necessary to end this conflict.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we have had discussions around the US's role. I discussed that directly with the US lead on humanitarian issues. In fact, we were involved in joint sessions at the UN General Assembly on the matter. Finally, he mentioned the key issue of the profile of the emergency in Sudan—the largest number of displaced people anywhere in the world. Sudan was one of the first issues I wanted to be briefed on and active on when I came into my role. It was the reason I visited South Sudan over the summer. I know many Members and, indeed, many of our constituents are deeply concerned about the situation.

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I am pleased that we are seeing more media coverage. Of course, when it comes to a Disasters Emergency Committee appeal, that is a decision for the broadcasters to take, but I hope the renewed interest we are seeing in the media will lead to its gaining a higher profile.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, I have raised the terrible conflict in Sudan on a number of occasions. Too often, it has felt like a forgotten conflict, despite the scale of suffering there, so I welcome the Minister's leadership on that issue. She talked about the regional impact. What steps has she taken to support South Sudan, Chad and Egypt? How is she engaging with grassroots groups in South Sudan so that their voices are heard as we try to move towards a solution to that terrible conflict?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those issues, and I thank her and many other Members gathered here for their leadership on them. She mentioned the situation in neighbouring countries. I am aware that in Chad, South Sudan and Egypt there are large numbers of refugees from Sudan. We have discussed those matters with representatives from each of those countries. We are seeing quite different profiles in the relative economic circumstances of refugees in those countries and in how they are being supported. I know that in Egypt there is a determination to support people, as indeed there is in South Sudan and in Chad.

On conversations with civil society organisations in South Sudan, I have had a number of discussions—particularly with women's rights organisations there—about the conflict, and I have spoken directly with some of those who have fled Sudan. I have spoken with representatives from Chad about it as well. We must be conscious that, as I mentioned, many of those countries already face significant challenges in food insecurity, economic development and the impact of the climate crisis, and now they are dealing with this major influx of refugees. We must pay tribute to them for enabling those refugees to seek safety and security within their borders.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We come now to a member of the International Development Committee.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I very much welcome the statement and the increased focus on Sudan. Evidence given to the International Development Committee is clear that those in Sudan feel that the conflict has been forgotten and ignored, partly because it has received so little international media attention. Anything that can change that is welcome. I commend to the Minister the evidence that the Committee took this week, which sets out that the most effective way of delivering aid is through local groups on the ground. More widely, what engagement has the UK had with the United Arab Emirates in particular, given their huge influence in that conflict?

Anneliese Dodds: I thank the right hon. Member for raising those incredibly important issues. I was pleased that an FCDO official engaged in that meeting, which I know was a helpful exchange of information. The right hon. Member talks about the local groups engaged

in delivering humanitarian support. When I have met representatives of such groups—particularly the so-called emergency response rooms—I have been incredibly moved by their bravery, courage and absolute selflessness in getting support to those who need it. They are resolutely non-partisan in supporting their communities, and are a real sign of co-operation in action, in the hardest possible circumstances. I pay tribute to them.

The right hon. Member talks about the influence of other countries in this situation, and mentioned the UAE. As he will be aware, a number of countries are concerned about this situation, and we have had bilateral conversations, including my own discussions, with representatives from the UAE and other countries elsewhere in the Gulf.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call another member of the International Development Committee.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her updates. Part of the reason that Sudan is becoming not just a devastating conflict but a protracted one is the involvement of state and non-state actors from elsewhere in Africa, the middle east and further afield. Does she consider Sudan to be a foreign policy priority as well as a humanitarian priority, and what diplomatic actions is the Department taking with the warring parties and their backers to urge de-escalation?

Anneliese Dodds: Yes, to use the words of my hon. Friend—who of course has considerable experience in the area of humanitarian emergencies—this is a foreign policy priority for the UK Government. That is demonstrated by the recent leadership of the Foreign Secretary at the Security Council. It will continue to be a foreign policy priority, as has been made very clear by the Foreign Secretary and, indeed, by the Prime Minister. We will continue to use every lever available to us to ensure that we are speaking up for the people of Sudan and doing all we can to secure an end to this dreadful conflict.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The current war in Ukraine and the battles between Israel and the terrorists from Lebanon and Gaza are regularly reported to this House, yet more civilians are being killed in Sudan than in all these other conflicts. This conflict has been largely ignored across this House and in our media, so I warmly welcome the Minister's statement today and support it completely. Now, of course, an end to hostilities has to be secured, but equally, those responsible for human rights abuses need to be brought to justice at the International Criminal Court or the International Court of Justice. What action is the Minister going to take to make sure that happens?

Anneliese Dodds: I thank the hon. Member for his kind words. As we can see, there is considerable concern about this situation right across the House; we need to be working together on this emergency, and I have certainly found the Opposition to be keen to do so.

The hon. Member talks about the need to ensure there is not impunity for the atrocities that we are currently seeing. That is absolutely a priority of the UK Government. As I have mentioned, we were really

determined to ensure the renewal of the fact-finding mission, and I pay tribute to the previous Government for having managed to secure the initial mission. There was some suggestion that it might be difficult to get it renewed, but we actually saw an increase in support for it—two African countries backed it, which was really encouraging. We are determined to work right across the board to ensure that there is no impunity, but above all, that the voices of people on the ground are heard. That also involves backing civil society, which again, the new Government are doing.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend's statement, as well as the work done by the Foreign Secretary at the United Nations, despite the failure of the resolution. Eleven million displaced people is a staggering number; some 2 million have gone to neighbouring countries and, specifically, 1 million have been displaced to Egypt. The regional and global consequences of that displacement are huge, so how can the UK assist those countries, particularly Egypt, which may also face the prospect of refugees from Gaza?

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter. The word that he used is absolutely correct: we have seen a staggering movement of people, both internally within Sudan and, as he mentioned, to neighbouring countries. We have had a number of discussions with those countries about the challenges that this displacement has posed. They have, of course, kept their borders open to enable those fleeing such an appalling conflict to seek sanctuary, but we need to make sure their voices are heard. That is why we have ensured that we have listened to those countries' concerns about these matters, particularly in our delivery of support. The Education Cannot Wait support that I have talked about is also supporting children in host communities.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber today to make this important statement. Unspeakable atrocities have taken place and are taking place in Sudan, and the humanitarian disaster that has followed is horrific, both in its nature and its scale. In that light, my SNP colleagues and I welcome the additional £113 million in aid that the Minister has promised. However, I must press her on three specific points.

First, can the Minister tell us whether the overall aid budget will increase accordingly, or is this simply moving money from one budget heading to another? That is an important point. Secondly, although this aid is welcome, it is insufficient. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew), called for a no-fly zone; can the Minister say what specific measures and actions she is taking to prevent these atrocities in Sudan, beyond the provision of aid? Finally, only moments ago, the Minister said that she was appalled by Russia's veto of a Security Council resolution, and that that veto is a disgrace. On that, she is absolutely right, but will she commit to consistent UK leadership in condemning UN Security Council members who veto humanitarian resolutions going forward?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his questions. On the overall aid budget, I can assure him that this is not just shifting funds around. If he looks at the programme budget for the FCDO for this

year, 2024-25, compared with next year, 2025-26, he will see that there is an increase of £450 million. Of course, we are inheriting a situation where there has been huge turbulence within the aid budget, particularly because of the increase in in-donor refugee costs under previous Governments, but we are determined to get a grip of that turbulence and have a much more planned approach for the future.

The hon. Member asked about the measures being taken beyond aid. I have talked about the arms embargo, and we are engaged in many diplomatic efforts. Because he specifically highlighted atrocity prevention, I will also mention that the Minister for Africa, Lord Collins, hosted an event with his Dutch counterpart at the UN General Assembly that was specifically about conflict-related sexual violence. We are determined to ensure that the voices of those women and girls who have been impacted are heard, and that we are taking action against it. Of course, the UK is determined to be absolutely consistent when it comes to the prevention of access to aid during conflicts, and the hon. Member has seen that from this Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call another member of the Select Committee.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Many members of the Select Committee, myself included, have heard of the role that online disinformation and hatred have played in some of the atrocities in Sudan. What leadership can the UK demonstrate in helping to quell some of this digital fuel on the fire in the war against Sudanese civilians?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. We are indeed seeing a huge amount of misinformation circulating, and a lot of it is digital. That is why we have been determined to support the Centre for Information Resilience, a research body that is gathering open-source evidence about the ongoing fighting. Where the facts about what is going on are being manipulated, that is linked to fuelling violence, so it is important that we see continued support for reliable information and evidence in this context and also that we combat that disinformation, which has been so damaging.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The war in Sudan is plainly appalling. I heard that 14 million people had been displaced, but 11 million is also an appalling figure. As I understand it, this started out as a war between the general in charge of the armed forces and the general in charge of the Rapid Support Forces militia. That makes me think that we need to get upstream of such situations, to try to prevent them happening again. The UK used to be involved in defence engagement: we were delivering courses such as managing defence in a wider security context at the Kofi Annan international peacekeeping training centre, teaching things like democratic oversight and democratic control of the armed forces. Will the Government look again at that training, and see whether we might deliver more such training for military officers and officials in those developing countries that are receptive to it?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his interesting and important question. The issue of conflict prevention is absolutely fundamental, not just

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for me as a Minister but for the Foreign Secretary and, indeed, the Prime Minister. We have been seeking to ensure that the UK does all it can to exercise leadership in relation to what are often described as fragile and conflict-affected states. That includes states that are not yet in conflict but where there are the ingredients for conflict to increase. Unfortunately, of course, the climate crisis is now often linked to some of those conflicts. We have made sure that there is a stronger focus on economic development, for example. We had some good results a few weeks ago from the World Bank, which is focusing on this in its International Development Association replenishment. I will ensure that the specific issue of defence training is raised with the Defence Secretary, and I will definitely be thinking about it myself.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome the statement and the leadership that the UK has shown, particularly in the UN Security Council. When we look at Sudan, the complexities can make us feel as though we cannot act, but it is really important that we do. Having spoken to NGOs on the ground, I know that they continue to push for access. As a number of hon. Members have mentioned, the NGOs are particularly concerned about the UN's role in this and keen that we continue to push the UN. I welcome the continuation of access on the border in Chad, but can we ensure that the UK is pushing the UN on sustainable access on that border, and that it is not time-bound or unnecessarily conditioned?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising these really important issues. The UK Government have discussed these matters in detail with the UN, and I have myself done so with a number of its agencies engaged in the crisis. I know that they have been deeply concerned about the restrictions on aid that we have seen. Some restrictions are very clear, such as the closures of crossings, but there are also those that are de facto because of bureaucratic or administrative obstacles placed in the way of those trying simply to keep people alive through humanitarian aid. She talked about the crossing in Darfur. We had welcome news that it would be open for three more months, but ultimately it must be open permanently. This is an absolutely critical lifeline for millions of people, and we will continue to advocate for that, as I am sure will the NGOs she mentioned. I pay tribute to their work, and it has been a pleasure to meet them and discuss these matters.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I, too, welcome the Minister's statement on the dire situation in Sudan. As has been mentioned, Sudan has been described as the "forgotten war", which is incredible when we think that, according to the United Nations, 14 million people have been displaced and over half its population is on the verge of starvation. Why does the Minister think it has taken us so long to give this conflict due consideration? I would like to push her on what negotiations we are having with our proxy nations that are playing a role in this conflict, with some of which we have excellent relations. Finally, what tangible actions are we taking to get aid into the country and to distribute it to those who most need it?

Anneliese Dodds: Perhaps I can reassure the hon. Member that this crisis has been an absolute priority for me. As I stated before—I will not rehearse what I said

previously—as soon as I came into my role, I was determined that I should be briefed on this situation. I was determined to get as close to Sudan as I could, which I did when I went to South Sudan over the summer. I was really determined to make sure that the UK was exercising its leadership role. We have also been absolutely clear—I have said this in the House a number of times—that there is no reason for any country to be engaged in Sudan unless it is providing humanitarian support. I have said that on the record a number of times, and we will continue to make that case.

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement on this harrowing humanitarian catastrophe. I especially welcome the fact that the UK is committed to giving an additional £113 million in aid to the people in Sudan. I have two questions. First, how realistic is it that this aid will actually get to the people still in Sudan? Secondly, given the large number of countries hosting huge numbers of refugees, have they in any way indicated how long they are willing to continue hosting refugees?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those important questions. We are confident that the UK support is reaching those in such desperate need. That is requiring creativity, diligence and repeated work from those on the ground, particularly to ensure that they are able to get aid to where it is needed. There is often a complex process of negotiation, and that is in the context that there should be no impediment on aid, but we are determined that it will get to those who need it.

My hon. Friend talked about the response of neighbouring countries to the large influx of refugees. The last conversation I had with one of those countries was with some Ministers and representatives from Chad. They are determined to fulfil their responsibilities, and they are extremely concerned about their Sudanese brothers and sisters, as they described them to me, who have come over the border. However, that country is already under a huge amount of stress, so we pay tribute to it, but we need to see the international community stepping up.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her positivity when she comes to answer questions in this Chamber; we are all encouraged by her true and honest enthusiasm, so I put my thanks on the record. With an estimated 25 million people looking for food and 14 million people displaced, Sudan is fast becoming the crisis point of the world. Although I am loath to suggest engagement in any theatre of war, my question to the Minister is this: can we do more? Can we do more to offer safe and secure camps for women and children, with the chance of education and clean water? Can we do more to assist those who are seeking to do better and to battle with tyranny? If we can do more, my question is: will this enhancement start today?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his kind words. I know that he is engaged significantly on these issues, and he has been at all the discussions of them in the House. I know that many of his constituents are concerned about this situation as well.

It really is important that we see far greater safety for those who have fled this conflict. The hon. Member talks in particular about women and girls. I mentioned before the extremely disturbing fact that, while of course

women and girls must be safe everywhere, we have, for example, had rape reported in camps for internally displaced people and at checkpoints. The fact that we have seen this taking place in those contexts is extremely disturbing. We are absolutely determined, as the UK Government, that we will be working with partners and the UN agencies to ensure that we do all we can to provide such safety and security, which of course includes the food security that he has also championed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call another member of the Select Committee.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's statement. This week the Select Committee heard compelling evidence, including about the important role of the Sudanese diaspora, and not only in the UK but in other countries. The Minister has rightly recognised the importance of listening to civil society organisations and working with them in Sudan. Will she speak specifically about how the Department is engaging with the Sudanese diaspora here, and what practical steps are being taken to tackle the cost of remittances, given that many people are sending money back to their loved ones?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this—of course, she has considerable expertise in this area. The role of the Sudanese diaspora is incredibly important. I am sure that many of us will have had discussions with members of the diaspora in our constituencies and heard their concerns about the humanitarian situation, but also about what they are doing to support friends, family and the wider community. I have certainly done that myself, and I know that Lord Collins is determined to ensure that we have a strong relationship with the Sudanese diaspora. Indeed, we should consolidate it for the future because we all want the same thing: peace, security and humanitarian support for people living in Sudan.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. This week the UN called the crisis in Sudan an “invisible crisis”, so it is really powerful that we have had so much agreement here today, which I hope will shed some light on the crisis. Others have spoken about the gender-based violence, which the UN has described as an “epidemic”. I am pleased that the Minister is taking the issue really seriously, and I know that this is more than just a job for her. However, Sudan is also a place where minority faiths are persecuted, so when we are thinking about distributing aid, will we take account of all human rights as well as the need to save lives?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that important question; he is of course right about the need to act against conflict-related sexual violence, which many Members have referenced. On religious freedom in particular, which has previously been raised in the House, we remain concerned by the wider human rights situation across Sudan since the 2021 military coup. We continue to promote freedom of religion or belief as a means of enhancing tolerance and inclusion in Sudan, but we are not aware of any significant increase in the

specific targeting of, or discrimination against, any religious minorities because of their beliefs, including Christians, in the country since April 2023. We will, however, keep this under review.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her statement and for her leadership on the growing humanitarian crisis in Sudan. It all too often feels like a forgotten conflict, given the systemic human rights abuses we have heard about. With that in mind, does she agree that Russia's veto of the joint UK-Sierra Leone UN Security Council resolution on protecting civilians is indefensible and will only extend the human suffering in Sudan?

Anneliese Dodds: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That resolution was asking for what anyone can see is desperately needed in Sudan: an end to impediments to aid; above all, an end to the conflict; and international action to support the people of Sudan. We were deeply disappointed and frustrated that Russia vetoed that resolution, but that will not dim our resolve to work with other partners on this issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Last but by no means least, I call Steve Race.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for coming to the House to give this statement and for all the work the Government are doing to support the Sudanese people in the face of severe malnutrition and starvation. Keeping the Adre crossing open is extremely important. The Sudanese armed forces have committed to three months, but what diplomatic pressure are the Government bringing to bear to ensure that that crossing remains open for longer than three months? The ability to bring in ready-to-use therapeutic food is so important, and there are global shortages in the production of RUTF at the moment. Ahead of the nutrition for growth summit next year, will the Government commit to investing in scaling up production of RUTF?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and he is absolutely correct. The nutrition for growth conference is coming up next year in Paris, and I was discussing that yesterday with some civil society experts. We must ensure that we are doing all we can so that there is provision of those much needed resources, especially for those already suffering from malnutrition. My hon. Friend also mentioned the additional challenge of those impediments to access to aid, which must be lifted. I am pleased that the House is united in its condemnation of those impediments, and I hope we can continue to work together on this appalling crisis.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the King has signified his Royal Assent to the following Act:

Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024.

Backbench Business

Taiwan: International Status

12.32 pm

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House, recalling that United Nations Resolution 2758 of 25 October 1971, which established the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations (UN), does not mention Taiwan, notes that UN Resolution 2758 does not address the political status of Taiwan or establish PRC sovereignty over Taiwan and is silent both on the status of Taiwan in the UN and on Taiwanese participation in UN agencies; and calls on the Government to clarify its position that UN Resolution 2758 does not establish the One China Principle as a matter of international law, to state clearly that nothing in law prevents the participation of Taiwan in international organisations and to condemn efforts made by representatives of the PRC to distort the meaning of UN Resolution 2758 in support of Beijing's One China Principle and the alteration of historic documents by representatives of the PRC, changing the name of the country from Taiwan to Taiwan, province of China.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. This is the first time I have stood in the Chamber to back the democratic rights of the people of Taiwan, and I want to acknowledge those who have worked on this issue over many years, in particular the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and my former neighbouring MP Stewart McDonald. I also recognise the Minister's long-standing commitment to the human rights of people in the region, and indeed your commitment, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome to Parliament the deputy representative, director and assistant director of the political division from the Taiwanese Representative Office. They are in the Gallery to observe this debate, which carries an important bearing on our strong and vibrant relationship with Taiwan.

The detail in the motion may seem esoteric, but diplomatic technicalities on an issue as fraught as the status of Taiwan could have far-reaching consequences for the entire world, and we must have this debate now rather than later. I think back to the frenetic last-minute activity ahead of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with emergency flights full of anti-tank weapons, hastily drafted sanctions regimes and fruitless shuttle diplomacy. Ukraine stands as a reminder that it is best to form policy on a crisis before the crisis emerges. Incremental changes to the status quo made by authoritarian regimes are likely a prelude to more overt measures, and the best time to deter an aggressor is before their confidence grows.

It is not possible to overstate the risks of a conflict over Taiwan. Leaving aside the humanitarian costs and geopolitical consequences of another democracy being attacked by a larger authoritarian neighbour, the economic pain would be felt in every household in this country. Around 90% of the world's large container ships pass through the Taiwan strait once a year. Taiwan produces two thirds of all semiconductors, and well over 90% of all advanced microchips. It is estimated that a conflict would cost the global economy not less than \$2.5 trillion, but that estimate is calculated by the Rhodium Group using only shipping data. Bloomberg puts the figure at a massive \$10 trillion—about 10% of global GDP—and it regards that to be a conservative estimate.

The scale of the risk is why this debate is taking place not only in this Chamber but in Parliaments around the world, and I put on record my thanks to the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China for its assistance. Through its work, Parliaments in Australia, the Netherlands and Canada and the European Parliament have all expressed their opposition to the distortion of UN resolution 2758.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate and for giving way. The comparison point is important. The figures he has given for what would happen should Taiwan be blockaded or even invaded are worth relating back to the Ukraine effect from when Russia invaded Ukraine. We had a hit of about \$1 trillion to the global economy. The hon. Gentleman is talking about nine or 10 times that effect on the global economy—this is our neighbour, rather than a far and distant land.

Blair McDougall: Absolutely. Although first and foremost in our minds should be the impact on people in Taiwan of any crisis, it would also be felt by our constituents in their cost of living and everything that happens in this country.

It is right that this is a worldwide debate, given the military incursions into Taiwanese territory, cyber-attacks, disinformation, interference with shipping and aircraft—all the things that make the headlines—and I welcome the new Government's expressions of concern about aggressive moves in the strait. However, this needs to be a global conversation, because the People's Republic of China is involved in an aggressive worldwide diplomatic strategy, especially across the global south. The strategy aims to secure international acceptance for its expansionist One China principle, which is to say that Taiwan is part of a single China and the PRC is the only legitimate Government of Taiwan, denying Taiwan's democracy any distinctive international status.

Of course, resolution 2758 does not mention Taiwan at all, and it does not address in any way the political status of Taiwan. It does not establish the PRC's sovereignty over Taiwan, and it is silent on the participation of Taiwan in the United Nations and its agencies. Importantly, it has no force of impact on us as sovereign nations and the relationships we choose to have with Taiwan. The current strategy by Beijing is a distortion of international law, but it is also at odds with the long-standing policy of the United Kingdom. It is essential that that is contested, and this debate offers the Minister and the new Government the opportunity to make it clear that the UK opposes that effort by the communist Government to rewrite history, or to unilaterally decide the future of Taiwan.

Debates about Taiwan are famously full of symbolism: which flag is flown, what nomenclature is used, and which seemingly synonymic words cause offence. It would be easy to write off discussions about the interpretation of resolution 2758 as yet another finer detail that distracts from a bigger picture, but that would be a mistake. This is not pedantry from Beijing; this is predation. Chairman Xi watched the near-unanimous diplomatic disapproval of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and he is seeking to reduce the chances of a similar chorus of condemnation towards any move against Taiwan.

If the PRC's position that the UN resolution endorses its sovereignty over Taiwan were accepted, it would later use that consensus to argue that any future coercion

of Taiwan through arms or other means—whether blockade or annexation—would be legal. Similarly, any acceptance of Beijing's interpretation would be used to argue that moves to prevent such coercion by Taiwan's democratic supporters were unlawful. This is not a technical issue but another source of increased risk for conflict across the Taiwan strait.

Will the Minister confirm today whether, as has been reported, any assurances have been given to the PRC that the UK will not seek to counter internationally its efforts on the One China principle, and whether promises have been made privately that we will not make the case with third-party nations for UK policy, namely our position that Taiwan's status is undetermined? Does she recognise that any UK Government acquiescence with the idea that the status of Taiwan is an internal matter for the PRC alone risks giving legal cover to any future aggressive acts? Does she recognise that distorting resolution 2758 to pursue the exclusion from international organisations of Taiwan—a democratic, self-governing people—undermines the legitimacy of the international rules-based order, not least as it appears to be inconsistent with the treatment of other disputed territories? Will the UK advocate for meaningful Taiwanese participation in all international organisations for which statehood is not a prerequisite?

Past moments of crisis in the strait of Taiwan have flared up and subsided—in particular in 1996 and 2000 after presidential elections—but three things that have changed since then should make us more concerned. First, China is far more heavily armed. Already possessed of the largest naval fleet in the world, Beijing has been adding to it the equivalent of the entire Royal Navy every two years. It will soon have the largest air force in the world.

Secondly, people on both sides of the strait have grown apart. The Taiwanese now have more of a sense of their own identity, and their democracy is deeply embedded, while China's populist nationalism has grown, and the PRC, which was hardly ever a free and open society, has moved even further in an authoritarian direction, from Xinjiang to Tibet and Hong Kong. Chairman Xi previously proposed to apply the "one country, two systems" approach to Taiwan. However, the systematic removal of Hongkongers' civil liberties means that any promise from the mainland to maintain the freedoms that Taiwan enjoys could not be trusted. We know that Beijing does not keep its promises.

Thirdly, if we are honest, the west has been found wanting. We have been less than united and less than determined in our defence of democratic allies and democracy around the world. Xi has learned from Putin's years of slowly boiling the frog, dividing western opponents from each other, manipulating our populations and operating in the grey zone where a gradual increase in aggressive acts avoids a strong strategic response from the west.

That mixture of Chinese armament, growing nationalism, increasing authoritarianism and western weakness is a potentially deadly combination. Indeed, the military exercises and provocations around Taiwan are a recipe for unintentional disaster. Last year, there were more than 1,700 occasions when PRC military aircraft deliberately entered the air defence identification zone of Taiwan. PRC jets turn away when they are just minutes from Taipei. During exercises, we see Taiwanese and PRC vessels in stand-offs on the edge of Taiwan's nautical buffer zone. Meanwhile, we do not have agreed red lines

around Taiwan with other like-minded countries, and worrying ambiguities remain. For example, a maritime and air blockade is normally classed as an act of war, but that is not clear in this case because of Taiwan's ambiguous state.

Will the Minister assure the House that the legal status of a blockade around Taiwan is being looked at? I worry that we could have a situation where Governments use that ambiguity as an excuse for inertia in the event of a crisis. Will she take the opportunity to say that a maritime and air blockade around Taiwan would be a red line for the Government?

On so many occasions during the cold war, catastrophe was avoided due to essential de-escalation protocols that prevented the misinterpretation of either side's intentions. I would be interested in the Minister's assessment of whether there are sufficient procedures of the kind between the military commands of Taipei and Beijing, as in such a febrile and nationalistic atmosphere, a mistake could easily be misunderstood as deliberate escalation, and control of volatile public opinion could easily be lost.

As was said earlier, let us not forget who paid the price for the collective failure of the international community to deter Putin's aggression. It was first and foremost the Ukrainian people, but ordinary working people around the world also found themselves with unaffordable bills. If Bloomberg is correct, escalation across the strait would be, as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, five times worse than the economic contraction post Ukraine. We simply cannot allow that to happen.

When we discuss Taiwan, we talk a lot about protecting the status quo, but we must recognise that the PRC is already actively working to change that status quo. Beijing has not paid any price for that. Xi's diplomatic offensive has not been met with a commensurate effort from western democracies. As the PRC isolates Taiwan within international institutions, we have not increased our engagement in response. Above all, there has been no sanction for the constant military intimidation or grey zone attacks.

I recognise, of course, that careful diplomatic language is needed on this issue, but we live in a world where free and open societies are retreating in the face of authoritarian regimes who no longer recognise the old order or even international boundaries, and who are seeking to recreate the world in their image. I do not expect the Minister to depart from the delicate, long-established language that has defined the UK's position towards Taiwan since diplomatic relations were established with the PRC, and the motion does not ask for such a departure. I ask the Minister to put on record the Government's concern about Beijing's distortion of the international law around Taiwan, and about the editing of historic UN documents by Chinese officials. I hope that is seen not as an outlandish or hawkish request, but merely as the least we can do when confronted with such troubling behaviour.

Finally, putting all diplomatic language aside, the debate is an opportunity to acknowledge the truth: Taiwan is not China in one important way that no amount of economic, military or diplomatic bullying by Beijing can obscure. It is this: the people of Taiwan are free and the people of China are not. Now more than ever, we must stand with democracies and against dictatorships. We must stand up for freedoms that we

[Blair McDougall]

claim are universal, regardless of where people live in the world, and we should stand with the democracy of Taiwan.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) mentioned sanctions; it gives me huge pleasure to call my co-sanctionee, Sir Iain Duncan Smith.

12.48 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I will see what I can do to speak on your behalf—even though you have no opinion on this matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Absolutely not.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: We will see if we can ascertain one in passing. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) on securing the debate. That is not easy, as he knows, and it is really good to see so many hon. Members in attendance. As you pointed out, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am one of nine political sanctionees, and it is always worth reminding ourselves that there are two others outside Parliament who are also sanctioned. They spoke to me the other day and said, “We’re often forgotten in this matter, but we can’t do business. It’s very difficult.” I wish to remember them, while we are at it; they were unnecessarily sanctioned.

Everything that the hon. Gentleman said is absolutely correct. The problem is that we are dealing with a power that is growing in potency and totalitarianism while it also grows in other ways. Let me add something on the size of the growth in its military capability. He mentioned China’s naval capacity; right now, China has 230 times the capacity for naval shipbuilding of the United States. Any one shipyard in China outbuilds the whole of the United States in naval shipbuilding. Someone please tell me that that is for a peaceful purpose. I have no conception of why it would need that many naval ships if its purpose was peaceful. The answer is that it is not.

This whole business of Taiwan has been obscured constantly by refusals from Administrations from both sides of the House. I say to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West), who will respond to this debate, that I am not having a go at this Government; I have been having a go at every Government for a long time. It seems that whoever is elected, I am in opposition. She should not take personally the point I am about to make gently to her. Politicians are elected to take decisions based on the principles that we govern by. Our principles are simple: we believe in free speech, base freedom, the rule of law and human rights. We may debate the elements and range of that, but we believe in the fundamental right to decent treatment.

I was sanctioned, along with you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and others, for raising the then undiscovered genocide that was going on in Xinjiang, which has now become public knowledge. This Parliament—Members on both sides—voted to agree that the genocide was taking place, although the Government said that they could not vote to agree with that, or do anything about it,

because that action would need to be taken at the UN, through the International Court of Justice. That is never going to happen, because it gets vetoed, straight off. The Labour party, in opposition, agreed that genocide was taking place, and agreed on many occasions with those of us who had real problems with China’s treatment of people and of human rights; the Labour party was constantly in support of our position. I simply say that as a base reminder, because this is really about what we believe.

From one Government to the next, we have genuinely, deliberately obscured the question of Taiwan’s status. People have argued with me that the question was settled by resolution 2758, which is often misquoted. They say that it somehow settled the status of Taiwan. They have argued that it was clear from that resolution, now that the PRC was responsible for China at the UN, that Taiwan was a part of China. It said no such thing, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire said. In fact, it was deliberately obscure about that idea; it was not settled.

Under the whole reign of the Communist party in China, Taiwan has never been a part of a Chinese Administration or a Chinese Government. Taiwan right now is a democracy and an upholder of human rights. It has an agreement, as we do, that the freedom of individuals to speak out without let or hindrance, and without fear of arrest—we see such arrests in Hong Kong—remains important. The Government should speak out in Taiwan’s defence and argue that China has no right to extinguish that, unless there is a deliberate indication that Taiwan wishes to be part of China. Taiwan has never wished that, and the last election demonstrates that is still not the case. Taiwan does not wish to join China, as it has never been part of China.

This military build-up is not for a general purpose. It is ultimately to try to displace the US’s position in the Pacific, so that it will be unable to act, should China decide at some point to blockade or invade. The incursions that are taking place would not be tolerated anywhere else in the world. There are huge numbers of planes overflying Taiwan. Ships are threatening it by coming right up close, past the border of Taiwan. They are deliberately provoking, in the hope that action will take place that allows the Chinese to take action themselves.

If we move our gaze slightly further south, we come to the South China sea. China has occupied it and declared it to be a historical part of China. The UN has said that that is not the case, and has told China categorically that it has no right to occupy or build military fortifications in the South China sea. What has China’s reaction been to that? Nothing. It said that the UN has no right to interfere, and now it is trying to blockade. In fact, US navy ships still sail through there, but every other ship, including recently the Philippines coastguard, has been hounded out of the area. Ships have been rammed and threatened, and military naval vessels from China now occupy that space.

We know what China thinks of these things. We know what it plans to do, because it has already done it. We wonder: if we do not say very much, will that obscurity allow China to back away? The Chinese have no intention whatsoever of backing off. That is part of their absolute creed now. In fact, it is clear even from China’s constitution that it sees Taiwan as part of China. I do not know how many more indications the Foreign Office needs of China’s direction of travel.

What do the Government plan to do about this? To what degree will the Government challenge the misinterpretation of resolution 2758 publicly, and recognise that Taiwan has a right to self-determination, as we and all other democratic nations do? Will the Minister take the opportunity to state Government policy clearly from the Dispatch Box? Will she agree to make a public statement to the House about what is going on in Taiwan? The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire asked for that, and I back him up. We would love clarity from the Government on the fact that what is taking place in and around Taiwan is utterly unacceptable; we should even think about moving to a sanction at the Security Council. China will veto that, we know, but it is important for the world to understand China's position.

To return to covid, we remember when all that happened as a result of a failure in China, but we were unable to get any figures about what Taiwan was doing—and that was rather important, because it had advanced methods of dealing with covid that we could have learned a lot from. We were not allowed to get those figures; they all had to come through China. China refused to let us know what was going on as it embarrassed China, because it had taken very little action early on, and the result was millions dying around the world. My point is that when we acquiesce and give way, as we did at the World Health Organisation, where we no longer insist on these things, that weakness is seen as a success for China. The Chinese take that and move on. How do we know that? Because back in the 1930s, every time we acquiesced to a new demand by Hitler's Germany, it took that and moved on.

We do not appease communist or fascist dictators by saying, "Well, if we are reasonable, in due course they will be reasonable." By definition, a dictatorship is not reasonable. Fascist Germany told us what it was going to do, and China tells us categorically all the time what it will do. We in the west do not want to believe that. We think that if we are reasonable, the Chinese will be reasonable. They are not reasonable. They intend to take Taiwan back one way or the other.

Today and going forward, the question for us and for the Foreign Office, the unelected body that sits across the road, is: why do not we get serious about this, understand it, and say all this? If we do not tell the Chinese that there are limits, they assume that we do not believe that there are any, and they go ahead. The financial chaos that would ensue from merely a blockade—not even an invasion of Taiwan—would be devastating to our economies.

I had an argument the other day with one of my colleagues, who shall remain nameless—*[Interruption.]* There we go; he is not in the Chamber. That individual said to me that Taiwan has nothing to do with us; it is a long way from us, and we have no arrangements with it. When I made the point to him that the whack to our economy would be enormous, I added one other figure, which is that 72% of everything made in the world is made in the area around the South China sea, including China. I said to my colleague that it is not far away; it is our neighbour. Without Taiwan—if anything happens to Taiwan—we go down, too.

The real point of this important debate is to try to persuade the Government to be much bolder about this matter and to recognise the threat, to recognise the need for a British Government to say enough is enough, and

to recognise that what happens to Taiwan is not just a matter of interest to us, but a matter of vital importance. Many Members were at the conference in Taipei recently, where we heard about all the terrible problems that Taiwan now faces as a result of China's actions. One only has to be there to realise just how devastating this situation is to many Taiwanese people, whose lives are genuinely threatened by it.

With this huge build-up, the clear threat that China poses, the brutality it has already demonstrated in the South China sea and the illegality of its actions, and its complete failure to take any actions other than those it wishes to take, it is important for us to demonstrate stage by stage, at every moment and at every opportunity, that we regard China's behaviour as unacceptable and that we will oppose it. One way this Government could start doing that would be to go back and look again at the risk register that we started under the previous Government. We should now move China on to the higher tier of that risk register. That would send a very strong signal to the Chinese Government that we are serious about our behaviour.

I will end simply by saying the following to the Minister. I know the Government want to increase and improve trade with China, and I understand why they want to do that. My concern, at the end of it all, is that we cannot detach our desire for commercial engagement from the real engagement, which is about the way a state treats the people who live there and the way it behaves to its neighbours. We did so in the past, and look what happened: 60 million people died because we ignored what was going to happen. They told us what was going to happen, but we wanted to do business with them. This time we have to learn that appeasement does not work. There is no chance it will work this time. We need to be clear to China, as America is and as others are, and say that this shall not stand, that we in the UK will stand for the freedom of those people whose self-determination is always a matter of high concern to us, and that we will defend it at whatever cost.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Select Committee Chair.

1.2 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for his contribution; it is always a pleasure to follow in his wake. The work you have done to make this House aware of the very real threat that China poses to us is astounding—you have been very dogged in making that happen, and I am grateful for that. I also thank my new hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) for his contribution. In your short time in Parliament, the work you have done to show how China is exploiting the most vulnerable and committing egregious human rights violations has been deeply appreciated.

I turn to you, Madam Deputy Speaker—now I can actually use "you" appropriately, for once. What you have done in your time as a parliamentarian to campaign for and champion the rights of the Uyghur people, who are being so egregiously exploited in the Xinjiang autonomous region by China, is admirable. We regard the sanctions China has put on you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as a badge of honour for defending human rights, and we are very proud of what you have done.

[Sarah Champion]

Can I say, quite simply, that I love Taiwan? I love the people, I love the food, I love the culture. Most of all, I love its vibrant democracy, which is one of the strongest in the world. In this speech, I will share how its democracy actively tries to help others around the world, and how it is something we all need to stand with. It will therefore come as no surprise that I must draw Members' attention to the fact that I co-chair the British-Taiwanese all-party parliamentary group and to my financial declarations in relation to that.

Over the years, I have witnessed at first hand how Taiwan actively contributes its expertise to support global partners, which we should celebrate. Taiwan is a leader in the fields of public health, technology, clean energy, net zero and so much more. However, despite all that Taiwan has to offer, it finds itself barred from international organisations. Since 1971, China has repeatedly used UN General Assembly resolution 2758 to justify its efforts to exclude Taiwan from the UN system, which it has done hugely effectively.

With a population of 23.5 million, Taiwan is the most populous self-governing state not represented at the UN. Its exclusion undermines critical global co-operation efforts, in particular around public health, climate change and the realisation of the sustainable development goals. Take SDG 3, on promoting good health and wellbeing. Taiwan maintained some of the lowest case rates in the world throughout the covid-19 pandemic. However, while it had notable success in suppressing the spread of the virus, its exclusion from the World Health Organisation meant that it was unable to share this expertise with the world.

The official record shows that when the resolution was passed 53 years ago, its intent was merely to make a judgment on who should take up China's seat at the UN—that was it. The resolution bears no mention at all of Taiwan; it does not state that Taiwan is part of the PRC, nor ascribe any right for China to represent Taiwan in the UN system. Most importantly, there is no evidence that the resolution establishes, as a matter of international law, the One China principle. For all those reasons, the resolution cannot be used as a reasonable justification to preclude Taiwan from participating in international organisations. As parliamentarians, we must do all we can to contest the narrative that China's territorial claim over Taiwan is a settled issue. It is not. It is not an issue at all. China has no sovereign right over Taiwan. Resolution 2758 is one of the many grey zones used by China to encroach on Taiwan's sovereignty, and we must not collude with it in that.

We have recently seen increased incursions into Taiwan's airspace, as well as large-scale military drills and advances close to Taiwan's contingency zone. Operations by the Chinese coastguard have challenged Taiwan's right to control the waters around its own territory. As China continues to challenge the boundaries and disrupts the rules-based international order, I am deeply concerned by the silence of the international community, and that that silence will be interpreted by China as tacit consent. We must call out any attempts by China to establish a legal basis for a future armed invasion of Taiwan.

We all hold a shared interest in the freedom of navigation through the Taiwan strait and the South China sea, which is one of the world's most important trade routes. As others have said, Bloomberg economists

have estimated that a potential invasion of Taiwan would cost the global economy around \$10 trillion—that would come out of our pockets. That is equal to around 10% of global GDP, which would dwarf the costs of the war in Ukraine. Safeguarding the Taiwan strait and protecting the rules-based order is in both our national and our international interests.

I understand but do not appreciate diplomats and UK civil servants dancing on the linguistic head of a pin on this topic, and I therefore urge the Minister and the House to solemnly refute China's arguments on UN resolution 2758, and to curb the PRC's ambition to unilaterally change the status quo across the Taiwan strait and across Taiwan itself.

1.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank all Members who have spoken. Their contributions are always exceptional and I am very pleased to hear them. I commend the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) for securing the debate. He also secured a debate in Westminster Hall on the Uyghurs, so I thank him for giving us an opportunity to participate. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) always brings his personal touch to these issues. He has a deep passion for this subject matter and I thank him for that.

In speaking about the future of global democracy and the protection of human rights, the situation of Taiwan, the actions of the Chinese Communist party and the increasingly concerning violations of religious freedom and human rights in China, let me begin by expressing my firm support for the sovereign status of Taiwan, a beacon of democracy in a region where its survival is threatened by the growing authoritarianism of China. Taiwan stands as a stalwart defender of liberty, democracy and human rights—values that we in this House hold dear. We all say that and when we say it, others will follow.

It is essential that we as a nation stand with Taiwan as it faces increasing aggression from the Chinese Government. The relationship between Taiwan and the United Kingdom has always been one of mutual respect and shared values. It is vital that we strengthen those ties in the face of growing threats from Beijing. Taiwan is not just an ally in the fight for democracy; it is a living testament to the success of democratic governance in the face of adversity. Since the 1980s, Taiwan has undergone significant political and social reforms, transforming from a one-party state under martial law to a flourishing democracy with free and fair elections. In fact, Taiwan rose 20 places in the Economist Democracy Index, ranking as Asia's No. 1 democracy and 11th globally, marking its commitment to the principles of liberty, freedom and human rights.

In contrast, just across the Taiwan strait, the Chinese Communist party seeks to erode the very foundations of liberty. China's increasing aggression towards Taiwan through military provocations, cyber-attacks and political pressure must be met with a strong response. The United Kingdom, along with other liberal democracies, has a responsibility to defend Taiwan's sovereignty and to advocate for its rightful place in the international community. That is why today's debate in this House is so important. It is so important that Members from all parties, on all sides of the Chamber, put that on the record.

In 2021 alone, we saw a staggering 950 intrusions by Chinese military aircraft into Taiwan's airspace—a sharp increase of 150% on the previous year. It is very clear what China is doing. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, why is China building all these ships? There has to be a purpose. Where is it going? It shows the increasing military threat posed by China, and we must not ignore these acts of intimidation.

On the Chinese Communist party's gross violations of human rights within its own borders, the Chinese Government have been responsible for some of the most horrendous human rights abuses in recent memory, particularly against religious minorities. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right. You and I know that, Madam Deputy Speaker. We all know that in this House and we all know how important it is to say it. China continues to systematically violate this right, both within its own borders and beyond.

One of the most concerning examples of those abuses is the ongoing persecution of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. Reports from credible international organisations indicate that over 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities are detained in so-called re-education camps. They are torture camps. They are intimidation camps. They take away liberty and freedom, and subject families to forced labour, torture and indoctrination. The camps are part of China's broader campaign to erase Uyghur culture, religion and identity. This brutal repression is compounded by horrendous reports of forced sterilisation, sexual violence and organ harvesting.

China's treatment of Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners and Christians is equally alarming. Tibetan Buddhists continue to face severe restrictions on their religious practices, with reports of monks and nuns being detained, tortured and even killed for peacefully protesting or for their religious beliefs. The ongoing efforts to erode Tibetan culture and religion include the imposition of Chinese Communist party-approved religious leaders. My goodness! Just pluck that man out there and he can be a religious leader. He doesn't know anything about the religion, but he'll do it! That is the China that we speak out against today. It is a direct assault on the freedom of conscience. For Falun Gong practitioners, the situation is equally dire. Thousands have been detained and subjected to forced labour, torture and execution for their beliefs. The crackdown on Christians in China is every bit as severe. Church closures, the destruction of crosses and the imprisonment of pastors have become all too common. Religious worship, whether in a mosque, temple, church or private home, is increasingly subject to government interference and repression.

China's efforts to silence opposition extend far beyond its borders. We are looking at Taiwan today, but there are other parts of the world where the focus is equally clear. Through its belt and road initiative, China has sought to extend its economic and political influence across the globe, often using debt-trap diplomacy to entangle countries in its sphere of influence. That has included pressuring countries to withdraw their diplomatic recognition of Taiwan and to instead align themselves with Beijing because, "You owe us so much money and this is part of the deal." It is a gross violation of the principles of sovereignty and self-determination, and it is essential that we, as a nation, continue to support Taiwan in the face of those pressures. Moreover, as

others have said, China's technological influence is a growing concern. The CCP has made significant investments in surveillance technology, which it uses both domestically to monitor and control its population, and abroad to further its strategic objectives.

As a leading global power, the United Kingdom has a unique responsibility to defend the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. It is essential that we not only stand with Taiwan, but take concrete steps to ensure its security and sovereignty. The UK must work closely with allies, particularly the United States, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, to build a co-ordinated response to China's growing aggression and evil attitude to everyone in the Indo-Pacific region.

In addition to our military and diplomatic support for Taiwan, the Government must also continue to raise the issue of China's human rights abuses at every available forum. The UK must lead the charge in holding China accountable for its actions and ensure that the international community does not turn a blind eye to the suffering of millions of people under the CCP's control. We must also ensure that our economic relations with China do not come at the expense of human rights. It is unacceptable that economic interests should override our moral obligation to stand up for the oppressed.

In conclusion, Taiwan is a shining example of the power of democracy and freedom in the face of authoritarianism. We must stand by Taiwan, not just because it is in our national interest, but because it is the right thing to do. We must also continue to speak out against the CCP's brutality and human rights abuses, and work tirelessly to hold China accountable for its actions. The United Kingdom must remain a champion of freedom, democracy and human rights, and we must be so in the firm belief that these values will ultimately triumph over the forces of oppression. I believe they will. I believe we will do the right thing.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We have a maiden speech. I call Alison Taylor.

1.17 pm

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech during this important debate. I only hope that I can acquit myself as well as the hon. Members who have preceded me. It is an honour, as the new MP for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, to deliver my maiden speech during the debate on the international status of Taiwan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) on bringing this debate to the House.

I represent a seat that takes in part of the former mill town of Paisley and part of the economic powerhouse of Glasgow, with the welcome recent addition of the communities of Hillington, Cardonald and Penilee. In my constituency, the towns and villages are brought together by the River Clyde and its tributaries. The Clyde, which stretches 170 km in length, is well known for its shipbuilding and engineering heritage. It has for centuries been an inspiration for lyricists, music and art.

During this decade, a new innovation zone has been developed around Glasgow airport, stretching out across the flatlands of the river basin and taking in the town of Paisley, the former burgh of Renfrew and the village of

[Alison Taylor]

Inchinnan. A new high-tech district, the silicon valley of Glasgow, links academia, research and industry. This project showcases the power of Government intervention and central funding. With strategic assets such as a tidal river, an international airport, the Erskine bridge, Braehead retail park and the M8 motorway, my constituency offers so much to allow businesses to thrive. However, our connectivity, while good, requires improvement. It needs a better bus network and a long-overdue rail link to the international airport.

With the Scottish constitutional question having been determined in 2014, there is now a real opportunity to foster political stability, create economic growth and reset international trading relations. My constituents badly need the economic growth that this Government have made their priority. Already in my surgeries I have spoken to many people who are living in unsuitable housing or temporary accommodation or, worse, are homeless. As Nye Bevan said,

“A house, a modern house, is a most complex economic production. Every single industry is a contributor.”

What better way is there of stimulating the economy, across many sectors, than to build modern homes?

My connections with this seat go back to the aftermath of world war two, when my family first settled in Bishopton. My Uncle Jack was a security guard at the munitions factory, now the site of Dargavel Village. In the neighbouring village of Langbank, my husband was raised on Middlepenny Road, and his mother was the local playgroup leader. Studying at what is now the University of the West of Scotland in Paisley, I graduated in land economics, and then, following in my father's footsteps, became a chartered surveyor. My mother stayed at home to look after her three daughters, while my father grew his business in Glasgow. I myself am proud to be the mother of two daughters; the youngest was born in 2017 in the Royal Alexandra hospital in Paisley, where we both received excellent care. Representing a constituency so integral to my family's history is a privilege that I hold dear. The seat is home to the former Member of Parliament for Monklands East, Helen Liddell, who now sits in the other place alongside my friend Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale, who has played such a vital role in our country's security.

As a chartered surveyor, I have been fortunate to work with inspirational clients and colleagues who were both innovators and entrepreneurs, and who taught me the long-term value of positivity, collaboration and strategic thinking. It is that sense of opportunity that I want to bring to the House. I will work diligently to bring my entire life experience to bear on the very real needs of my constituency. I have established my constituency office in Inchinnan, in the former India Tyres factory—a stunning art deco building which would have been there when my roots in the area were forged.

I would like to say a few words about my predecessor Gavin Newlands, who was a Member of Parliament for nine years. In spite of my contesting the seat three times, Gavin was always courteous and polite to me. He railed against exploitative working practices, he promoted the importance of the airport to this constituency, and he spoke up for vulnerable women who had no voice. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing him the very best for the future.

My constituency is a fine mix of history and modernity. Like me, it has pride in its past and optimism about its future. I was elected to deliver on the change that my constituents and my country need, and it is an honour to do just that.

1.24 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) for initiating this important and timely debate. I particularly welcomed his comments about the long-standing work of other Members in support of Taiwan, and his remarks about this being a global conversation. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor) on her maiden speech and her focus on driving economic growth across her constituency.

China's increasingly aggressive behaviour towards Taiwan is yet another alarming example of its consistent and blatant disregard for the international rules-based order. As one who is proud to represent a significant Hong Kong community in Bolton West, I have heard at first hand about the devastating effects of Beijing's authoritarian rule. Indeed, many of my constituents were effectively forced from their old homes in Hong Kong by the destruction of its democratic freedoms. Let us be clear: Beijing's actions towards Taiwan do not exist in isolation. They are part of a broader pattern of behaviour, as I have described.

We need only look at Tibet, where Beijing has systematically suppressed cultural and religious freedoms; at Xinjiang, where atrocities have been committed repeatedly against the Uyghurs; at Hong Kong, where the Sino-British joint declaration has been torn asunder; and, now, at Taiwan. Beijing has escalated its military posturing, imposed economic coercion and engaged in cyber warfare, all aimed at undermining Taiwan's vibrant democracy and intimidating its people. China's deliberate distortion of United Nations resolution 2758 is a prime example of the way in which Beijing disregards the international rules-based system to push its own narrative. Let me emphasise that, crucially, the resolution did not address the sovereignty of the island of Taiwan, or preclude it from having representation at the United Nations or other international organisations. Yet Beijing has sought to change historic documents and records, including at the UN, to allege that the resolution claims that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory.

The blatant misrepresentation of resolution 2758 is not just an attack on Taiwan, but an assault on the integrity of the international system that we champion. This behaviour also stands in direct opposition to the UK's long-standing position on Taiwan. For decades, the UK has maintained a policy that not only is in favour of Taiwan's participation in international organisations, but reiterates our clear interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan strait, considering the Taiwan issue one to be settled through constructive dialogue, not force or coercion. However, China's actions continue flagrantly to contradict that principle and threaten the stability of the wider Indo-Pacific region. Tensions are increasing, with recent estimates suggesting that there has been a 300% increase in grey zone activity across the Taiwan strait, as well as incursions into Taiwan's air defence identification zone. Beijing's grey zone activity in the strait is making it very difficult to establish red lines

around its behaviour. Normally, a maritime and air blockade would be considered an act of war in international law. Can the Minister confirm that a maritime and air blockade by Beijing around Taiwan would be a red line for the UK Government?

I want to underline the clear public interest in de-escalation in the Taiwan strait. We depend on Taiwan for microchips, especially for the advanced semiconductors on which we all depend for our critical infrastructure. Two thirds of chips, and almost all advanced chips, are currently produced in Taiwan.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire outlined, Bloomberg has estimated that the conflict would cost the global economy \$10 trillion—more than five times more than the Ukraine crisis. As we learned from Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the failure to deter a conflict in the South China sea will have a high cost for all of us in this place and for our constituents. In 2023, the then Defence Minister Baroness Goldie confirmed that the UK Government were analysing the prospective economic impact on the UK of escalation in the Taiwan strait. Will the Government publish that assessment, given the clear public interest?

Beijing's pattern of behaviour is clear. Each time we fail to respond decisively to China's disregard for democracy and the international rules-based order, it emboldens Beijing to continue to act with impunity. Taiwan is now at the frontline. We must stand with Taiwan—not only to protect its people and democracy, but to send a clear message to Beijing that the systematic erosion of freedoms and violation of international law that has taken place in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and now Taiwan will not go unchecked. By pushing back, the UK will defend our shared values, strengthen our global alliances and uphold the international laws that ensure peace and stability across the world.

1.30 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) on securing the debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor) on making her maiden speech. It is wonderful to have two MPs from Scotland bringing so much knowledge and understanding of international issues to the House. It really is enriching, and I have been in this place for 10 years.

All the contributions today have been full of different aspects—economic, public health, dictatorship, the Communist party and filthy politics—but I will stick to some basics. I have been to Taiwan a number of times, and I think I am still getting over my last trip, which was to the conference that has been mentioned. I do not know how many hours of travelling we did, but it really knocked me out for six and we did not have many hours between the business over there. If anyone thinks that Members going on trips to Taiwan are on holiday, they are wrong.

Taiwan is a wonderful place. I will not go on too much about it, but it must be way up there in the rankings for demonstrating actual democracy. Believe me, this Parliament has much to learn from Taiwan about how to conduct its business. On my first visit to Taiwan, I thought I was going to the third world, but I came back to somewhere that resembled the third world by comparison with Taiwan.

Only last month, the People's Republic of China conducted one of its largest ever military drills off the coast of Taiwan, in an attempt to intimidate it. The drill involved 34 naval vessels and at least 125 aircraft. The tactic of intimidation is part of today's debate, and it shows what China is about. China is attempting to intimidate Taiwan and isolate it by insisting that the One China principle means that Taiwan can play no role in international bodies. Nothing in UN resolution 2758 states that Taiwan cannot be part of international organisations, and the exclusion of Taiwan comes with dangerous consequences for the world. A number of Members have explicitly stated that today, so I do not need to repeat what they have said. The opening speech of my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) was magnificent; he covered every aspect of this matter, and I congratulate him on doing so.

During the covid-19 pandemic, Taiwan deployed one of the world's most effective strategies against the disease, despite its close proximity to China. However, Taiwan was excluded from the World Health Organisation, and it remains excluded today. It is worth mentioning the forced organ harvesting system. Who determined that China has an ethical organ transplant system? China itself did, yet the WHO still admitted it. According to the WHO, China operates an ethical organ harvesting system.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The hon. Lady raises a really important point. Practitioners of Falun Gong talk about arrests, incarceration and illegal organ harvesting from people who are still alive, and about the high levels of state-based attacks and murders. It is quite staggering that China exports more organs than any other country in the world, and I wonder where it gets them from.

Ms Rimmer: I do not want to go on too much about organ harvesting, because it gives me sleepless nights. China takes organs from 28-year-olds because it gets more for them, as there are better chances of succeeding if the organs are taken fresh from people who are still alive. People can order a kidney and so on, because there is a database of the people going to "re-education schools". China says to the world, "Don't worry; we can get what you need. You can have it in days." How many people have been prosecuted? We know there has been one prosecution in the UK, but how many people have come back from China having received an organ? Is the law being enforced?

The exclusion of Taiwan from international bodies meant that it could not share with the world its successful methods of dealing with covid when we needed them the most. The World Health Organisation is only one example of an international body from which Taiwan has been excluded. China has consistently blocked attempts by Taiwan to join the UN, including in 2009, which means that over 23 million people in one of the finest democracies in the world have been blocked from being heard at the United Nations. In the event of a conflict breaking out across the Taiwan strait, only one side would be able to put forward their case at the United Nations. That is not how the United Nations was intended to operate. Why is it like that? I shivered when Putin's Russia was allowed to use its veto at the United Nations. People thought I was mad, but we are seeing the consequences now.

There are troubling reports that former Taiwanese President Tsai was blocked from visiting this place to address MPs and peers last month. President Tsai has

[Ms Rimmer]

had successful visits to Canada, Brussels and Czechia, yet apparently she was not allowed here. That is despite Taiwan being an important strategic partner for the United Kingdom in the Indo-Pacific. Sadly, it seems as though China's intimidation campaign continues to work.

One of the best ways to push back against the People's Republic of China's intimidation campaign is to elevate the status of the Taiwanese Representative Office here in London, in a similar way to the action taken in the United States and Lithuania. Right now, the Taiwanese Representative Office is not afforded the protection it clearly needs. It cannot even get a bank account. Elevating Taiwan's diplomatic status would send a clear message that the British Government do not accept an enforced One China principle, and instead consider both Taiwan and China to be individual partners.

The People's Republic of China was founded 75 years ago, and Taiwan has never been part of it. Taiwan is a thriving and successful democracy that shares our values. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said, what is happening in Taiwan is just part of China's plan. Look at what is happening in Hong Kong. Instead of waiting 50 years to review everything, China smashed it and moved on to the next one: Taiwan. The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise that point today.

It is time to show our strength by throwing off the shackles of intimidation and giving Taiwan diplomatic status. If the British Government lead with our allies, other nations will follow suit. Taiwan is a self-governing democracy that has succeeded despite not being allowed into the UN and other international organisations. It is a shining light of democracy in an uncertain region, and this world is desperately short of such shining lights of true democracy in operation. The world is in desperate need.

I urge Members to vote for the motion today, to send a clear message that this House believes Taiwan has every right to be part of international organisations in its own right. That is what resolution 2758 was about.

Some people would have me be ashamed of my religion, but I am not. I am a Roman Catholic, but not holier than thou. A shudder went through me when, last year or the year before—time seems to go very quickly now—Roman Catholics in China were required to register as Roman Catholics, and our Pope accepted it. What did Hitler do? This is how he started. I thought, "Dear Lord, this sleeping tiger has not half woken up, and it is going to cause harm." It is about time that other nations, not just ours, got their act together. It is about time that so-called democratic countries sorted this out.

China is to be feared more than Russia. It is part of the evil axis that would take over this world if we do not all stand up for democracy and for people.

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

1.43 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): It is always a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker, particularly given your considerable contribution on this issue throughout your parliamentary career, as other Members have said.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor), whose passionate love for her community and her family reflects well on her and gives her constituents faith that she will act on their best behalf in this House. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), whose contribution to this debate has already been warmly noted.

Experts often talk about the pressure points of geopolitics, the places where the strategic aims of different countries coincide, clash and create tension. What is far too often left out of these conversations is the reality for the millions of people who live in those pressure points. The Taiwanese people are living in real fear at one of these pressure points.

It should be telling for all of us that, despite being an advanced economy and a thriving democracy with high living standards and strong manufacturing, and with cultural links to the rest of the world, Taiwan feels increasingly isolated and vulnerable in the face of the Chinese Government. That is testament to the fact that, no matter how hard people have worked to build a robust democracy on that island, that does not, in and of itself, protect the liberty and security that we all deserve. Taiwan deserves our support as we enter the second half of this decade, and this motion can help us to continue doing that.

The Liberal Democrats stand with the people of Taiwan. Any Chinese aggression or threat to their free speech and human rights is unacceptable. The Liberal Democrats will continue to support our friends in the Democratic Progressive party, which is the governing party of Taiwan, a long-standing member of Liberal International, and a founding member of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats.

In our manifesto, the Liberal Democrats called for the building of new diplomatic, economic and security partnerships with democracies threatened by China, including Taiwan, and it is something that we will gladly work with the Government to deliver because an issue of this importance should transcend party politics. I am reassured by the voices and the statements we have heard from Members on both sides of the House in this debate.

Fundamentally, what is at stake in Taiwan is a question of moral obligation, one that we have always had to confront and that liberals have always been clear in answering: can we stand up for people living outside recognised sovereign states, who cherish the same freedoms we do and have the same inviolable right to self-determination that we do, against neighbours with increasingly imperial objectives? Or are we forced to live in a world where, as was said in antiquity, the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must? Put simply, does might make right?

The people of Taiwan deserve us to answer that question with our clear and resounding support as they go about trying to integrate into the system of international governance. The Government should therefore listen to the story being told in this House today and make it clear that, in their dealings with the Chinese Government, they will establish clear red lines that call out violations of Taiwan's territory at land and sea as unacceptable.

The Government should work with their international partners to remove the obstacles to Taiwan joining various international bodies. As other Members have said, Taiwan's exclusion from the World Health Organisation serves to prove this point. Despite a successful

approach to the covid-19 pandemic, Taiwan was again rebuffed in its attempts to join the WHO, with China vetoing its accession until such time as Taiwan gives in to China's territorial claim on the island. This compromised our ability, and the ability of countries around the world, to learn from the lessons of Taiwan's successful response to covid-19, and it will have cost many, many lives.

Taiwan finds itself unable to properly access and work alongside Interpol, leaving it excluded from the international crime-fighting network that it needs, not least because international criminals are known to operate in the South China sea. This should concern all of us.

Taiwan's exclusion from these bodies makes international co-operation harder. It weakens a strategic ally in the region, and it emboldens states such as China and Russia to feel that their attempts to undermine the liberal world order will succeed. Indeed, how can we justify the liberal and democratic world order without ensuring that it offers protection to those who subscribe to it and who wish to join and collaborate with the institutions that are so key to maintaining that very world order?

We have already left so many countries around the world vulnerable to the influence of states such as China. The last Government made short-sighted and naive decisions to continually cut the UK's foreign aid budget, to slash our international development credentials, to shrink our world-renowned diplomatic service, to force cuts to our BBC World Service output and to undermine our standing as a major power on the world stage. Those steps have left a vacuum in Africa, in Asia, and in parts of Europe, too. We should not be remotely surprised that China has increasingly sought to fill that gap with debt traps and political influence through its belt and road initiative. It is up to this Government to do something about it, to show that the One China policy is not the policy of this Government and that Taiwan will be supported in acceding to various international bodies. That would be a key step in the right direction. They must be willing to discuss Taiwan with the Chinese Government as they embark on a new era of bilateralism with President Xi.

I note that in its manifesto earlier this year, the Labour party committed to a new approach to China, as part of a wider audit of its China strategy. The manifesto said:

"We will co-operate where we can, compete where we need to, and challenge where we must."

Those were welcome words, so it is disappointing to read coverage this week of the leaked news that the Foreign Office intervened to cancel a visit last month that Taiwan's former President Tsai Ing-wen had been due to make to the UK, when he would have spoken to MPs. Will the Government respond to that claim and explain to the House exactly why former President Tsai, as it seems, was denied a visit?

We all recognise that diplomacy is difficult, and I sincerely hope the Government will put my mind and those of other hon. Members at rest by confirming that this was an oversight. However, if it was not an oversight and that decision was taken out of deference to the Chinese Government ahead of the Prime Minister's recent meeting with President Xi, the Government will not be surprised to hear me say that that is unacceptable.

The Government's new approach to China should be characterised by a defence of our values and the robust support of Taiwan. That is why the Liberal Democrats

have called for the Government to issue a comprehensive China strategy that places human rights, effective rules-based multilateralism and working with our European partners centre stage. Without that, we risk further backsliding into a world where China feels able to act with impunity and Taiwan will continue to suffer. Will the Minister provide an update on when the Government will provide the House with an update on its China strategy audit, so that we can scrutinise it and ensure it lives up to those values?

Just last month, China simulated a full-scale invasion of the island through war games in the South China sea. As the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) said, in late 2021 and early 2022, we watched Russian forces massing on the Ukrainian border and attempted to convince ourselves that the inevitable was not about to occur. I will quote a great man, who hangs heavy over many of us in this place:

"Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

Imagine living with the threat of such a war on the doorstep. We have all been paying close attention to the terrible scenes unfolding in Ukraine and the middle east in recent years. We all know that the horrors of war have not been eased, but rather compounded by modern technology. Imagine people witnessing those scenes on their TV screens, while knowing the very same could happen to their homes and families in the very near future.

The journey to recognition and accession to international bodies for Taiwan is long and will not be solved overnight, but the Government can play a key role in making the journey easier by showing its support for Taiwan as clearly as they can. They can do the right thing on human rights in China more widely too. They can choose to recognise the genocide happening to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang autonomous region. They can stand with Hongkongers who are already living with the experience of creeping authoritarianism from Beijing. And the Government can champion the cause of international laws and norms, in the face of growing disorder and violence around the world. I invite them to do so and to regularly report back to the House on how such a China strategy is developing, because Britain is at its best when it stands with those facing oppression and says clearly, with one voice, that the days of "might makes right" are well and truly consigned to history.

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

1.53 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who always brings such knowledge and expertise to the House. I welcome the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor). I congratulate her on making her making speech and thank her for sharing her passion for her constituency with us. It is apt that you are in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, because of your great knowledge of this policy area.

Although we do not have formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, there is nonetheless a valuable and dynamic relationship between London and Taipei, underpinned by strong commercial, educational and cultural links. We also have a solid partnership in other important

[Wendy Morton]

areas, including health, as we saw particularly during the pandemic. The work of the British Office Taipei and the Taipei Representative Office in London is highly commendable and benefits both of our peoples, for example with a wide range of exchanges and visits, including on environmental, educational and judicial themes.

We also have a significant trading relationship, which we call on the Government to continue to promote. Trade in goods and services rose from £5.5 billion in 2014 to £8.3 billion in 2023, which is a substantial increase. We want more British businesses to benefit from Taiwan's impressive economy and prominent trade and investment links with the wider region. Within the current structure of our unofficial relationship, there is more we can do to maximise the benefits to both of our peoples, and we will push the Government to do so.

It is right that the UK continues to lobby in favour of Taiwan's participation in international organisations where statehood is not a prerequisite. In her response, will the Minister update the House on the Government's current plans on that front, including on the World Health Assembly and the World Health Organisation technical meetings?

The Government must not overlook the risks Taiwan has to contend with. There have been some worrying early signs, which we want to see put right. Members on the Conservative Benches harbour concerns that the relationship Labour is carving out with Beijing is all give and no take. Today provides the Minister with an opportunity to dispel the widespread impression that this Government are making concessions with nothing in return. Labour has called in the application for a new super-embassy in London and is desperately performing verbal contortions on issues that should be very straightforward, including the national security law in Hong Kong. We firmly believe that law should be repealed and we are not afraid to say so publicly.

Will the Minister name a single area where measurable, tangible progress has been made in advancing critical British interests with China, whether on national security, economic practices or human rights? As far as I can see, we are yet to receive a convincing answer. We are very clear that what Labour must not do is sacrifice the UK's voice on the threats facing Taiwan on the altar of closer relations with Beijing.

We have already seen signs of naiveté. Within a day of the Prime Minister's meeting with President Xi Jinping, which the Prime Minister hailed as an opportunity to bring about a "strong" and "consistent" relationship where "surprises" would be avoided, 45 pro-democracy campaigners were jailed in Hong Kong, following a very harsh application of the draconian national security law. It makes the Prime Minister's boast that the UK would be a partner

"committed to the rule of law"

look rather hollow. The Prime Minister's response to these entirely unjustified jailings and his inability to sufficiently publicly condemn them has raised eyebrows too. It has not gone unnoticed and we will not let that point go.

The Government need to be much more clear eyed about the threats and challenges posed by China, whether in relation to Hong Kong or Taiwan. We are concerned

by reports that the Foreign Office tried to exert pressure to postpone an inward visit by the former President of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen. The FCDO has said it "does not recognise" the description of events set out in the reports, which in Westminster language means that it does not deny that this happened. Will the Minister give the House the explanation it expects? What actually happened? Will the Minister also confirm that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have explicitly raised serious concerns in their respective meetings with President Xi and Wang Yi about any activity that risks destabilising the cross-strait status quo? Did they say, in no uncertain terms, that we stand firmly against any unilateral attempts to change the status quo?

For reasons that are well understood, we have a clear interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan strait. It is our deep conviction that the tensions, which have understandably received a great deal of attention in this afternoon's debate, should be resolved peacefully. That is what will best serve people on both sides of the Taiwan strait, as well as the Indo-Pacific region and the wider world. That peace and stability matters for the rules-based order, for trade and for the health of the global economy, and we should not shy away from saying that. We hope that people on the two sides of the Taiwan strait will renew efforts to resolve differences peacefully through constructive dialogue and not under a cloud of coercion or threats.

Much of the debate on this subject revolves around the constitutional status of Taiwan and its relationship with China. Yet we should never lose sight of Taiwan's domestic achievements in its own right, because they are deeply impressive: a flourishing and vibrant democracy, a strong judiciary and one of Asia's most dynamic economies. Taiwan is also a vital manufacturer of semi-conductors, which is one of the most important pieces of tech in the world. For all those reasons and many more, we will press the Government to deepen and grow our relationship.

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

2.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): May I say how apt it is that you are in the Chair this afternoon, Madam Deputy Speaker? I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) for securing this important debate and for his first-class speech. I thank hon. Members for their insightful contributions. I will try to respond to all the questions in the course of my speech.

As two thriving democracies, the UK and Taiwan share a unique relationship which is rooted in our shared democratic values, cultural links and deep ties. Despite not having formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, we have strong unofficial links across a range of issues such as trade, education, science and cultural exchange. In that regard, I must commend my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for her adept chairing of the British-Taiwanese all-party parliamentary group, which continues to play a fundamental role in fostering those ties and encouraging greater parliamentary links and friendship—and, indeed, visits—between the peoples of the UK and Taiwan. On that point, we had questions on visits from the two Opposition

spokespersons, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) and the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), and I will say that the best visits are the ones that are organised by the friendship groups, without too much interference from Governments.

Those links are driven by common interests such as security and prosperity, trade, innovation, climate action and global health, and in the first three quarters of this year, there were more British visitors to Taiwan than from any other European country. Taiwan-UK trade was worth £8.3 billion in the four quarters to the end of the second quarter of 2024, and Taiwan remains a key destination for UK enterprises in clean energy and professional services. The British Office Taipei and the Taipei Representative Offices in London and Edinburgh support the partnership, in the absence of diplomatic relations.

Members of this House are familiar with recent tensions in the Taiwan strait. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) laid them out in his introductory speech and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was very clear on that point. Our long-standing position is clear: the issue should be resolved peacefully by people on both sides of the strait, without the threat or use of force or coercion. Peace and stability in the strait matters, not just for the UK but for the wider world. As the FCDO statement in October outlined, recent Chinese military exercises around Taiwan increased tensions and risked dangerous escalation.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green is correct to carefully monitor the increased spending on the People's Liberation Army, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) is right to warn of the damaging elements of cyber-warfare. A conflict across the strait would, of course, be a human tragedy, or as my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) said, would have "dangerous consequences". It would also be devastating to the global economy, with the study by Bloomberg Economics from January 2024, which I think we have all read, estimating that it would cost the global economy \$10 trillion, or 10% of global GDP. No country with a high, middle or low income would be shielded from the repercussions of such a crisis. That is why the UK does not support any unilateral attempt to change the status quo across the Taiwan strait.

Taiwan is not just facing pressure in the strait; it is being prevented from participating meaningfully in large sections of the international system. We believe that the people of Taiwan make an invaluable contribution to areas of global concern and that the exclusion of Taiwanese expertise is a loss both to the people of Taiwan and to the people of the UK. I therefore reply to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire in his excellent speech about the importance of Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organisations, as a member where statehood is not a prerequisite and as an observer or guest where it is.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The Minister has mentioned the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire and his excellent opening speech. He posed a question that I hope she can answer at some point. Do His Majesty's Government now believe that a blockade of Taiwan would be considered an act of war?

Catherine West: I can confirm that we have ongoing conversations with allies about all the risks associated with the Taiwan strait, the South China sea, which has also been brought up in this debate, and other borders. Those include borders with India and any other borders where we have serious concerns, because there are a number of threats to global security.

We continue to make the case for Taiwan's reinstatement to the World Health Assembly as an observer. The UK has restated that several times, including alongside partners in recent G7 Foreign Ministers' statements. Its inclusion would benefit global health, including through participation in technical meetings and information exchange by the experts. The fact that a growing number of countries joined us in making statements on Taiwan's inclusion at this year's World Health Assembly meeting demonstrates that the issue resonates not just in the UK and Taiwan, but with many in the wider international community, and we are pleased to play that leadership role. We would all benefit from learning from Taiwan's experience in dealing with pandemics, which, as we know, do not respect different geographies.

On that point, we believe that, as Members have said today, there is a misconception in many quarters about what UN General Assembly resolution 2758 from 1971 determined. The UK's view is that the resolution decided that only the People's Republic of China should represent China at the United Nations. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire said, it made no separate or additional determination on the status of Taiwan and should not therefore be used to preclude Taiwan's meaningful participation in the UN or the wider international system on the basis that I have already set out. That is why the UK opposes any attempt to broaden the interpretation of resolution 2758 to rewrite history. I do not believe that that would be in the interests of the people of Taiwan, and neither would it be in UK or global interests.

On wider UK-Taiwan collaboration, we will continue to strengthen the UK's unofficial relationship with Taiwan because both sides derive enormous benefits from it, because the UK is a believer in the importance of free and open trade and, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said, because the UK and Taiwan have strong cultural ties. Our thriving £8 billion trade and investment relationship encompasses a wide range of goods and services, not least the UK's export of over £340 million-worth of Scotch whisky. I think that is quite appropriate, given that we had the wonderful maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor)—I am sure she is a strong supporter of that wonderful export from her beloved Scotland—and that it took place just two days before St Andrew's Day. What could be better?

Our enhanced trade partnership that was announced last year, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham mentioned, will further strengthen co-operation in investment, digital trade, renewable energy and net zero. Taiwan produces the vast majority of the world's most advanced semiconductors that drive our digital economy, and it has a critical place in the technology supply chains that underpin global markets. That is why we want our flourishing science and technology co-operation to continue.

Just recently, the national technology adviser led a delegation of 24 businesses to Taipei for the SEMICON Taiwan 2024 conference, where the UK had its largest

[*Catherine West*]

country pavilion to date. The two sides also held the annual Dialog Semiconductor and discussed the potential to expand co-operation on semiconductor skills, research and development, and supply chain resilience.

I am pleased to say that we hold regular expert-level talks with Taiwan on a range of other important issues. Hon. Members may have seen that our latest energy dialogue concluded just last week. We are also partners on climate action. Taiwan is a key market for the UK offshore wind sector. Our enhanced trade partnership will strengthen our co-operation on net zero technologies, which are essential for the transition to a clean energy system and for bolstering energy security.

To conclude, this Government are maintaining the UK's long-standing policy towards Taiwan and relations across the Taiwan strait. I am sure that parliamentary visits by MPs will continue, given the feeling in the House today. Our collaboration with Taiwan is mutually beneficial, which is why we continue to engage with Taiwan within the bounds of our unofficial relationship.

We continue to be a staunch advocate for Taiwan's meaningful international participation, because Taiwan's valuable expertise on a wide range of issues can only benefit the international community as we work to tackle shared global challenges. We continue to work closely with our international partners to advocate for peace and stability, and to discourage any activity that undermines the status quo.

Before I finish, I am aware that I did not answer the question about the China audit, which was raised by colleagues today. We expect it to be ready for public discussion in spring 2025, but there is plenty of consultation—official and ministerial—happening in the meantime. The Foreign Affairs Committee will also be approached for comment.

The UK has a critical role to play in supporting continued peace and stability in the strait through these channels. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Blair McDougall to wind up.

2.11 pm

Blair McDougall: I thank the Minister for restating the Government's position on the interpretation of UN resolutions, and for celebrating Taiwan's society, economy and democracy, which I know will be well taken by our visitors. It is encouraging that so many Members spoke in the House with one voice on this issue, regardless of party, and that so many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), made it clear that the situation in Taiwan cannot be separated out from wider questions of human rights in the People's Republic of China.

I did not realise that my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor) was going to give her maiden speech in this debate, but it was wonderful none the less and I congratulate her on

it. We can all see why she is such a valued friend and colleague to so many of us. She mentioned the former munitions works in her constituency, which is now this beautiful, peaceful, new build community. That made me think that it is almost a metaphor for our attitude in the world's democracies.

President Macron spoke recently about how western democracies are herbivores in a world of carnivores. I think that we have forgotten the sacrifices and the strength that it took for us to enjoy the freedoms we have today. Hon. Members reached back into different parts of history to make that point. I was particularly pleased with the contribution of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor). I am currently trying to get my son interested in ancient Greek history, so to hear someone quoting from the Melian dialogue in Parliament was music to my ears.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) reached back slightly less far into the 20th century, but there is a pattern whereby dictators will take a little bit, a little bit more and little bit more, and if they are not met with strength early on, they will eventually ask for something that we cannot give. That is when it becomes a crisis, and when we have to make greater sacrifices.

What I was most encouraged by today was that, as important as it was for this House to condemn with one voice any attempt to change the status quo through force, there was also a celebration of Taiwan. Even if Taiwan were not a democracy, it would deserve protection from the international community, but it is a democracy, and we should protect its people. Even if it did not have a vibrant, open society and free speech, we should be seeking to show solidarity with its people, but it does have that open, vibrant society, so we must show that solidarity. Even if it were not the dynamic economy that is so important and so integrated in everything that we do in the world economy, we should be recognising the cost of any conflict there, but it is integrated in the world economy. And even if we were not in a global context where authoritarians are on the march, we should stand up and say that we would not tolerate another democracy being bullied by its nearby authoritarian neighbour and another society having to be forced into defending its own freedoms through force when, as an international community, we can prevent that from happening.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House, recalling that United Nations Resolution 2758 of 25 October 1971, which established the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations (UN), does not mention Taiwan, notes that UN Resolution 2758 does not address the political status of Taiwan or establish PRC sovereignty over Taiwan and is silent both on the status of Taiwan in the UN and on Taiwanese participation in UN agencies; and calls on the Government to clarify its position that UN Resolution 2758 does not establish the One China Principle as a matter of international law, to state clearly that nothing in law prevents the participation of Taiwan in international organisations and to condemn efforts made by representatives of the PRC to distort the meaning of UN Resolution 2758 in support of Beijing's One China Principle and the alteration of historic documents by representatives of the PRC, changing the name of the country from Taiwan to Taiwan, province of China.

Pakistan: Freedom of Religion

2.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House notes reports of deteriorating religious freedom in Pakistan; expresses its concern over the alleged widespread forced conversions and human rights abuses of minority religious groups; deplores the lack of action by the Pakistani government, which represents a serious violation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and further notes that the arrest of opposition religious leaders by the local authorities has led to condemnation both in Pakistan and further afield.

May I first thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this debate and for granting time in the main Chamber for it? I thank all hon. Members who will make contributions to the debate. It is a pleasure to secure, I believe, the first debate on religious persecution in this Government's first Session. I think that it is the first time in about four or five years that we have had a debate on this subject in the main Chamber. In essence, we have scored two in one today.

I rise today with an urgent message about the plight of religious minorities in Pakistan. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and also as chair of the all-party group for Pakistani minorities, I have had the privilege of hearing first-hand accounts of bravery, resilience and heartbreak from those who continue to face unimaginable persecution for their faith. I have always had a deep interest in Pakistan—even long before I came to this place—and for my brothers and sisters who are Christians in a country where persecution is rife, human rights abuses are rampant and the right to express oneself is denied them.

I visited Pakistan on two occasions in 2018 and 2023. I would love to say that things have changed in Pakistan in those intervening five years, but they have not. Indeed, they have got worse, and I will go into more detail on that as we move forward.

Our APPG for international freedom of religion or belief remains steadfast in its mission to uphold and defend the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief for all people regardless of faith or creed. As chair of that group, I speak up for those of Christian faith, those of other faiths and those of no faith. I believe in my heart that that is my duty to do that as a Christian. I always explain that when I deliberate on all the many religious groups that are persecuted today. I urge my esteemed colleagues across the Chamber to join us in amplifying the voices of the oppressed and taking decisive action to address the systematic injustices that they endure.

Let me put this in plain language that we can all understand: the reality of the situation in Pakistan is dire. It is critical. It is at crisis point. In fact, I can understand why some people feel utterly hopeless. Pakistan is a lovely nation, with a rich and diverse history, but it remains fraught with challenges for its religious minorities. Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis and Shi'a Muslims face widespread discrimination, persecution and violence on a regular basis. The legislative and societal frameworks in Pakistan have created an environment where intolerance thrives. If we let something happen once, twice, three times, then 10 times, it becomes the norm. That is what has happened to religious minorities in Pakistan.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): We are familiar with interventions from bodies such as Amnesty International and the United Nations even in our own country. Obviously there is a far more acute need for their attention in places such as Pakistan. Does that seem to be articulated and driven home adequately, and is it having an impact, especially on such appalling matters as forced marriages and honour killings?

Jim Shannon: I would love to say that such interventions are having an impact, but unfortunately I do not see much evidence of it. Our responses have to be evidentially based. Amnesty International is involved, and present, in Pakistan. Is it highlighting these things in Pakistan? Only Amnesty can answer that. We do not see much evidence of it.

My concern is that the legislative and societal frameworks in Pakistan have created an environment where intolerance thrives. The blasphemy laws, which I ask the Minister to respond to directly, were introduced during General Zia ul-Haq's regime. They are among the harshest in the world, and have been frequently weaponised against religious minorities. I will give some examples of that in the debate.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Does the hon. Member agree that the issue goes beyond religious freedom into other equality matters such as women's rights and LGBT rights, which go hand in hand?

Jim Shannon: I will mention that later; it is a salient point, because whenever there is persecution based on people's religious beliefs, there are human rights issues alongside it. The two things are not separate; they are married. If human rights are taken away, so are religious rights. The hon. Gentleman is right to put that on the record.

Since the 1980s, many thousands of cases have been reported, disproportionately affecting Christians, Hindus and Ahmadis. The blasphemy laws are used not only to silence dissent but as tools for personal vendettas and mob incitement. When I was in Pakistan in 2023, I met some of those who had been charged under the blasphemy laws. It was found that the allegations were vindictive and malicious: there was no evidential basis for them whatever. Such accusations have led to extrajudicial killings, violent attacks and mass displacements.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) referred to the plight of young Christian and Hindu girls who are abducted, forcibly converted to Islam and married to their captors. That is not merely a violation of their religious freedom but an affront to their dignity and human rights. In Sindh province alone, the practice has become alarmingly common, with inadequate legal protections allowing perpetrators to evade justice. There is something wrong with a society that can let a 14 or 12-year-old, or anyone who is still under the care of their parents, be taken away, abducted and married against their will. These are people of such innocence. It really disturbs me, and unfortunately we have reports that it is happening regularly in Pakistan.

Dignity First's 2024 report highlighted more than 70 violent incidents targeting Christians, ranging from mob violence to forced conversions and abductions. In Jaranwala in Punjab, Christian homes and businesses were attacked in what appeared to be a premeditated

[*Jim Shannon*]

assault on their religious identity. They were attacked and brutalised because they were Christians. Tragically, the authorities have often failed to bring perpetrators to justice. Christians have been subjected to accusations of blasphemy that can result in torture or death at the hands of violent mobs. The international community must demand that Pakistan take concrete steps to end the violence against Christians and provide legal protection for all religious minorities. This House believes in freedom for religious minorities, wherever they are in the world. We therefore ask Pakistan to conform to that, and protect religious minorities. I commend the organisation Alliance Defending Freedom International, which recently facilitated the rescue of Saima Bibi and Reeha Saleem, two brave young women forced into such marriages. Their release was a triumph, but countless others remain trapped in similar situations. Their cries for help go unanswered. We ask the Minister to do something about that.

I want to take up the plight of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan. We were fortunate that the last time we were with them we were able to meet some of the imams and people at high levels of the Muslim faith. According to the society in Pakistan, the Ahmadiyyas are a sect of Muslimism, but they do not conform to everyone else. Therefore, according to Pakistan law, they are heretics, if that is the right word to use, and outside the mainstream. There is something wrong with religious liberty if we cannot accept that people have the right to choose the god they wish to worship. That right should be protected. Declared non-Muslims by the state in 1974, Ahmadi face systematic discrimination, enshrined in law. There is no freedom there. Under ordinance XX, their religious practices, such as calling their places of worship “mosques” or referring to their faith as “Islam”, are criminalised.

The desecration of Ahmadi mosques and graves has become almost routine. The last time we were there, we saw pictures of churches, mosques and gravestones that had been destroyed, with the graves desecrated. Since 2021, more than 40 mosques and 421 graves have been destroyed or defaced. Violent hate speech against Ahmadi is openly promoted, with preachers inciting mobs to commit acts of violence. It is not just a matter of verbally objecting; they take it further. Mob violence ensues and many people are hurt.

Just two and half months ago, the September 2024 commemoration of anti-Ahmadi laws was particularly chilling, as it emboldened extremists and led to further attacks on that very vulnerable community. In the Parachinar Kurram district, Shi’a Muslims—another sect—face relentless attacks from extremist groups, including the Taliban and ISIS-affiliated organisations. Just this year, Parachinar was cut off from the rest of Pakistan due to a blockade, resulting in severe shortages of medical supplies, food and fuel. Eleven lives were lost because critically ill patients could not access essential care.

To pivot slightly, we also have an obligation to address the role of the Jamaat-e-Islami group in Pakistan. Not only did it play a significant role in the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, but it continues to shape religious and political landscapes across the region. Its student wing is called Islami Chhatra Shibir. The organisation has been involved in violent protests, including recent clashes in Bangladesh over Government policies. Founded by

Syed Abul Ala Maududi, Jamaat-e-Islami promotes the idea of establishing an Islamic state, and has been linked to extremist activities through connections with groups such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The legacy of Jamaat-e-Islami’s involvement in atrocities during the liberation of Bangladesh still casts a shadow over its actions today, both in Pakistan and Bangladesh. We want to see peace, stability and the democratic process working well, but there are those who work against that. In addition to the suffering of religious minorities in Pakistan, we cannot ignore the ongoing targeted violence against Shi’a Muslims in regions such as Parachinar. Located in Pakistan’s volatile tribal belt, it has been the site of relentless sectarian violence, including a recent attack that left 44 Shi’a Muslims dead at the hands of extremist Sunni militias and the Taliban. Those acts of violence are not isolated, but part of a broader pattern of persecution against the Shi’a community.

In August 2024, a conflict over land disputes escalated into deadly sectarian violence, leaving 46 people dead and 200 injured. Such violence is not isolated, but part of a broader pattern of targeted attacks on Shi’a Muslims, perpetuating cycles of hatred and division. The situation is urgent. These attacks are an affront not only to basic human rights but to the principles of religious tolerance and co-existence.

Let me give an example. Whenever I was in Pakistan, we went to the Church of Pakistan—equivalent to the Church of England—and the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), who is no longer here, went to the Roman Catholic cathedral. Both places were surrounded by guards, inside and out, and there were metal gates on the entrance. We had a police guard, along with members of the army, the whole time we were there. Simply being a Christian, or having any different religious persuasion, requires extra security in that area. I remember seeing the parishioners as they left the church to make their way home. When they walked out of the gates, nobody was there to guard them, while obviously we were being guarded, and I was very conscious of that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend not only for securing the debate, but for his continuing efforts in this regard. He outlined a litany of attacks, which hopefully will be deplored by all, so will he join me in commending groups such as Open Doors, which will publish its annual watch list in January? That list itemises in good detail the types of attacks, criticisms and human rights violations that exist across the globe, particularly for those persecuted for their religious belief.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is right to put that on the record. Pakistan will feature highly in the top 20 countries where persecution is rife. It is one of those leagues that countries do not want to be at the top of. It is not like the premier league; countries do not want to be No. 1, or indeed anywhere in the top 20.

Pakistan’s legal framework ostensibly guarantees religious freedom, under its constitution, yet the reality is far different. It has a single national curriculum, and as recently as 2021 that was criticised for marginalising religious minorities. Textbooks continue to perpetrate stereotypes, fostering intolerance among the next generation. We have to be careful about what Pakistan does on education. We had hoped that during our visit we

would see some changes and opportunities. Pakistan says it sets many jobs aside for people from religious minority groups, but the fact is we do not see that. There are many talented people who are Christian, Hindu, Shi'a Muslim, Ahmadiyya, Baha'i, or of a faith that does not conform with Pakistan's state faith, and they could do the same job every bit as well.

Minority students are forced to study Islamic content, isolating them further in a society already fraught with prejudice. Economic discrimination compounds those challenges. Non-Muslims are often relegated to low-status jobs with limited opportunity for social or professional mobility. That systematic marginalisation keeps them in a cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

I give the example of those people—mostly Christians—who work in the brick kilns. We did a report on Pakistan's religious minorities in the last Session and presented it to the Pakistan Government, but we have not had any response just yet. My Christian brothers and sisters are persecuted, beaten and abused in every way imaginable—I do not want to have to imagine it. Their contracts of employment are changed in such a way that they are contracted to the brick kilns for not just a couple of years, or perhaps 10 years; they are there forever. That report also highlighted that.

The United Kingdom has a proud history of championing human rights on the global stage. As we deepen our relationship with Pakistan, we must use all our influence to advocate for meaningful change, and I urge colleagues to join me in calling on the Minister to do so. I am pleased to see him and the new elected shadow Minister in their places, and I wish the shadow Minister well. I look forward to a consensus of opinion across the Chamber on this issue.

I have a couple of asks for the Minister—more than a couple; it always is with me, but I do so respectfully and in a positive fashion. Can we advocate for blasphemy law reform by working with international allies to pressure Pakistan to reform those laws, ensuring that they cannot be misused against religious minorities? Can we support victims of forced conversion and forced marriage by providing resources to non-governmental organisations working on the ground to rescue and rehabilitate victims? Can we press the Pakistan Government to implement stronger legal safeguards to protect vulnerable girls and women? The hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) referred to how women and girls are considered as second-class in many cases. If they are Christians, they are doubly second-class in that country.

Will we demand equal rights for the Ahmadi people by advocating for the repeal of discriminatory laws targeting the Ahmadiyya community and ensure that they are granted full rights as citizens of Pakistan? Will we provide humanitarian aid to Parachinar and urge the Pakistan Government to lift the blockade, restore essential services and mediate sectarian conflicts in order to prevent further bloodshed? There is a mediation role for our Government in this country. In Pakistan it is more important, but it does not seem to happen. Will we promote education reform by collaborating with the Pakistan authorities to develop curricula that promote inclusivity and tolerance and that foster a culture of co-existence?

My final request to the Minister relates to my private Member's Bill—it will not be debated tomorrow because the focus will be on the assisted dying Bill. My Bill asks

for a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief to strengthen accountability and to set the precedent on the international stage that we are not for turning on human rights or anybody's freedom of religion or belief. I know the Bill will be put off tomorrow, probably until March, because that is how the system works. I have asked for meetings with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, and hopefully those meetings will take place. I suspect that, had it not been for the wash-up after the sudden calling of the election, my previous Bill would probably have become law, because I had positive responses to questions I have asked in the Chamber on it. We hope that will be the case but, again, perhaps the Minister could explain the way forward.

I want to cast my mind back to when we were in Pakistan in 2018 and mention the blasphemy law. Most people here will know the case of Asia Bibi. She was accused of blasphemy. It was a vexatious, malicious, vindictive and untrue allegation, but none the less she was subjected to the law that pervades in Pakistan. She fought her case and was sentenced. When we were in Pakistan, we met two of the three judges who would make the decision. I am not saying that we did any better than anybody else—that is not why I am saying it—but we spoke about how and why the blasphemy law is used against people of a different faith. The Minister at the time—I think it was Mark Field—said, "Don't say anything about Asia Bibi, because the two judges we met told us that they were of a mind to set her free." We understood the process: do not say too much about it at home and let the process run. It did and she is free. She now lives in Canada, but there are so many other Asia Bibis who live in Pakistan and also deserve to be protected.

We must be clear that we stand on the side of the people of Pakistan and that hate and intolerance divide and hurt people. It is within our power to support stability and freedom through our influence and by being resolute in our commitment to the region. We cannot be idle. Long before I came to this place, a former Prime Minister said:

"The lady's not for turning."

We all know who that was. I suggest that we use that same spirit and that we must not step back from our commitments.

The challenges facing religious minorities in Pakistan are immense but not insurmountable. We have the tools, the influence and the moral responsibility to act. By joining forces with international partners, civil society organisations and the Pakistani diaspora, we can help to create a Pakistan where no one is persecuted for their faith. That is the objective of this debate; that is the goal that I hope we might be able to achieve. Let us not be silent witnesses to such atrocities. Let us stand together and be a voice for the voiceless, a shield for the defenceless and a beacon of hope for those who have known only darkness.

I always conclude my remarks in such debates with a scripture text. Proverbs 31:8-9 says:

"Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Let us do just that today.

2.39 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate and thank the Backbench Business

[John McDonnell]

Committee, through which he secured it. I also congratulate him on this upgrade from Westminster Hall to the main Chamber—some argue that Westminster Hall should be renamed the “Shannon debating forum.”

I will take up the hon. Gentleman's point, as I am sure others will, about the Ahmadiyya community. Like other Members in the Chamber, I have an Ahmadiyya community in my constituency. They operate under the slogan of “Love for all, hatred for none.” We saw that campaign on our London buses at one point a few years ago. They relate to me exactly what the hon. Gentleman described: distressing tales of what is happening to their community in Pakistan. As he says, just describing oneself as a member of the Ahmadiyya community is an offence under the penal law in Pakistan. Doing so can result in a three-year term of imprisonment, a fine, or even death. In addition, if people call their place of worship a mosque, or their call to prayer—the *adhan*—goes out, they can be prosecuted under that penal code, which is appalling.

The briefing that the all-party parliamentary group received recently highlighted that the situation has got significantly worse this year. In the briefing, we were told that at least four people had been murdered because of their religion. We also had a list with a number of people who had been arrested and imprisoned for their religion. In prison, their situation is extremely precarious; there are also worries about torture. Publications are banned, and to be able to vote, Ahmadis are placed on a separate list—in fact, many of them are disenfranchised as a result.

In the past, when we have raised those matters in debates, in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall, Governments of all political complexions have made representations. At times there has been some alleviation because the world has focused its attention on Pakistan's behaviour, but the reports that we get show that recently things have been getting dramatically worse. That is why we need some action from our Government.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need to work through international agencies to shine a light on what is happening and make representations. It is key now that we mobilise pressure as much as we can to influence the Pakistani Government to scrap the blasphemy laws being used so ferociously against the Ahmadiyya community and others.

Let me say something that might prove contentious for some. I think we now need to think about going beyond that. There are individuals in Pakistan, within the Administration and the security forces, who we can now identify as leading on some of these human rights abuses, and I wonder whether we should treat them as human rights abusers, as we would others from other countries. That would mean naming and shaming, of course, but also instigating some form of sanctions against them. Most of those individuals have a relationship with this country in one form or another. In fact, many of them will be using their resources via investment vehicles in this country. I feel that we need to take a stronger view and stronger action than we have in the past, because the situation has deteriorated.

Another issue, which we have raised before, is that although we provide a fair amount of aid and assistance to Pakistan—that is fine; I completely understand that—it is important that that aid is not abused. For example,

the Pakistani Government nationalised Ahmadiyya schools and have never returned them to the community. We fund education in Pakistan, so we need to be conditional about how that investment in education is made.

A second point that might be provocative is that we must consider the funding of the organisations campaigning for human rights in Pakistan and internationally, so that we can strengthen their arm in advocating on behalf of the Ahmadiyya community. That is my position on the Ahmadiyya community.

I will slightly abuse the scope of the debate if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker. Human rights abuses in Pakistan have worsened in this recent period, not just for Ahmadiyyas but for others. At the moment, severe repression is taking place in Balochistan. There is a history in the last year, and in the recent months in particular, of repression among the Baloch. The Pakistani authorities have introduced a strategy of disappearances. Large numbers of people have simply disappeared. A crudity about that is that it involves “find and dump”—the only way in which people who disappear are found is when their bodies are dumped on the streets in that region.

The forms of repression taking place in Balochistan are producing a resistance movement. Unfortunately, some of that is armed resistance, and we have seen what are being classified as terrorist actions, so there is a deterioration. However, there is also a peace movement, which is largely led by women. They have been instigating marches over the past 12 months. Unfortunately, they are now being arrested and the peace and human rights movement in Balochistan is being savagely repressed. If we are taking up these issues of religious freedom, we should extend consideration to the whole range of human rights abuses taking place in Pakistan. I would not want to see a destabilisation of the country as a result of a reactionary Government taking these measures. From my understanding, people are on the edge—they have had enough—and unfortunately the response from the Pakistani Government does not suggest that they will reconsider their strategy of repressive measures.

2.47 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate, and am grateful to him and other Members for their excellent contributions.

Pakistan's constitution enshrines the right of every citizen to

“profess, practice and propagate his religion”,

and in January, the Minister of Foreign Affairs went as far as to claim:

“Pakistan has undertaken wide ranging measures to promote religious freedom and protect minority rights.”

That is sadly and simply untrue. In the face of forced conversions and mob violence, the Pakistani Government are far too often failing to fulfil their basic duty of protecting their citizens.

Even more seriously, there is widespread evidence of the state actively supporting the discrimination of certain religious minorities, including Shi'a Muslims, Christians and Hindus, with laws against blasphemy in particular being used to undermine their human rights and freedoms. Today, however, I will focus on the Ahmadi Muslim community, who are subject to some of the most serious discrimination.

I am proud that many in the Ahmadi Muslim community live and/or worship in my constituency, which is home to Morden's magnificent Baitul Futuh mosque, the largest mosque in the UK and the worldwide headquarters of the faith. It is from there that the caliph's regular Friday sermon is televised live throughout the world, but while Ahmadi Muslims can practise in freedom in this country, that is sadly not the case for those watching and listening to him in Pakistan. I have heard from the mosque and from many of my constituents about the persecution that their community faces on a daily basis in Pakistan. In their mosques, their homes and their businesses, Ahmadi Muslims are facing persecution merely for observing their faith.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I also have a number of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Epsom and Ewell, and it was really shameful that this faith group had to move its home to the UK to avoid exactly this persecution. Does my hon. Friend agree that all religious groups in Pakistan should have the freedom to practise their faith, and that we in this House should be a voice for the persecuted?

Mr Kohler: I completely agree. We have an absolute duty to enforce that and make sure that happens.

The Pakistani Government are doing more than just turning a blind eye to this discrimination, with the state actively seeking to marginalise the Ahmadi Muslim community. Unless Ahmadi Muslims declare themselves to be non-Muslims, they are not permitted to stand for office or vote—they are denied a voice in the system that is meant to uphold their rights. It is important to note that this was not always the case: for example, the first Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Sir Chaudhry Zafarullah Khan, was an Ahmadi Muslim. Sadly, however, Ahmadi Muslim freedoms have been undermined by the Pakistani Government over time, but that does not mean that those rights cannot be restored.

For that reason, our Government should be speaking more loudly on this issue. The UK is Pakistan's third largest trading partner and its largest in Europe. We are consequently not without influence. Disenfranchised and marginalised Pakistani Ahmadi Muslims have very few options at their disposal. It is therefore our duty to raise our voices, and for the Government to do what they can to help protect their rights and those of other religious minorities. I consequently echo my party leader's calls last year to reconsider Pakistan's trade preferences. I also hope the Government will work with Ahmadi Muslim refugees across the world and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to preserve those refugees' safety. As Gladstone said in 1877:

"Nonconformity supplies the backbone of English Liberalism."

The Government must do what they can to continue this country's proud liberal tradition, protecting the rights of the Ahmadi Muslims and other religious minorities in Pakistan.

2.51 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for organising this important debate. From the many examples he has given from his long time spent fighting for religious freedom in Pakistan and for Christians around the world, I can see that this is something he cares deeply about, and it is important that we are discussing it today.

Like the Minister, I spent some time working in Pakistan with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I spent three years working in Islamabad and Lahore from 2019 to 2021. I spent a lot of that time traveling around Punjab—I had responsibility for that province within the FCDO—and a lot of the examples that the hon. Member for Strangford gave are really familiar. I will talk about some of those examples in a moment, but before I do so, I want to highlight some of the other aspects of Pakistan that I saw there, including some of the more positive ones, which may be examples of how religious minorities should be treated that we can give when we are talking to Pakistan in the future.

In my time travelling throughout Punjab, I got to see many religious sites. Travelling through the old city of Lahore, there is the very impressive Badshahi Masjid. You can travel down to Derawar in Bahawalpur and see a fantastic fort there; there is the Rukn-e-Alam shrine in Multan, as well as the gurdwara at Nankana Sahib, and of course there is Lahore cathedral. I mention all those sites not because I want to give people a tour of Pakistan, or indeed to promote its tourism industry—although that definitely should be encouraged—but to highlight that all those magnificent buildings are from different religions. Pakistan has a proud history of various minorities throughout the ages, from the Buddhists of the Gandhara civilisation to Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims of various sects, Ahmadis and Christians. There are parts of the country that recognise that history. Spending time with each of those groups was a real privilege.

Of course, this is a debate on freedom of religion and belief, and while there are huge concerns about the treatment of minorities in Pakistan, I wanted to give one positive example of something that has happened in recent years. Towards the end of my time in Pakistan, I had the opportunity to visit the Kartarpur corridor, on the border between Pakistan and India. It is a site built on the location that was used by Guru Nanak when he first established the Sikh community in the 16th century. For a long time, it was divided between India and Pakistan, but in 2019 Narendra Modi and Imran Khan allowed access for the community to cross between their two countries. When I visited in 2020, I met pilgrims from India who had come to Pakistan to meet relatives in the Sikh community whom they had not seen since partition nearly 80 years before. The joy on the faces of those people, who were enabled to do that by the promises made by the Pakistani Government, showed that it is possible for the Government to be more positive toward some religious minorities.

In the three years I was based in Punjab, there were numerous cases of brutal attacks on religious minorities, some of which the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. I will give three more examples from the time I was there. In April 2021, there was a mob attack in Faisalabad on Mariam Lal and Newsh Arooj, two Christian nurses who had been asked to clean up lockers in the hospital in which they were working. They were set on by a mob after accusations of blasphemy, and they were later arrested by the police and held in prison for some time. They have now been released, fortunately. In December 2021, there was the lynching of Priyantha Kumara in Sialkot. Priyantha was a Buddhist from Sri Lanka who was running a factory as the general manager. He was lynched by an angry mob after accusations of blasphemy while the police stood by and were unable to intervene.

[Alex Ballinger]

In August 2022, there was the stabbing of Naseer Ahmed, a 62-year-old Ahmadi grandfather, who refused to chant slogans in support of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan. For that crime, he was murdered in the streets by an angry Pakistani man.

I raise those three incidents not because they are extraordinary, but because they felt routine. On a weekly basis when I was there, I would hear of bad examples from the Christian community, the Ahmadi community and others about the brutal violence and humiliations to which they were subjected. Sumera Shafique, a friend of mine who works for the Christian Lawyers Association of Pakistan, would call me regularly to update me about the false conversions she was working on, particularly in the south of Punjab.

Many people from the Ahmadiyya community, who would obviously prefer to be anonymous at the moment, regularly raise with me the victimisation they are facing, with their mosques being destroyed and their schools being closed down. As we heard from other Members, schools have also been nationalised by the Government. There has even been the introduction of a new marriage law meaning that an Ahmadiyya Muslim in Pakistan must renounce their faith to get married. The level of discrimination is quite outrageous.

I am lucky to have a significant Ahmadiyya community in my own constituency, with the Baitul Ghafoor mosque on Long Lane in Halesowen. It holds a number of inter-faith events, and I have been to many of them. I have been pleased to see the welcome that members provide to many people from different religious backgrounds. The contrast with the way the Ahmadiyya community is treated in Pakistan is striking.

When I was in Lahore, I had many discussions with the Human Rights Ministers of Punjab, Khalil Tahir Sandhu and Ramesh Singh, whom I still count as friends. I know they face a very difficult situation, and it is very challenging to work within the system to improve the conditions of religious minorities. Many people in Pakistan and in the Government are trying to do that, but I would of course encourage them to do more.

Finally, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford again for organising this debate on a subject that I think we should be talking about more. I know it is an extremely difficult subject for the FCDO to work on, and I understand the limitations we are working under, but I ask the Minister to continue to raise the deteriorating situation that religious minorities have faced in recent years with our counterparts in Pakistan. I also ask him to commit to include freedom of religion or belief in the discussions about the future co-operation and trade agreements that we are having with Pakistan, and to use every opportunity across Government to hold discussions to push that forward.

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

2.58 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on bringing forward this debate and allowing us to discuss this incredibly important issue in this House.

On 25 November 1981, the General Assembly of the United Nations passed resolution 36/55, which said:

“Discrimination between human beings on the grounds of religion or belief constitutes an affront to human dignity and a disavowal of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and shall be condemned as a violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Nearly half a century has passed since those words were written, and they came just seven years after the passage of the second amendment to the constitution of Pakistan, which declared that Ahmadi Muslims were

“not a Muslim for the purposes of the Constitution or the law.”

My speech will concentrate on the Ahmadi community, but that should not diminish the persecution and discrimination suffered by other communities, which has been mentioned by many hon. Members.

Many decades on, we still find ourselves grappling with the critical injustice, prejudice and persecution that that amendment enshrined in law and enabled. That is what the current legal framework in Pakistan has done. It has enabled not just legal exclusion and prosecution, but ongoing hate speech and violent persecution. Extremist clerics in Pakistan have called for Ahmadi Muslims to be hung or beheaded, for their women to be murdered to prevent more Ahmadi Muslims from being born, and even for the Government of Pakistan to understand that if they do not act, the people will take matters into their own hands and kill Ahmadi Muslims themselves. If anyone has any lingering doubt about whether that awful rhetoric extends only to calls for violence within Pakistan's borders, I refer them to one rally this year where the following was said:

“We have to strangle each and every Ahmadi... You have no idea how powerful this slogan is! You will raise it here, an Ahmadi will die in Great Britain.”

That abhorrent rhetoric has no place in a democratic republic such as Pakistan, and I know from conversations with many of my constituents, as well as Ahmadi Muslims across London, that it absolutely terrifies Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan and here in the UK.

We too often forget that rhetoric has consequences, and violent rhetoric becomes violence as surely as night becomes day. Sure enough, violent hate crimes across Pakistan and around the world against Ahmadi Muslims are at shocking levels. This year, four Ahmadi Muslims were killed in a targeted manner. Tahir Iqbal, president of a local Ahmadi Muslim community, was shot dead by two motorcyclists. Zaka ur Rehman, a dentist, was killed in his own clinic by two gunmen. In both cases, no perpetrators have been identified and brought to justice. In Sadullahpur, two Ahmadi Muslims, Ghulam Sarwar and Rahat Ahmad Bajwa, were murdered in separate incidents on the same day. The alleged perpetrator, a 16-year-old student of a madrassah, confessed to the killings, citing religious reasons—16 years old. I invite hon. Members to recall the poisonous rhetoric that I have just outlined, and to which that young man must have been exposed in order to carry out such a heinous act.

It seems that violence against Ahmadi Muslims is rarely investigated, and in many cases is seemingly encouraged or enabled by local officials and policemen in Pakistan. In June, 30 Ahmadi Muslims were arrested for the crime of celebrating Eid. Ahmadi homes were attacked, an Ahmadi mosque was ransacked, and the police stood by and did nothing. Earlier this year in

January, it is alleged that local police in the Punjab region, acting under instructions from a local official, took part themselves in another disconcertingly common and awful act of hatred: the desecration of tombs in an Ahmadi Muslim graveyard. Desecration is a particularly cowardly and heinous act, and serves only to underscore the severity of the situation facing Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan.

Freedom of worship is inextricably linked with freedom of expression and speech, and as a Liberal I will always place the greatest currency on that most cherished of virtues.

But as all liberal societies have found, freedom of speech cannot extend to freedom of hate speech or the freedom to incite violence and hatred, and the Pakistani Government ought to be reminded of that fact in our bilateral engagements. Nobody should have to live like that, and to face hatred, threats, violence and death just for worshipping their own religion in a peaceful manner in a democratic country. It goes against every principle we hold dear in the community of international law, and against our every principle as an open, democratic, tolerant nation ourselves, not least as a nation that is bound to Pakistan by a common history, a common language and a track record of collaboration on tackling extremism in the region. We must be a critical partner of Pakistan. I call on the Government to respond to the concerns raised in the House today and to please come forward with reassurances that, at every single opportunity, the plight of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan will be raised with the Government of that country. Our conscience calls on us not to turn a blind eye.

Ahmadi Muslims, like members of all faiths, deserve to worship free from intimidation and discrimination. The Liberal Democrats have long been in favour of a rigorous, values-based foreign policy that puts our money where our mouth is. We cannot just talk a good game on protecting minorities around the world and standing up for the fundamental freedoms outlined in the declaration of human rights; we must use our leverage with Governments such as that in Pakistan to encourage them to take serious and concrete steps towards making it a reality. This should be an issue that unites us across the House—I am encouraged to hear that it does—and one that reminds us not just of our obligations under international law but our moral duty to those facing oppression everywhere.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

3.6 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I congratulate my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this vital debate in the Chamber and on continuing the noble work of his predecessor, our former colleague Fiona Bruce, as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate. It is a privilege to respond on behalf of His Majesty's most loyal Opposition.

Pakistan is a Commonwealth partner, and our paths have been intertwined for an important part of our shared history. The UK and Pakistan have a close and long-standing relationship underpinned by strong links between our peoples, especially through the Commonwealth of Nations.

I have been intrigued—and pleased, to be honest—to hear the passion with which Members from both sides of the House have spoken. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) spoke passionately about the persecution of the Ahmadi people. While the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and I rarely agree on things, he spoke passionately about his own community and quoted what the Ahmadi community says: “Love for all, hate for none.” Could a single Member of the House ever disagree with that?

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) represents a large community with the mosque in Morden—I know the mosque he referred to—which I think is part of his constituency. I have learned a lot about the Ahmadi community this afternoon. It is deeply distressing to hear about some of the incidents that have occurred. The hon. Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) spoke from experience, having represented the Government—I assume Her Majesty's Government—in Islamabad as a diplomat; I thank him for his service. He relayed his experience and gave examples of some of the horrendous persecution that has taken place. I went to Pakistan as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee some years ago. I think that we are united in the House in standing up for freedom of religion and wanting to see a change. Some of the incidents and persecutions in Pakistan that we have heard about are completely wrong.

The 1956 constitution of Pakistan included liberties for people to profess their religion “freely”. However, today, freedom of self-expression is subject to article 19 of the constitution. According to this year's Open Doors world watch list, Pakistan is the seventh most dangerous nation in the world to reside in as a Christian. Churches have endured regular attacks, and those with strong community outreach have faced severe rights violations. There is also concern about career prospects being more limited for Christians than for others.

The Minister will be aware that the previous Government established the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, a British Government-funded multi-country programme that has implemented a project in Pakistan to protect minorities who work as sewage and sanitation workers. Can this House have the Minister's assurance that the work of that organisation will continue under the new Government?

Since the 1980s, Pakistan's blasphemy laws have become more and more severe and oppressive. Ahmadis have been subject to blasphemy laws that carry the punishment of three years imprisonment and severe fines, the most notable of which is ordinance XX, which prohibits Ahmadis from publicly practising their Islamic faith and forbids them from using sacred texts for prayer. That simply cannot be right. Ahmadis have been denied identity cards and are coerced into signing faith-related documents.

Ministers in previous Governments have raised the issue of the Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan and with Pakistan's Foreign Minister and high commissioner. Given that there have been several cases of brutal extrajudicial killings of Ahmadi Muslims in recent months, some being high profile members of their community, I hope that we will receive the Minister's reassurance that that will remain the case, and that Ministers continue to press our counterparts in Islamabad and the high commissioner here in London about the issues raised in today's debate.

[Andrew Rosindell]

Despite making up only 2% of the Pakistani population, Christians are subject to roughly a quarter of all accusations of blasphemy. Anyone openly calling for reform of blasphemy laws is openly threatened by radicals. According to Associated Press News on 5 September 2023, in August last year at least 17 churches were set on fire in Jaranwala. Hundreds of houses were attacked and hundreds of Christians fled from their homes, subsequent to inaccurate accusations of blasphemy. I was pleased that the Foreign Secretary at that time raised these attacks against Christians in Jaranwala with Pakistan's Prime Minister last September. Additionally, that August, Lord Ahmad, the then Foreign Office Minister, wrote to Pakistan's caretaker Foreign Minister urging the Government to ensure the safety of the Christian community following these atrocious attacks.

Such reprisals are not restricted to Christians and Ahmadi Muslims. Unfortunately, Hindus too have been subjected to increasing violence. In July 2023, a Hindu temple in the Sindh province of Pakistan was attacked, and in June 2022, a Hindu temple in Karachi was destroyed. According to the National Council of Churches in Pakistan, not just since the adoption of the 1973 constitution nor since the turn of this century but annually, as many as 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls are kidnapped. There are also reports of Christian children being obligated to attend Islamic lessons at their local madrassahs, while Christian teaching is restricted to the home. I hope that the Government are once again raising these concerns with our counterparts in the Pakistani Government.

Article 4 of the Commonwealth charter, which I am sure the Minister will know, states the need to promote religious freedom. Whether it is women who have been snatched from their homes and forced to profess a religion that they do not follow, or men who are targeted through blasphemy charges, there are clearly issues that need to be addressed most urgently. Religion has provided a bedrock for the Pakistani people and serves as a source of motivation for the betterment of society, and all must be free to pursue their beliefs without fear.

While I have the opportunity, I will commend the work of my friend—a friend to many in this House—Fiona Bruce, the former Member for Congleton, whom I mentioned earlier. She dedicated many years of her time in this place to fighting for freedom of religion or belief and against the persecution of minorities who wish to worship freely. One of the towering achievements of the previous Government was to appoint the United Kingdom's first ever special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I therefore ask the Minister to assure the House that His Majesty's Government will be doing the same, and that an appointment to this position will be announced very soon.

Two years ago, the Conservative Government brought together 800 faith and belief leaders and human rights activists and 100 Government delegations for the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion to agree a plan to encourage and defend those fundamental inalienable rights. The outcome of the conference bore witness to the pledges of 47 Governments, international organisations and other entities to take action in support of freedom of religion or belief. Through the soft power of our diplomatic network, the previous Government

were able to solidify coalitions of support to protect freedom of religion or belief for all within international bodies and through the multilateral framework, hardening obligations for states to uphold their human rights obligations. Once again, I sincerely hope that the Government will continue the work of the Conservative Government in the previous Parliament.

On a separate note, earlier this year, the Conservative Government put on record their serious concerns about the fairness and lack of inclusivity of Pakistan's recent election. We were clear we regretted that not all parties were allowed to contest the elections, and that legal processes were used to prevent some political leaders from participation and the use of recognisable party symbols. I am sure the House is also aware that restrictions were imposed on internet access on polling day and that there were significant delays to the reporting of results and claims of irregularities in the counting process. The new Labour Government need to urge the authorities in Pakistan to uphold fundamental human rights, including those I and many other Members have touched on, as well as other important freedoms including free access to information.

The rule of law must be unflinchingly upheld. To be crystal clear, that includes the right to a fair trial, which, for the avoidance of doubt, means adherence to due process within an independent, transparent judicial system, free from interference. To that end, will the Minister say what discussions on those issues the new Government have had with the Government of Pakistan? Will he say what Labour's position is on the imprisonment and general treatment of former Prime Minister Imran Khan? As he will know, that has caused huge divisions within the Pakistani community.

To conclude, I believe the United Kingdom has been at the vanguard of defending freedom of religion and belief, civil liberties and human rights. We urge His Majesty's Government to continue this important work to protect all those who choose to practise their faith, and who have the right—and must continue to have the right—to do so without fear and in freedom. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, there can be no turning back in our defence of freedom of liberties, the rule of law and the right of peoples throughout our world to share and practise a religion without fear. I hope His Majesty's Government will follow that tradition.

3.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer):

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. I pay tribute to his work as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I know he has been engaged on these issues for some time. I note that the group visited Pakistan last year and published important recommendations for improving the state of freedom of religion. Its commitment to defending the rights of vulnerable communities across the globe does not go unnoticed. I am grateful, too, for the contributions of other hon. Members. I join the shadow Minister in paying tribute to the service of my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) in Pakistan. I will respond to the points raised and highlight what the UK is doing to help protect the rights of minorities in Pakistan.

I would like to reassure the House that I was in Pakistan last week. I was the first British Government Minister to visit for some years—more than two, I believe—and, as I understand it, I am the only G7 Minister to have visited Pakistan this year. As the House knows, and has been clear from the debate, Pakistan is an important country, a strategic country, and it is important that we stay engaged in the full range of issues going on in that country. On that note, Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope you will allow me to provide some brief comments on current events in Pakistan.

I am deeply concerned by the reports of loss of life arising from this week's protests in Islamabad, which I know have been followed very closely in the House. The UK Government support individuals' rights to protest, and urge the Pakistani authorities to respect those fundamental freedoms. We are closely monitoring the situation, including the potential impact on British nationals. We are concerned by reports that a number of journalists have gone missing following the protests, including Matiullah Jan, a respected Pakistani journalist and a Chevening scholar. The UK remains committed to media freedom and the protection of journalists. We will urge the authorities to ensure the safe return of all journalists.

I also want to express my sincere condolences to all those affected by the abhorrent violence in Kurram over the past week. My thoughts are with the families of those killed and injured. We hope that a peaceful resolution can be reached. We remain in contact with the relevant individuals.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) asked about the situation in relation to the Baloch, in particular the protests led by women in Balochistan. I am aware of reports of enforced disappearances. The UK strongly condemns any instances of extrajudicial killings or enforced disappearances. We urge states to investigate any allegations fully, to prosecute those responsible and to provide justice to victims and their families. We continue to encourage progress towards the criminalisation of enforced disappearances in Pakistan.

Britain has a long relationship with Pakistan founded on our shared history and warm ties between our people. We have heard some of that today. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen, I served in Pakistan in 2010 when some of the incidents referred to this afternoon occurred, including the concerning incident with Asia Bibi. As I said, last week I had the pleasure of visiting this beautiful country. I met Ministers, businesses and religious leaders. I can reassure the House that in all my engagements I raised some of these important issues.

We know that many minorities in Pakistan face injustices, including structural discrimination, economic exclusion and wider social intolerance. I share Members' concerns about the increasing misuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Too often these laws are used to settle personal vendettas, with insufficient evidence or safeguards for those accused. Once an accusation is made, there is a high risk of vigilante violence. For example, in May an elderly Christian man died of his injuries following an assault by a large mob in Punjab. These abhorrent attacks form part of a wider pattern of discrimination and violence towards marginalised religious communities.

Jim Shannon: Frequently, when accusations are made—accusations that are often vexatious and malicious, with no evidential basis whatsoever—the police stand by and

do nothing to control the mob violence. Could the Minister perhaps take that on board when he next has discussions with the Pakistani Government? We want a Pakistan police force that is independent and applies the same rule of law to everyone, but it is clear that that is not currently the case.

Hamish Falconer: I raised the specific question of how policing operates in relation to religious minorities with the Pakistani Minister for Law and Human Rights, the Minister for Interior, and personnel from Pakistan's security establishment just last week.

Let me now turn to the subject of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, who, as many have pointed out this afternoon, continue to receive threats from extremist groups. Regrettably, a number have been murdered. The practices of forced marriage and conversion are devastating the lives of women and girls from minority religious communities. We in the House should welcome small positive steps, such as an amendment to the Christian Marriage Act 1872 to equalise the age of marriage between Christian boys and girls in Punjab, but more clearly needs to be done to protect the rights of both Muslim and religious minority girls across Pakistan.

Let me now say a little about what the UK is doing to help. This Government recognise the central importance of promoting a more open society in Pakistan. We regularly engage with its Government, with like-minded partners and with other stakeholders to raise concerns and discuss ways of protecting marginalised communities. Generally, our assessment is that private engagement with Pakistan's authorities is the most effective way to get our messages across. My recent visit was an excellent opportunity to convey those messages to an array of senior Ministers. I met the Human Rights Minister to discuss the importance of promoting religious tolerance and harmony. I highlighted concerns about recent incidents of blasphemy-related violence and the misuse of blasphemy laws. I also raised the issues of forced marriage and conversion, and the Minister assured me that efforts were under way to pass new legislation to help address it. I met the Minister of Interior as well, alongside with the British high commissioner. We underlined concerns about threats of violence towards Ahmadi Muslims, and stressed the need for police protection. Again, we received assurances that the authorities would work harder to protect minority communities.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) expressed concern about his constituents in the UK. While policing is clearly a matter independent from the Government, this Government will do everything—as one would expect—to ensure the freedom of religious belief and ensure that religious minorities feel protected here.

Since my visit, the high commissioner has spoken to the Punjab Minister for Minority Affairs about some of the incidents that have been described this afternoon. She raised concerns regarding extremist threats made against minority groups, including Ahmadi Muslims, and pushed for more action on forced marriage and conversion.

To maximise the impact of our engagements, we co-ordinate closely with the wider international community and work alongside international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation in relation to the forced labour of children in brick kilns, which I even witnessed many years ago when I served in Pakistan.

Jim Shannon: Many people whose young female children have been abducted and kidnapped for the purpose of marriage are probably illiterate—I am just being observational here—and do not understand the paperwork in front of them. When our deputation was in Pakistan back in 2023, we suggested that a legal representative should be made available to each of those people to take their cases forward. It is a simple measure, but it would be incredibly effective.

Hamish Falconer: I thank the hon. Member for his consideration of these issues. I am happy to write to him in more detail about what we are doing in Pakistan to try to ensure that women and girls, both from minority communities and across the whole of Pakistan, are able to prosecute their rights. Questions about illiteracy are clearly relevant, but I am afraid that a far wider range of issues make it hard for women and girls across Pakistan to assert their full rights.

During my trip, I was pleased to visit Pakistan's national mosque, the Faisal mosque. I met the Grand Imam, Dr Muhammad Ilyas, and we discussed the importance of promoting interfaith harmony and tolerance. Such engagements are a vital part of the UK's approach to freedom of religion or belief, a principle that must be supported across all communities in Pakistan.

Members have posed questions about our aid programme, so I will briefly comment on that. Alongside our diplomatic engagement, I am glad that the UK's targeted aid programmes are helping to protect human rights and boost inclusion. For example, our £47 million accountability and inclusion programme helps to change social behaviour and promote interfaith harmony by encouraging dialogue between influential community leaders. Following the Sargodha attacks in May, the programme prevented further violence by helping to engage with the police to identify tensions and resolve community disputes at the local level. We also raise awareness about the harms of early enforced marriages, and have reached over 35 million people with our messaging to date.

I note the comments from my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington about aid conditionality. We try to ensure that our aid is closely targeted. Where there are concerns, we raise them diplomatically, and our aid programme is an important component of our contribution towards trying to address these issues in Pakistan.

Members also raised the issue of modern slavery. I commend representatives of both Houses for raising awareness of this issue in Pakistan. I saw it with my own eyes during my service, and I know that many Members of the House have seen it too.

We are supporting Pakistan's Government to improve laws and strengthen related systems in order to protect marginalised and vulnerable groups. We have supported the Pakistani authorities to undertake the first child labour surveys in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Balochistan. The data is being used to shape policies on child bonded labour, including forming systems to protect children. We have also helped set up eight child courts across Pakistan to provide justice for victims of child abuse, child trafficking and child marriage. As these examples show, we are determined to ensure that aid reaches those who need it most.

Let me turn to the points made about the special envoy. I understand that Ministers are considering the role, and we should be in a position to update the House

soon. I pay tribute to the previous envoys. As I hope the House can see, this Government will remain focused on these issues, in Pakistan and elsewhere, with or without an envoy.

This Government place freedom of religion or belief at the heart of our work in Pakistan, and it was a major part of my visit last week. Pakistan must be open and tolerant, and we will continue to work with its Government and all key stakeholders, including this House, towards that end.

3.33 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their speeches and interventions, which are much appreciated. We have heard about the barbaric attacks on Christians in Jaranwala province, the relentless persecution of the Ahmadis, the genocidal violence against Shi'a Muslims in Parachinar and the oppression of the Baloch people, to which the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) referred. All those things focused our attention, and I am conscious that the actions we take today will speak louder than any words. I believe we have the power to influence change, to hold the Pakistani Government accountable and to stand in solidarity with the oppressed.

Let us remember that the fight for religious freedom, justice and peace is not optional; it is a duty. With that in mind, I thank the shadow Minister for his contribution, and I particularly thank the Minister. I know that he has a deep interest in these issues, as I have had discussions with him on a number of occasions. We have been in a number of debates together, and I have noticed his passion.

I thank every right hon. and hon. Member who has taken the time to contribute to the debate. The commitment to human rights, and to a world where all people can live without fear, is commendable. Finally, I echo the sentiment that we must never be silent in the face of such grave injustice. Our duty is clear and the time to act is now. I look forward to working with every Member of this House to try to make things better, and I wish the Minister well in his job.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes reports of deteriorating religious freedom in Pakistan; expresses its concern over the alleged widespread forced conversions and human rights abuses of minority religious groups; deplores the lack of action by the Pakistani government, which represents a serious violation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and further notes that the arrest of opposition religious leaders by the local authorities has led to condemnation both in Pakistan and further afield.

PETITIONS

No. 84/85 bus service in South Gloucestershire

3.35 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): This cross-boundary service enabled people in Wotton-under-Edge who do not have a vehicle to travel south to Yate and on to Bristol. The service also allowed people in south Gloucestershire to attend their doctors and schools, so it is really missed. I commend the efforts of Barbara Lawrence, a local resident of Wotton-under-Edge, who has been instrumental in trying to secure the return of this bus service.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Gloucestershire,

Declares that the No. 84 and 85 Yate & Wotton-under-Edge Circular bus service should be re-instated.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the needs of rural areas when allocating funding for bus services, and to take steps to encourage the re-instatement of the No. 84 and 85 Yate & Wotton-under-Edge Circular bus service in South Gloucestershire.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003022]

Pimping websites and paying for sex

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): On the third day of the UN's 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, I rise to present a petition on behalf of my Washington and Gateshead South constituents on commercial sexual exploitation. The trafficking and exploitation of women is actively facilitated by pimping websites that advertise these women, free for anyone to view. The sex trade has never been more accessible or more centralised than it is now.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Washington and Gateshead South,

Declares that demand from the minority of men who pay for sex is driving the prostitution and sex trafficking trade, and this sexual exploitation is being facilitated by pimping websites that operate with impunity.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to outlaw pimping websites and paying for sex, and provide support, not sanctions, to victims of sexual exploitation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003023]

Cross-Boundary Housing Developments

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jeff Smith.)

3.37 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am a serving councillor in Leicestershire.

I am grateful for this opportunity to raise the challenges posed by cross-boundary planning applications, and I thank Barrie Gannon, a Markfield parish councillor who has campaigned for changes in this area.

My constituency is unique in many ways, but most pertinently to this debate, it is unique because it straddles three council boundaries: Blaby district council, Charnwood borough council, and Hinckley and Bosworth borough council. Generally, these councils work constructively alongside each other and with Leicestershire county council. However, one area of tension surrounds development, collaboration on local plans, and housing allocations within each council area.

It is clear to me, and to many of my constituents, that some of the councils are purposefully granting applications on the edge of their boundaries, which has a disproportionate impact on the neighbouring council. In essence, they are taking all of the benefits but none of the negatives.

I have secured the debate not because I am a nimby, but because I want to see a more collaborative approach from local planning authorities. As a Conservative MP, I fully support the notion of a property-owning democracy, particularly for those from the next generation, who find it increasingly difficult to get on the property ladder. However, the free-for-all approach offered by the current system is harming many of the beautiful villages in my Mid Leicestershire constituency. How can it be fair that borough, district and parish councils are able to democratically pass local plans, but adjacent boroughs can undermine them by allowing development on the edge of their boundaries?

I have seen many such examples in Mid Leicestershire. In Markfield, the challenges posed by cross-boundary planning applications have been raised with me many times by Councillors Claire Harris and Deborah Taylor, and local activist Dave Hyde, who lobby me regularly on the frustrations of cross-boundary anomalies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. One of the issues that clearly arises from what he refers to is the impact of development on GPs, education, roads and leisure infrastructure in adjoining constituencies or council areas. Houses may be built in one area but people in other areas will be affected. Does he agree with many hon. Members that there needs to be a co-ordinated plan, perhaps at a higher level, that brings future proposals together, so that when houses are built in one area, associated infrastructure is spread across all affected areas?

Mr Bedford: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I will go on to address some of those points, particularly in relation to the use of infrastructure.

Markfield village sits in the local planning area of Hinckley and Bosworth borough council, but under the current framework, Markfield parish council and Hinckley

[Mr Bedford]

and Bosworth borough council have very little say or influence over such decisions, as they are made in the adjacent Charnwood borough. It is obvious that the new Markfield residents will use services in Hinckley and Bosworth, Markfield and the surrounding areas, but those areas will see very little benefit, because those benefits will go to other villages. Worst of all, such developments are going ahead without constructive or binding input from the local parish council or the adjacent borough council.

Another example is in Glenfield village, in my constituency, which sits in Blaby district council, adjacent to Leicester city council. Steve Walters, who heads a local action group, has raised the issue that the city council plans to build several hundred homes on the edge of Glenfield village, but because the village does not sit within the city council boundary, it will see all the detriment of that development but have very little input in the decision-making process. Indeed, Steve has campaigned many times against the urban sprawl of the city affecting villages such as Glenfield. He is working constructively with me and local councillors to try to get progress on the issue.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my constituency of Horsham, we are almost entirely surrounded by other areas that, for one reason or another, have constrained housing targets—they have areas of outstanding natural beauty, are in national parks or are already built up. As a result, under the duty to co-operate, Horsham has to take a very unfair proportion of housing to serve the whole area. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the duty to co-operate system needs to be revised to stop freak results happening in constituencies such as mine?

Mr Bedford: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. He gives an example in his constituency, but I have seen the same in Leicestershire and, from speaking to other hon. Members, I know there are similar examples in other constituencies.

So where are we heading? We have a Government that are steadfast in their plan to concrete over our green and pleasant land, especially in rural constituencies such as mine. In July, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government said that she believed the national planning policy framework “offers extra stability to local authorities.”

Is that really the case?

The Government’s approach is to alleviate the pressure on housing in UK cities and force additional housing on rural areas, without providing sufficient support to the communities that will impact. That was seen by the Government’s plans to reduce housing targets for cities by an incredible 35% in the NPPF. In the village of Ratby in my constituency, predatory developers such as Lagan Homes are taking advantage of the current situation, forging ahead with proposals to bulldoze over The Burroughs, despite a staggering 900 households in that village writing to the borough council to oppose that ecological vandalism. I am sure Leicester city council was jumping for joy at the news that it would have to build 31% fewer homes by 2030, but that meant rural areas such as mine and my residents’ would have to see additional housing, as it is pushed further and further out.

In truth, the reduction is why the decision to build houses on the edge of Glenfield leaves such a sour taste in the mouths of local residents, particularly in Glenfield and Blaby district. What does it look like in context? The city council has been asked to produce fewer houses, whereas rural areas, such as Blaby and Hinckley and Bosworth, have been asked to dramatically increase their target, by 69% and 59%, respectively. Unfortunately, the planning reforms do not really take into account the cross-boundary implications, so what should we do instead?

The Government should foster a co-operative relationship from the top down. Our local authorities should be encouraged to work alongside one another to prevent situations such as those I have described. That can be done by allowing adjacent borough and district councils to have a say in housing development policies through their various local plans, particularly where that will have an impact on the neighbouring authority. There should also be an ability for residents in adjacent boroughs to view and comment on plans in other local planning authority areas. Furthermore, the increased arbitrary housing targets for each borough council area simply do not take into consideration the impact of the adjacent targets. There is surely a better method for developing sustainable housing county-wide, rather than local authorities parking houses next to their own front lawn.

Finally, and probably most importantly, under the current regime there is no requirement for financial compensation for local authorities that are adversely impacted. No thought is given to that. Section 106 agreements and community infrastructure levy contributions are paid by developers to local authorities to mitigate the impact of specific developments. They are well-intended negotiated agreements that force developers to give something back to the community, whether that be funding for infrastructure, improvements or green spaces. However, they fall short in cross-boundary considerations, as we have seen in the examples I have given from Markfield and Glenfield.

Charnwood borough council has made it explicitly clear that the section 106 moneys for the developments along the boundary of Hinckley and Bosworth would go to its own borough. How can spending all those allocations for a development on the edge of Markfield, to the benefit of Loughborough and Barrow, be in the interest of Markfield residents, who sit in a different borough? That undermines local buy-in to the planning process. Instead, there should be a more practical approach whereby section 106 agreements go to the authority where the services are actually being used. Another anomaly of cross-boundary development is the distribution of council tax precepts, with the new residents in Markfield, for example, paying into Charnwood borough council rather than their own.

I am not a nimby. I called this debate to raise the issue posed by cross-boundary planning applications. I believe there should be a collaborative, holistic approach, as mentioned by other hon. Members. I encourage the Government to listen to the debate and consider bringing about the changes and proposals that I have outlined.

3.48 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) on securing this debate on an important

but often overlooked issue. Having known him for many years before we took up our new roles, I can say with authority that his constituents will be well served in this House, particularly because they, like mine, are represented here by one of their local councillors. I too want to draw attention to the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which includes my ongoing unpaid role as a district councillor for my home village of Norton Canes.

As councillors, we know that cross-border developments can cause various complications, which I am sure are seldom considered when developments are brought forward. We all know that council boundaries do not always reflect local communities, and that is inevitable to some extent, with boundaries going down the middle of main roads, for example. It is not particularly logical or necessary, however, to have housing estates or even individual homes divided between different council areas.

I am a bit of a local government nerd, so I could give many examples from close to where I live and across my region, but I will spare the House that and focus on my constituency. On the north-east edge of Cannock Chase, we have a small estate nonsensically split between Brereton and Ravenhill, in my constituency, and Armitage with Handsacre in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson). This is reflected in council boundaries as well, so there is clearly an impact on our local services. However, a far bigger cross-border development is fast approaching in the form of the redevelopment of the huge former Rugeley power station site. When it was a 1,000 MW power station, nobody particularly knew or minded where the boundary was. My predecessor and the former Member for Lichfield would often joke about which of the cooling towers were in each of their patches. But once 2,300 homes, around 900 of which will be in Cannock Chase, have been built, this could become a major issue.

Rugeley already has several developments on its fringes, which are outside our boundary, including the Hawkesyard estate and Hathorn Grove. The vast majority of those new residents feel that they live in Rugeley and go into Rugeley for various services, yet their lower-tier local authority council tax goes to Lichfield district council. This means that any service that draws on district council resources is strained by an inconsistent council tax base. The same is true of parish and town council services.

This is not just about services that residents go out to use, but about the services that come to them at home—bin collections, for example. We also know that NHS commissioning decisions, for example on special educational needs and disabilities provision, are sometimes done on a district by district basis. The chronic lack of general practice capacity in Rugeley and Brereton will be a major issue for the new power station development unless our integrated care board acts quickly.

There can sometimes be a democratic deficit, as residents in those cross-border developments are split between different council areas and different parliamentary constituencies. Knowing who to contact about various local issues can be challenging enough as it is, without estates being bisected by boundaries that make no sense. Sometimes, those boundaries are tidied up through ward or constituency boundary reviews, but we know that the process of changing council boundaries can happen only at the request of both councils. Clearly

there is no incentive for the council that benefits from council tax payers who do not tend to use its services to consent to a principal area boundary review. As the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire said, those councils have all the benefits and none of the drawbacks. That process can also be cumbersome, so it rarely happens, even when a small move in a boundary would be the logical thing to do. Given that our constituency boundaries are often based on council boundaries, such discrepancies are often not corrected for Westminster elections either.

I do not come here with any oven-ready solutions, although it does strike me that in other countries—Canada for example—local authorities can, with appropriate oversight, annex territory from others to prevent these cross-border challenges and inefficiencies from arising. I hope that the Government will consider how we can better address these challenges. Any solutions that we can come to will certainly greatly benefit community identity and local services.

3.52 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

Having not had the chance to do so personally, may I begin by welcoming the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) to his place?

I think it is fair to say that the important issue of cross-boundary planning co-operation has received far too little attention in this place over recent years, and I therefore very much welcome the hon. Gentleman giving the House an opportunity to consider it in some detail. I also appreciate the clarity with which he set out his position on the matter. He will know that the eight Leicestershire authorities are at different stages of plan preparation, having delayed due to further work addressing Leicester city's unmet need.

Owing to the Secretary of State's quasi-judicial role in the planning system, I am unable to comment on the details of specific local plans or specific local applications, but the points that the hon. Gentleman has made are on the record and I would expect him to make written representations to the Department in the appropriate way on some of the specific concerns that he has raised.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the nine local authorities in Leicester and Leicestershire voluntarily came together to collaborate on the publication of a non-statutory strategic growth plan in 2018. That plan provides a high-level vision for the sub-region up to 2050, setting out its housing and economic development needs, and focusing growth on key strategic areas.

Key to securing cross-party political support for voluntary collaboration along those lines has been the commendable desire to address the negative impacts of ad hoc, speculative development and to stimulate infrastructure investment to support growth. But equally vital has been a shared understanding of the obvious functional geography of a sub-region with a city at its heart, strong pre-existing relationships at member and officer level, and clear governance structures that are independent of any one authority.

While the partnership arrangements in Leicestershire took a not insignificant amount of time to establish, and to the best of my understanding nearly collapsed several times, they aptly demonstrate that local planning authorities can, and already do, work together informally to deal with cross-boundary and cumulative matters. Notwithstanding the concerns that the hon. Gentleman

[Matthew Pennycook]

raised, Leicestershire is a rare example of relatively successful cross-boundary co-operation in a planning system whose incentive structure is not geared towards facilitating it. The Government have inherited a planning system in which, outside London, some metro mayors have spatial planning powers while others have only the power to prepare non-statutory plans. A lack of effective levers, whether that be governance arrangements that require unanimity or an inability to set the strategic direction for where new affordable housing should be delivered, prevents mayors who do have spatial planning powers from realising the full potential of those powers.

In the rest of the country there is a duty to co-operate, as the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) mentioned. The requirement provides a minimum standard for cross-border strategic planning, but by common consensus has not proved to be an effective mechanism for fostering the kind of deep strategic co-operation that enables areas to meet their cross-border challenges and unmet local need to be shared with adjacent authorities. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 includes provisions that enable local authorities to come together to produce joint spatial development strategies, but as that is entirely discretionary and the current incentives are weak, there is no evidence that scores of areas eagerly await the opportunity to take that particular approach.

The result is a planning system that currently lacks any effective mechanisms for cross-boundary strategic planning. That has not always been the case. Indeed, planning for housing growth and infrastructure at a larger than local scale has been integral to the functioning of England's planning system for most of the past half-century, whether through county structure plans, regional planning guidance or the comprehensive system of regional strategic planning introduced by the last Labour Government, including regional spatial strategies. The period since that architecture was abolished by the coalition Government in 2011 has been something of an aberration, with the duty to co-operate ostensibly facilitating necessary strategic cross-boundary planning, but in practice failing to do so in any meaningful way.

The result has been large parts of England where no strategic planning activity takes place, a number of notable local plan failures, increased delays in local plan production, growing public antagonism towards the planning system, and a yawning gap between the amount of development that the country needs and what is actually being built. The Government are committed to bringing that sub-optimal situation to an end by first, in the short term, strengthening the existing national planning policy framework requirements on effective co-operation, and then introducing effective new mechanisms for cross-boundary strategic planning through legislation, with a view to implementing a universal system of strategic planning in this Parliament.

Let me make it clear that we do not intend to return to the pre-2011 regional planning regime; rather, we will look at how we can ensure that effective cross-boundary co-operation—the kind that I take it the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire wants to see in his constituency—is taking place at a sub-regional level. While it is still too early to be definitive about the precise model, the Government are attracted to the spatial development strategy, which is well established in London, with the London plan having been produced and continually reviewed over a 20-year period by successive London Mayors. Whatever model is ultimately selected, it is important to note that strategic plans are not big local plans. Nor should the forthcoming introduction of statutory strategic planning arrangements be taken by local planning authorities as a reason not to progress the development of their local plans.

Local plans are the best way for communities to shape future development in their areas. The Government are determined to progress toward our ambition of universal local plan coverage, and we intend to drive local plans to adoption as quickly as possible. In all areas, strategic sub-regional plans will guide development for the local planning authorities in the area, and local plans will need to be in general conformity with them. We will expect local plans to be updated or developed alongside the strategic planning process, and we envisage that that process is where those larger than local level questions and negotiations about large-scale housing growth will be determined.

Given that the hon. Gentleman's constituency spans three local authorities, I know he will take an active interest in the Government's plans. Local authorities in Leicester and Leicestershire have shown what can be achieved through the voluntary production of a non-statutory strategic growth plan. I note that they have been working effectively on their local plans, including various local authorities meeting unmet needs from Leicester city.

However, the experience of the partnership arrangements being in place in the county also highlights the risks and limitations of voluntarism. I hope the intention to require statutory strategic planning arrangements to be put in place across England will be welcomed by the authorities that lie within the boundaries of Mid Leicestershire as a means of more quickly and effectively resolving cross-boundary and cumulative issues of the kind the hon. Gentleman has drawn attention to. On that note, I look forward to further discussions with him and other hon. Members as the Government take forward their plans in this area.

Question put and agreed to.

3.59 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 28 November 2024

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Fishing Industry

1.30 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the fishing industry.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I am grateful to members of the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this debate, and I am delighted to see such good geographic and political representation in this Chamber.

Before we come to the meat of the politics, as we enter Advent it is worth reflecting for a second or two that, in coastal and island communities right around our country, there will always be families with a sense of sadness because somebody will not be with them for Christmas. Last year, four people in the fishing industry lost their lives. That number goes up and down—in 2021, it was as high as 10. It is worth our remembering as we talk here in the safety, security and warmth of Westminster Hall that the way in which our fishers actually live and work is very different. They often take an enormous personal risk to put food on our table, and we should not forget that.

I will touch on four different areas. First, there are the year-end negotiations coming up between the UK, the EU and Norway. Looking ahead, we have the review of the trade and co-operation agreement and the transitional arrangements in 2026. There is also the ability of our fishing industry to access traditional fishing grounds and the extent to which it is being squeezed out of them. Finally, there is the availability of crew for many boats, especially those operating inside UK territorial waters, to whom the opportunity of visas through the transit visa regime is not available.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this debate. I have spoken to him, and I apologise that I cannot be here for the rest of it—I think it will be the first fishing debate that I will ever miss in totality.

In the debate we had on 5 November, the Minister discussed the issue of positive outcomes that could be attained if these issues could be resolved. The ability to go to sea to catch fish is reliant on having the crews to man vessels. Despite automation projects being brought forward, the problem is in the ability to access crews and thereby survive long enough to bring the benefits of these opportunities into local communities. This is not just a Northern Irish problem. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that some relatively minor tweaks to Home Office policy would enable the growth potential identified for Northern Ireland and all this great United Kingdom to be replicated in one form or another?

Mr Carmichael: As interventions go, I think that meets its total allowable catch. I will come on to that issue—the hon. Gentleman knows that, because we have debated it often enough. If he cannot be here for the entirety of the debate, his fishing constituents will know well enough that he is a regular and diligent contributor to these debates. He will be missed at the end of the debate, if he is not here.

Mr Efford, you and I are long enough in the tooth to remember the December fishing debate ahead of the December Fisheries Council, which was a staple of the parliamentary calendar when we were in the European Union. Of course, things have changed since then—the debate is no longer in Government time, but we always have the co-operation of the Backbench Business Committee in holding it, and the focus now tends to be on the UK-EU-Norway debates.

Essentially, we are still looking at year by year by year negotiations. I am afraid that, even outwith the EU, this remains an absolutely crazy way to run an industry. I cannot believe that any Minister in Government would ever go to Tesco or Sainsbury's and say, "We're going to tell you how much business you can do next year, but only for next year. By the way, we won't tell you until the end of December—sometimes well into January or February—how much business you are going to be able to do." Surely at some point we have to move away from this crazy annual round and get into a proper, stable set of multi-annual negotiations. But we are where we are for the moment, and that is what we have to deal with.

When the Minister responds, will he outline what he sees as the priorities for the negotiations this year? I also invite him to reflect on the role of the science that underpins the negotiations. The blue-chip science comes from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea—ICES. It is always complex, often quite nuanced, and often vulnerable to misrepresentation. It is a mix of empirical data, extrapolation through mathematical modelling, conjecture and the application of precautionary principles when the evidence is just not adequate. That is then balanced with socioeconomic factors and a bit of politics thrown in for good measure. The TCA negotiations will coincide with the arrangements on energy co-operation, for example. I am afraid we are back in the situation we were in during the EU days, when there was often conflation between different negotiations; and where there was linkage, it was inevitably the fishing industry that lost out.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent case. On his point about multi-annual quotas, does he not agree that ICES very carefully presents its advice in a manner that actually provides for Governments, Ministers and indeed the European Commission to adopt a policy of multi-annual quotas for stock recovery? It does not necessarily solely push the industry or the legislators into a position where they have to set the annual cliff edges that he describes.

Mr Carmichael: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many of the scientists who have contributed to the ICES data over the years will say exactly the same thing. They want to see the stability of the multi-annual approach that would allow the economic efforts and the conservation efforts to be managed together. That makes perfect sense.

At present, there is a real problem—albeit not a new one—in relation to data-deficient stocks. It has very real consequences that feed through to the whole process,

[Mr Carmichael]

due to the policy of proposing automatic precautionary quota cuts of at least 25% for stocks for which full scientific advice is unavailable. In the current round, for example, ling and lemon sole are not massively significant species, but they are an important and valuable part of the catch for the fishermen in the whitefish fleet in my constituency, and they face recurring quota cuts based on the fact that they are data deficient. If we do that year after year, we will have a quota that does not match the reality of the fish in the sea.

As a consequence, smaller species in a mixed fishery become a choke species, so it is a two-strand problem. First, there is not a proper quota for fish that could be caught and could be an economic benefit to the industry. Secondly, they can sometimes act as a choke species. Because there is a low quota for them, once they are caught other fish in a mixed fishery will not be able to be caught and landed either.

The opportunities that come with getting this right have been highlighted by the northern shelf monkfish—a stock that was, following an ICES review, recently granted full analytical assessment and is no longer classed as data deficient. It will be a valuable species for the catching sector, no longer to be subject to precautionary quota cuts. However, the most significant point of all is that, based on scientific advice and full analytical assessment, for the first time, the recommendation now is for a quota increase of some 211%. That is where the operation of the various principles of ICES can be counterproductive, and it leads us to a situation in which we do not have the best outcome because there is a mismatch between what is in the quota and what is in the sea.

The fault, I am afraid, often lies in our own hands because it all comes back to how we fund and operate fisheries science within this country. In Scotland over recent years, our fisheries science laboratories have been salami-sliced away to the point of virtual extinction. There has been a chronic lack of investment in fisheries science. Something that was previously blue chip and widely respected across Europe has, I am afraid, been diminished to such a point that, in recent evidence to the Scottish Parliament, Dr Robin Cook, a fisheries scientist from the University of Strathclyde, said:

“It is of real concern that we no longer have a marine institute in Scotland with the capacity to deliver for the future. The directorate is dependent only on what it learned 10 years ago.”

If we do not put data in and do not gather the data for ourselves, I am afraid that we cannot really complain that what we get out at the other end is not fit for purpose.

I now turn to the trade and co-operation agreement review. At the point of leaving the European Union, expectations among the fisheries industries were very high, especially in the catching sector. It was the most obvious industry to expect a win from our departure from the European Union, and it was certainly promised one. It really takes something to do worse than the common fisheries policy, but somehow or other we found ourselves with a deal that the Scottish Fishermen's Federation described at the time as

“the worst of both worlds”.

Provisions for review are built into the trade and co-operation agreement. We are in the transitional arrangements at the moment; the review will take effect over the course of next year and into 2026. From the

discussions that I have had, I know that the EU sees that as a priority, and I would like to hear from the Minister that the Government see it in those terms as well.

The core issues at play are obvious: we are looking at quota numbers, specific stock allocations and, of course, access. It will take political will from this Government to win back the ground lost by Boris Johnson, but fishing communities expect positive change to be delivered. The fishing industry has a great story to tell; it is rooted in the island and coastal communities that define our country. The new Government have the chance to be part of that story and to close the sorry chapter of missed opportunities.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): My right hon. Friend talks about stories; I think that is one of our challenges in attracting new people into the industry, which is one of the reasons why we are facing the visa issues. The Scottish Fisheries Museum in Anstruther in my constituency is doing a lot of promotion work, but it needs support, including educational support. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Mr Carmichael: I absolutely do, and this is one of the reasons why it is so difficult for fishing boats in coastal communities to recruit a crew. For decades, teachers, careers advisers and probably even parents have been telling people, “Don't bother going into fishing. It's a dying industry; it's got no future for you.” When you look at the history of the last couple of decades, you can kind of understand why people say that. I believe that they are wrong, but it is going to take a long time to turn that around.

In the meantime, in order for there to be an industry there for the next generation to be recruited into, I am afraid that we need to take measures now to maintain it. In the short to medium term, that requires a more sensible approach to be taken by UK Visas and Immigration in the Home Office. It also requires the industry itself to step up to the plate and to say, “We understand that the answer to this, in the medium to longer term, lies within our own hands. Here is what we propose to do to make it a more attractive industry for the future.”

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I apologise for being unable to stay for the whole debate, including the ministerial response at the end of it; unfortunately, travel plans intervene.

On the point that the right hon. Gentleman just made, during the summer representatives of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, the Scottish White Fish Producers Association, the Scottish Seafood Association, Seafood Scotland and the North East Scotland Fisheries Development Partnership all endorsed the need for a better set of visa arrangements, so that we can deal with these post-Brexit labour shortages. Might it be helpful if the Minister agreed to visit the north-east to meet representatives of those bodies to discuss how we can address the labour shortages in a more productive way?

Mr Carmichael: I will take this opportunity to address the visa question; I was going to address it last, but we might as well address it now. The hon. Gentleman is right: especially for inshore fisheries, which are those working within the 12-mile limit of the UK territorial waters, the labour shortages are an absolute chokehold.

The bigger boats that fish outside the 12-mile limit can take advantage of transit visas. Frankly, that is an abuse of the transit visa system, but it is the only mechanism available to boats to get the crew they need.

In news reports and on television programmes recently, there have been some quite disgraceful examples of the way in which the transit visa system has been abused. There are those in the industry who need to take a good, long, hard look at themselves. They have brought shame on the industry by the way they have mistreated those they have brought in on transit visas—although, to my mind, that also reinforces the need for a proper system of visas to be introduced for what the Migration Advisory Committee accepts is an occupation with a shortage of available labour.

The crux of the problem is that although the MAC designates fishing as a shortage occupation, the Home Office insists on a standard of English language competence that sits somewhere between O-level and A-level—in fact, it is just short of A-level—in the English system. Obviously, some language skills are necessary, but that standard of language skills goes beyond what is necessary. We have had for years now crews from the Philippines and from some African countries in particular who work in our inshore fleets and other fleets with no real safety concerns about their work, so I see no reason why the Home Office should continue to insist on that language standard, which acts as a barrier to the industry getting the crew it needs. If we accept that bespoke arrangements are required for the fishing industry, to insist on a language requirement that goes across all the workforce arrangements makes absolutely no sense to me.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): If the solution is to do away with English language standards, does the right hon. Gentleman think that would detract from the point the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) made about trying to attract a domestic workforce and investing in skills for that workforce?

Mr Carmichael: No, I do not think it does because, apart from anything else, I am not talking about removing a language requirement completely. It is the level of the requirement that is the issue—this requirement of something just short of A-level for English language. I also think it betrays a particular attitude to what a skilled worker is, which is informed, it seems to me, by people who think we should measure somebody's skill only by their academic achievements, when in fact the people coming here to work on fishing boats have a much wider range of other skills for which there are no metrics in the current visa arrangements. Having accepted that there is a need for more visas to bring crew in, to get us to the point where we can do more to develop our own crew, it is unfortunate that, for this reason, we are basically undoing all the good work we have done.

To go back to the trade and co-operation agreement, having taken a fairly substantial detour, the question of access to UK waters post-2026 will be critical. For both quota and non-quota stocks, shares are heavily weighted in the EU's favour, and the EU is more dependent on UK waters to catch its quotas than vice versa. EU vessels' catch in the UK zone is worth between £450 million and £500 million a year, compared with around £80 billion-worth caught by UK vessels every year in the EU zone.

To put it another way, the UK shares of fishing quotas written into the TCA fall well short of the zonal attachment that was supposed to underpin the negotiations at the time of departure. They do not reflect the reality of where the fish actually are, and amount to an annual transfer of at least £400 million-worth of natural resources from the UK to the EU. The final cost to the fishing industry is far greater as multiplier effects from the fish catches are thought to be significant; they are typically assessed at between 2.5 and 3.5. Will the Minister tell us who will lead the review? What are the UK priorities for it? What engagement will he have with the fishing industry to ensure that he is able to deliver for them what Boris Johnson and the noble Lord Frost at the time of the departure so manifestly failed to?

I am mindful of the fact that I have taken quite a lot of time, but I am taking a lot of interventions. On the question of spatial squeeze, there are currently 48 offshore wind projects planned in Scottish waters alone. Seven of them are fully commissioned; two are under construction. In getting even to this point, the view of the fishing industry is that its voice has simply not been heard or, if it has been, it has been ignored. Many of those offshore wind developments are constructed in highly productive fishing grounds, and there are more on the way. Great British Energy and the Crown Estate announced another fishing licensing round just last year. That cannot be seen in isolation.

The fishing industry understands the need for change. Fishers are not blind to the realities of climate change; they see its effects day and daily in their own nets. The loss of cod in some parts of the North sea seems to be down to the changing temperature of the sea, which is having a real effect. The industry is also, ironically, part of the answer. The fish caught by our fishing industry are a good source of protein caught in a sustainable way in a low-carbon-emitting industry. In the rush to tackle climate change, there seems to be a determination to squeeze out some of the people who are most able to help us to move to that future.

Melanie Onn: I discovered an interesting fact following a conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume). She has been talking with her local fishers, who say that the population of brown crab in Scarborough and Whitby has gone up as they are making their homes in and around the wind farms there. So there is some subtlety and nuance in all of this.

Mr Carmichael: Absolutely, yes. The picture is complex and it depends what is being put where. However, for some of the spawning grounds for whitefish that have been affected, the evidence suggests that the construction is causing a problem. If we damage our spawning grounds, we are storing up a problem for ourselves a few years down the line.

Floating offshore wind is a particular issue for the bigger boats that are further offshore. When floating offshore wind farms are being constructed, virtually the whole area of their construction is closed down. It is impossible for those boats to trawl safely due to the cables that are there because of the floating offshore wind turbines.

I have one other matter that I want to place on record, and on which I seek the Minister's continued assistance. His predecessors in office did take this seriously.

[Mr Carmichael]

It is not something that lies within the remit of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but it matters very much to our fishing community: it is the safety of fishermen at sea, which is a Department for Transport responsibility.

I have had two truly shocking incidents in my constituency in recent years. The *Pesorsa Dos*, a Spanish gill-netter, tried to foul the propeller of a local trawler, the *Alison Kay*, some time ago, and the *Antonio Maria*, a French longliner, did the same thing to another local boat, the *Defiant*. Both incidents happened inside the 200-mile limit—the exclusive economic zone—but outside the 12-mile limit of territorial waters. The United Nations convention on the law of the sea tells us that safety action has to be taken by the flag state. The flag state of the *Pesorsa Dos* is Germany, and I am afraid Germany does not see much interest to be had from prosecuting a German-registered but Spanish-owned trawler fishing to the west of Shetland.

The position remains dire. Sooner or later, if such behaviour is allowed to continue, somebody will end up with a boat at the bottom of the sea. This has to be taken seriously. Representations need to be made to the relevant authorities in Germany and France. Some effort has been made by Ministers at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Department for Transport, but more needs to be done. We simply cannot leave our fishing industry unprotected in this way.

The position with the *Pesorsa Dos* is interesting because it was fishing not just in UK waters but around Ireland's. The Irish authorities took an approach rather different from the hands-off attitude of Marine Scotland and the Marine and Coastguard Agency, and took the *Pesorsa Dos* into port, where she was held for some considerable time. Of course, if she is in port, she is not out earning money for her owners. They threw the book at the *Pesorsa Dos* and its skipper.

The Irish enforcement agents, when they were climbing on board, found that the ladder provided for them broke. That meant an immediate €10,000 fine for failing to provide safe access. The matter recently finished in the Irish courts with a series of fines and the forfeiture of gear worth £470,000. I suspect that will concentrate the minds of the owners and skippers of that boat better than the hand-wringing and legalism we have in this country. A bit more of that sort of enforcement would be enormously welcome.

We all know that Al Capone was eventually done for tax evasion. Let us hope that the modern gangsters of the sea might be brought to book in a similar way, if not necessarily for the misdeeds themselves.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. I have had a number of requests from people who want to leave before the Front-Bench responses. I cannot allow that to happen—certainly not in the large numbers that have made requests. If you intend not to be here, I cannot call you to speak. If you make interventions, you might find the Chair sympathetic if you take a little longer than normal. I understand that this is a very important constituency issue. I remind anyone who wants to speak that they should be on their feet so that I can see who wants to be called.

1.59 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this important debate.

As the MP for South East Cornwall, I am proud to represent a constituency with a rich fishing heritage. Our iconic small-scale fishing fleets and charter vessels from Looe and Polperro, and from Fowey in the neighbouring constituency, are the lifeblood of our communities. That proud tradition, passed down through generations, ties our communities to the sea.

I pay tribute to those who support our brave fishers and their families, including the harbourmaster and port authorities, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, for which I had the privilege of working, the Seafarers' Charity and the Fishermen's Mission. If hon. Members have not bought their Christmas cards yet, I suggest supporting those fantastic charities, which do so much when things go wrong. I also pay tribute to Seafood Cornwall Training and especially to Clive Palfrey of Looe, who works tirelessly to raise safety standards and still makes time to helm the Looe lifeboat.

This Labour Government are rightly committed to tackling climate change and biodiversity loss. Damaging practices have taken a significant toll on the marine environment, and urgent action is needed to secure the sustainability of our fishing industry and restore the health of the sea. Offshore wind is essential to achieving home-grown clean energy, but developments must be carefully sited to minimise disruption to ecosystems, sensitive habitats and our historic fishing grounds.

Marine spatial prioritisation provides a framework to balance those competing needs, but our fishers must be included in the decisions. I urge the Minister to ensure that consultations are held in local ports and are scheduled around tides so that fishers can attend without sacrificing a day's income and do not miss the chance to be heard. That should be the norm rather than the exception. It is a simple ask, but it would mean so much to our fishers and, vitally, it would improve Government engagement.

Sustainable fisheries management is essential, and catch limits should be set using the latest scientific advice, but the UK currently lacks robust data on many commercial species. Does the Minister agree that it is essential to prioritise a road map to improve stock assessment and work with partners on shared stocks to secure sustainable management? Better monitoring and enforcement are vital to ensure compliance, but the issues with CatchApp and inshore vessel monitoring must be urgently addressed. Will the Minister seek assurances from the Marine Management Organisation that it will address them, ensure transparency and timelines on fixes, and adopt a pragmatic approach until the systems are fully operational?

Globally, management and enforcement around marine resources are often poor. Stronger labelling laws could block illegal, unreported and unregulated fish from entering UK markets and could protect our domestic fleets. I would be grateful if the Minister committed to a review of labelling laws, to protect not just the world's oceans but our markets.

Locally, buying UK products helps to boost our fleets' income. I pay tribute to fishmongers such as Pengelly's of Looe, which does a great job of supporting its local fleet and offers an overnight service for those

without a local shop. I also highlight the work of local Looe fishers Murray Collins, Dan Margetts and David Bond, who have a tuna tagging programme, and Dr Bryce Stewart and Dr Simon Thomas, who do pollack data gathering. I would welcome the Minister's support in expanding fisheries science partnerships to fill knowledge gaps and secure robust data for all our commercial stocks.

I support a transition away from damaging practices that harm our future stocks, alongside advances in vessel safety and technology. Remote electronic monitoring is a cost-effective way to improve transparency, sustainability and data integrity while creating jobs. Better data means better management, which benefits everyone.

Fishing is central to the jobs, culture and identity of South East Cornwall, a region grappling with low income. Our fishers are ready to play their part in regenerating our seas, but they need a fair deal that respects their knowledge, safeguards their livelihood and protects the marine environment. I am proud that the Government are working with our fishers. I urge the Minister to continue working closely with fishers, scientists and all involved to secure a just and sustainable future for our seas.

2.4 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. As the Member for Gordon and Buchan, I represent a constituency that plays a key role in Scotland's fishing industry. The strategic transport corridors of the A90, the A947 and the A96, which run through my constituency, are crucial arteries on which our fishing industry relies for its distribution network. Those vital links connect our coastal fishing communities to processors and markets across the UK and Europe. I will touch on three crucial issues: the vital role that fishing plays in our food security, the increasing spatial squeeze in our waters, and the TCA.

Fish and fishing are part of our national food security. It should go without saying, but it is so important that the industry is not overlooked. The 2021 UK food security report stated that fish constitutes a valuable protein source, accounting for nearly 20% of the total animal protein consumed globally. With the consumption of fish going up in recent decades, both globally and in the UK, the figure will only increase.

Our fishing grounds—we are seeing something similar with our farmland—are becoming ever more crowded, with increased pressure for space and with competing and often incompatible uses of the marine environment leading to spatial squeeze. About 37% of the seas around Scotland are now in one of the 240 offshore or inshore marine protected areas. The industry also has to be mindful of the “Will they, won't they?” potential for highly protected marine areas. Coupled with the expansion of offshore renewable energy, such as wind, tidal and wave, that means that the space for fishing in our offshore is shrinking faster than ever.

Fishing is currently excluded from about a third of Scottish waters. Back in the year 2000, the figure was only 1%, so we can see the scale and pace of change. Yes, we need renewable energy and we need to protect the marine environment—important sites such as Forvie in my constituency show that—but we also need proper consultation on how the fishing industry may be increasingly impacted. Generations of expertise relating to fishing, spawning grounds and species movement must be

considered when other decisions are taken. The incoming competing pressures in our seas must not be prioritised over fishing or to the detriment of the fishing industry. The current balance does not feel equitable, despite the value of fishing in producing healthy, sustainable and low-carbon food, contributing to our food security and supporting thousands of coastal jobs around the country.

As has been said, the upcoming discussions on the trade and co-operation agreement post 2026 are crucial and of real concern to the industry. There is a clear imbalance off our shores, with EU vessels catching in our waters six times the value of fish that we catch in theirs. That imbalance affects not only boats at sea, but the entire supply chain, including businesses and workers in my Gordon and Buchan constituency who form part of the north-east's fishing industry network. That imbalance needs addressing in the TCA review, and the review offers an opportunity to do so, but the Government must prioritise our fishing sector and not grant EU vessels inequitable access to UK waters as part of a wider deal with the EU. The rhetoric of resetting relationships must not come at the expense of our fishing sector or our coastal communities. It is so vital that the Government prioritise the TCA. There was silence on it in Labour's manifesto, and that cannot be replicated here.

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is clear that ex-fishing towns such as Fleetwood, which I represent, have been devastated by the decline of our once prosperous fishing industry. My community and lots of others were built on fishing and thrived on it, but Fleetwood has suffered terribly from job losses and a decrease in living standards. Everyone in this room knows that our fishing industry is in decline. Does the hon. Member agree that if these negotiations are handled properly, we could see increased investment in our towns that could reverse the devastation to our local economy? That would be so important to many communities like mine.

Harriet Cross: I agree with the hon. Member, and I certainly hope that that is the case. It is important that these negotiations go well, and it is important that our fishing communities are helped and represented. As I was going to say, money that is spent in the fishing environment has an economic impact onshore that is 2.5 to 3.5 times greater. It is important for everyone across the country, including our fishing communities, that this is handled correctly.

I hope the Minister will address the concerns about how we manage the growing spatial squeeze that is felt by our fleet. There must be a proper assessment of the impact on supply chains and distribution networks. The strategy for the 2026 negotiations will be really important, given that they are starting so soon.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) paid tribute to those working at sea, and I want to pay tribute to the RNLi crews. It is a charity close to my heart. Its brave crews risk their lives to save lives at sea; they do us all a service, and they do us proud.

2.9 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Fishing is such an important part of Cornwall's history and its future—as you can probably tell, Mr Efford,

[Jayne Kirkham]

because half the MPs from Cornwall are here today. We are surrounded by the sea on three sides. Fishing has been integral to us for centuries: Cornish people have fished for pilchards for hundreds of years in Newlyn, St Ives, Mevagissey and Portscatho, among other places in my constituency. Oysters in the Fal have been farmed for half a millennium with traditional methods that are still in use today because of a byelaw dating back to 1876 that outlaws mechanised dredging—an early example of legislation that promotes sustainable fishing. That makes the oyster farms on the Fal one of a kind in Europe, if not the world.

Fishing in Cornwall is not just about the past; it is also about the future. Our fishing industry is vital for our food security, jobs and tourism. We need to preserve the knowledge and skills that have been passed down through fishing families in Cornwall for generations. The industry contributes more than £170 million to Cornwall's economy directly from fish landed, and we have 500 fishermen at sea and 8,000 jobs in the supply chain. There are 15 jobs ashore for every one at sea. It does have a future and it does have profit. We need to make sure that the conditions are right and we protect it.

How do we do that? I repeat the points that have been made about the ongoing EU-UK negotiation process to set the fishing quotas for next year. In previous years, reductions to some quotas have been too large for fishers to adjust to: for example, the pollack quota last year was set at zero with no warning, and Cornish fishermen ended up being compensated. The past two years of annual negotiations have led to a £20 million reduction in fishing opportunities for the Cornish fishing fleet, so we need a long-term approach to quotas that is based on scientific evidence and that balances food production with protecting the environment, promoting sustainability and supporting the industry. As a result of the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement, under Boris Johnson's Government fishing was basically sold down the river; Boris Johnson's name is sometimes not spoken kindly in Cornwall. In the renegotiation, we need to be careful to ensure that our Cornish fishers do not lose out like that again.

I have mentioned Fal oysters, which are a vital heritage industry in my constituency. To protect the population, there is an ongoing review looking at the size of the oysters that are caught. I would like the Minister to pay close attention to it; I think it was passed up to DEFRA in April or May. Central to that is clean water. Sewage dumping is destroying the shellfish industry. In May 2003, 11 shellfish sites in Cornwall were forced to close because of high levels of *E. coli*. I welcome both the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which will crack down on water companies that dump sewage, and the coming review. Agriculture will have a part to play as well.

Shellfish was an afterthought in the Brexit negotiations. There was extra red tape and there were reduced markets: as the UK is now a third country, we cannot export unprocessed oysters, scallops and mussels to the EU. That is a massive loss of market.

In conclusion, we need to look carefully at how we balance fishing, marine protected areas, sustainability, nature recovery, the environment and floating offshore wind. As an MP in Cornwall, I am a great supporter of floating offshore wind and would love to get it off the

ground in the Celtic sea. We still have not quite got there; I want it kick-started, but it is important that everything has its space and that consultation is wide and is carried out with all of the industries.

Equally, we need a strategy for the ocean. We do not have one at the moment: we have a local plan for the land, but nothing similar for the ocean. It is important that there is a long-term strategy that looks at protecting certain areas and our ambition for zero-carbon electricity by 2030, but that still maintains profitable and vital heritage industries such as fishing, so we can carve out a place for everything as we go forward.

2.14 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate.

Fish and chips were deemed so critical to morale during the dark days of the second world war that they were not rationed, and extra resources were allocated to keep the home fryers burning. Today, the harvest of fish and seafood from our pristine waters is hard-won. It is estimated that fishing crews face the threat of death at 100 times the rate of the average UK worker. In my constituency of Dumfries and Galloway, the Isle of Whithorn will never forget the loss of seven of our sons when the scallop dredger Solway Harvester foundered off the Isle of Man in a force-9 gale 25 years ago in January. The two youngest victims were aged just 17. The sea is magnificent and unforgiving.

Today's fishermen face the terrors of the deep and onshore threats too. Fishing in south-west Scotland centres on scallops, lobster and crab. The economic contribution of catchers and producers is vital to vulnerable coastal communities, yet fishermen are criticised as voracious plunderers when really they are cautious custodians of the sea. It took sterling work by my colleague, Finlay Carson MSP, to stave off the threat of the loss of livelihood for static-gear fishermen along the Solway coast. The clunking fist of the Scottish Government was set to ban them inside a six-mile limit to save berried or egg-bearing lobster, but it was the fishermen who spoke up about returning berried lobster to protect not just their livelihoods, but those of the next and future generations of fishermen.

Brexit could yet deliver a sea of opportunities for our fishermen. If we spend time at the quaysides and pierheads of Kirkcudbright, Garlieston, Port William, Stranraer and Portpatrick, we will not hear any clamour to return to the hated common fisheries policy of distant and faceless Brussels. In 2022, landings in those places were estimated at £4.5 million—an enormous shot in the arm for a rural area such as Dumfries and Galloway.

As we have heard, while the sea is vast, it is not limitless. Floating offshore wind is just one of the sectors exerting spatial squeeze, for we cannot fish between the turbines and their seabed infrastructure is another impediment. Shipping lanes and undersea cables, as important to Britain today as the convoys during the battle of the Atlantic, further hem in our fishing fleet. Plans have also been suggested for more marine protected areas in English waters to offset the environmental damage in existing MPAs. Fishing already pays the price of being excluded from prime fishing areas through the privatisation of the seabed, but being locked out of the MPAs adds insult to injury.

The waters are choppy, but fishing is a touchstone in Scotland: St Andrew, our patron saint, was a fisherman. Fishing is also about food security, so it is terrifying to hear this pivotal industry being touted in some quarters as a mere bargaining chip as the Government prepare for TCA renegotiation.

Seamus Logan: The hon. Member mentions the forthcoming TCA, which others Members have referred to. We have not yet heard who the chief negotiator of that review will be, but does he agree that it would be advantageous, once they have been identified, for them to come to Scotland to listen to the industry, to fishermen and fisherwomen, and to the fish processing sector to hear their concerns in advance of the negotiations?

John Cooper: I agree that it is important that the voices of people directly involved in the industry, both onshore and offshore, are heard. On the TCA negotiations, nothing—not quota or anything else—should be exchanged for automatic access for EU boats. War could not choke off our fish suppers; can we ensure that legislation does not either?

2.19 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and I extend my thanks to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for corralling us all here for this important debate. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fisheries, he is a substantial expert in this field, and we have debated it many times—I am delighted to be back in the House and able to participate in these discussions. I agree with much of what he said in his opening speech, which reflects his years of experience on this topic.

On the anticipated finalisation of the transitional arrangements review in 2026, could the Minister bear in mind that the catching sector is willing and able to work and support the Government with all the facts and arguments that they will need when they enter into those negotiations? I am sure that the Minister will have heard the requests in the speeches today, which I add to by asking whether there could be an indication of the Government's aims, ambitions and approach in those negotiations. What are they planning to do, particularly to achieve longer-term settlements rather than year-on-year negotiations? Nobody can run a business effectively in those circumstances and we would not ask or expect it of any other sector. If the Government intend to show respect to the fishing industry, addressing that would go some way to doing that. We have a golden opportunity to demonstrate our support for the sector.

I am going to talk an awful lot about processing, and I remind Members that this is not just about the catching sector. I am the Member of Parliament for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and it will be of no surprise to anybody that the processing side of the industry means so much to our local economy, to those who continue to work in the industry and to the small and large businesses that operate in processing.

My constituency plays an essential role in serving the nation's seafood. Almost every major UK food retailer buys its seafood from Grimsby, and the town continues to be a thriving hub for seafood processing, such as the

bespoke smoking from our 150-year-old smokehouses. The Minister enjoyed a visit to my constituency to see them in action. We embrace the traditional techniques of smoking high-quality product and deliver that around the country, including to very high-end retailers. From Grimsby to Harvey Nichols might seem like a long stretch, but it is actually just a short hop through our seafood processing sector.

Good-quality food production buildings are very hard to find. Whether it is cold stores or processing factories, Grimsby is home to some of the best sites anywhere in the UK. We have around 500 food-related companies processing 70% of the nation's seafood, most of which currently comes from Norway, Iceland and the Faroes, and is frozen and shipped through our local ports—not quite the romantic notion of what the fishing industry should or possibly could be, with direct catching and processing locally. The world has changed, and it is worth remembering that that is the reality of the sector and of the industry, so that it continues to support communities.

Grimsby is widely regarded as the seafood town. On the way in on the train, we see remnants of a sign that called us “Europe's food town”, although perhaps we do not want to mention Europe quite so much in Grimsby any more. The industry is now worth more than £2.5 billion every year, so it is nothing to be shy about. I know that success has not always been the case, however, and I have seen at first hand that my constituents are not afraid to dig deep when times are tough.

Following the decline of the trawling industry, which we have seen in so many coastal communities across the nation, Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes stood tall and proud and adapted. That adaption to focus on the supply chain and processing of seafood means that currently, across Grimsby and the wider Humber region, there are 6,000 people directly employed in more than 50 approved seafood processing units.

It is not just processing that our area holds expertise in. As of this year, I am proud to say that the next generation of seafood professionals will hone their skills at a dedicated new training facility in Grimsby. The UK seafood school at Grimsby Institute will provide the next generation with the skills and knowledge that they need to thrive in the industry, with up to 75 students being trained to use those facilities in the school's first year. I was pleased to go to the opening, where I saw the skills of the first tranche of new students. This is so important—the price of fish used to be a throwaway comment, but fish is now an expensive product, so retailers and processors are prepared to take risks in the training to prevent high fish wastage. This route encourages young people to be creative and to see seafood as high end and specialised.

That is incredibly welcome, but it does not stop there. The Minister will be pleased to know that the University of Lincoln is opening a centre of excellence, which will focus on the skills required by the processing sector in the local area to support people into highly skilled, well paid and long-term processing jobs. I was surprised to learn that a skilled, experienced filleter can expect to earn in the region of £70,000, because they are so in demand and waste so little fish. As tough a job as it is, it is well remunerated.

The Government have an essential role to play in enhancing and advancing this industry through their negotiations. The Minister will know that I have previously

[Melanie Onn]

raised the issue of the distant water fleet. It would be welcome if the Government started to engage thoughtfully in the latest rounds of negotiations with our international allies.

Many businesses in Grimsby have benefited from multimillion-pound infrastructure and skills grants from the £100 million UK seafood fund. I have written to the Minister previously to ask about the status of its future replacement. That support be greatly appreciated by coastal communities with fishing sectors, because it has been used to create investment, extend jobs, create new jobs and upskill local communities so that they are able to access those opportunities in my area. Given the success of the initiative, it would be helpful to understand whether there is a plan to reopen the scheme or launch one, so that businesses in our local seafood cluster can continue to benefit from that support.

The fishing industry is important not just to this Government's commitment to economic growth but to their commitment to building the healthiest generation ever. Fish is the cornerstone of a healthy diet, as it is rich in essential nutrients, such as omega-3 fatty acids, high-quality protein, vitamins and minerals. Those nutrients are vital to the healthy functioning of the heart and brain, and they reduce the risk of chronic diseases. By incorporating more fish into our diet, we can significantly improve our overall health and wellbeing. I had salmon at lunch time, as I hope everybody did—I was going to ask for a show of hands, but I will not embarrass people. Encouraging the consumption of fish not only helps individuals to lead healthier lives but reduces the burden on our healthcare system by preventing diet-related illnesses.

We have a food strategy, and we have a food tsar in Henry Dimbleby. We have great structures such as the NHS. We have great programmes of providing lunches in schools. Could we incorporate those aims into a state function, such as ensuring that fish is regularly on the menu for people in the NHS, care homes or education, so that they can benefit from all its goodness? That will help to support our sector as well as anything else.

On the topic of delicious food, if anybody is in the vicinity of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, they would be more than welcome to join me in some of our world-renowned chippies. Whether that is Ernie Becketts, the Ocean Fish Bar, Wybers Chippy or Steels Cornerhouse Restaurant, they can be certain that they will have the best fish and chips.

There are other elements that throw risk into the future of some of those stores. We are currently undergoing consultation on the pedestrianisation of Cleethorpes marketplace. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) is giggling from a sedentary position, but it is very serious. Steels has been in existence in the Cleethorpes constituency for more than 100 years—it is incredibly well known and traditional. Those who run it are so concerned about some of these environmental changes—the anticipated pedestrianisation and roadworks—that they worry it will be forced to close its doors in the next 10 months, which is very problematic and does not encourage people to eat more fish, as they should be doing. I said it would be a slight detour, but I got back to the point.

I will conclude. The future of the fishing industry in the UK holds significant promise in both supply and production. By continuing to support and invest in this essential industry, we can ensure its sustainability and growth, which will not only bolster our economy but enhance our food security. The Government's role in facilitating trade agreements and providing direct investment is crucial.

2.31 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), who gave what I suppose is best described as a commercial break in our proceedings, as she did a fantastic job of marketing the health and other benefits of consuming fish. This is *déjà vu* for me, in that I remember my first fisheries debate in 1997, for heaven's sake. That was the annual fisheries debate we used to undertake in the main Chamber. One of the annual features of that debate was a contribution from the then hon. Member for Great Grimsby, the late Austin Mitchell, who I recollect was temporarily renamed by deed poll Mr Haddock, so enthusiastic was he to promote the fishing industry. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes is proposing to have a name change herself; she is certainly moving in that direction, given the nature of what she told us.

Melanie Onn: It is funny that the hon. Gentleman should mention that. I made it very clear in my maiden speech in 2015 that I would not be changing my name to Haddock or any other fish species. Interestingly, although Austin changed his name by deed poll to Austin Haddock, famously carrying a Harry Haddock inflatable to Parliament, we do not believe he ever actually changed it back.

Andrew George: Well, he died a fish, and we are very saddened by his demise. I should reflect, as we certainly did in those days, on the risk that people take to put fish on our table, of which my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly reminded us. I remember that in 1997, we lost seven men in the industry in my constituency alone. It was just after the loss of the *Margaretha Maria* 200 miles off the coast of west Cornwall, in which we lost four men from Newlyn. We have sadly lost others in the industry since then. It is worth reminding ourselves just what a hazardous trade it is.

It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. I thank him for coming down to my constituency in the summer to visit Newlyn and for the genuine interest he takes in the industry, both in the catching sector and in the processing and marketing sector, which certainly impressed everyone there who met him. I am very grateful to him for making that visit.

I come back to a debate on this subject after a decade's sabbatical in the real world, which I must say is a very pleasurable place, and reflecting on a number of changes within the fishing industry in that time. Obviously, there is the B word; we do not want to return to the skirmishes of Brexit this afternoon, but it has certainly been a momentous change. During the period I was away, the fishing industry and fishermen were used as the poster boys for the Brexit campaign. I have to say

that they were sold a very cruel hoax in terms of the outcome of the vote; they were made a lot of promises that have not been fulfilled at all.

I had been prepared to concede that there was a major opportunity for the fishing industry, and that it was the one sector within the UK economy that could potentially have benefited as a result of Brexit, but such a benefit has not been delivered. Those people who made promises at that time just walked away from the industry after they had come down to places such as Newlyn to have their photographs taken for the purposes of their referendum campaign. That caused a lot of bitterness within the industry. Nevertheless, we move on.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland said, the common fisheries policy was often described as the worst possible policy apart from all the others, because fishing is a very difficult industry to manage, as the Minister knows and, indeed, as we all know. I remember engaging in fishing debates 10 years ago and there was a genuine belief then that we could move the industry away from the annual cliff-edge of the quota negotiations to a multi-annual system that would enable the industry, especially the catching sector, to plan five years ahead. Yes, there would be adjustments during that five-year, multi-annual rolling programme, but nevertheless it would provide a greater degree of certainty.

As I said in my intervention on my right hon. Friend, the science supports a multi-annual programme. If we want a recovery programme for most of the stock, there is no reason why we cannot project forward five years—not with great certainty, admittedly, regarding the situation five years hence, but with an indicative quota going forward over that period. That would help the industry to plan for the future.

Another outcome for the industry in my area has been the detriment to the very significant export trade that existed. A number of companies operating back then—particularly those at the smaller end, admittedly—have gone out of business as a result of the impediments that predictably, indeed inevitably, were placed in their way, particularly for those involved in the export of live fish to the continent. That was predictable but avoidable, and it has clearly had a detrimental impact on the local economy. Nevertheless, our local community adjusts itself to the challenges it faces.

The hon. Members for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) and for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) have made some excellent cases on behalf of Cornwall's fishing industry and the important role it plays in the local economy. Indeed, the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation produced a report, which I know was handed to the Minister, called "The True Value of Seafood to Cornwall". It shows that the industry contributes £174 million to Cornwall's gross value added per annum, with 500 full-time equivalent jobs in the catching sector alone. That equates to about 8,000 jobs in the seafood supply chain, so it is a significant player in the Cornish economy. It is often ignored, but nevertheless very important, particularly in my part of Cornwall with Newlyn being the largest port with a significant market.

The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth also mentioned the need for a fishing and marine strategy, and I hope the Minister will take that on board. There are both opportunities and challenges associated with rolling out, as the Government must, with our support, the offshore wind programme in the Celtic sea, which

we in Cornwall are keen to ensure achieves maximum benefit to the local economy and the community. There is no reason why it cannot be rolled out in a manner that enhances fishing opportunities rather than creating a detriment to the industry, but that requires the Minister, Energy Ministers and others to engage in dialogue with the industry to ensure that the location of those sites is planned with great care.

I want to draw the Minister's attention to one of the—probably—unintended consequences of the decisions taken, through a little story of an individual fisherman from my constituency. An inshore fisherman from Cadgwith, who fishes from Newlyn, has been affected by the cut in pollack quotas. As the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth said, compensation was offered to the industry, and many who received the funds used them, naturally, because they are fishermen, to go into other sectors where in fact there was pressure. For example, the industry is trying to protect the crawfish sector and implement a recovery programme. By then, there was no reason why the fishermen could not invest in the gear necessary to catch crawfish, and that had a detrimental impact on the recovery programme efforts.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I want to clarify something in relation to pollack. My understanding is that the scientific advice given out in June was that the total allowable catch should be set at zero, but it was not set at zero. The quota was set at 925 tonnes; even now, the stocks are much lower this year because the decision was not in line with the scientific assessment.

Andrew George: I will come to that in a second. The nature of what happens off the Cornish coast, and certainly in the south-west and other areas, is that pollack is caught in a multispecies environment. It is impossible not to catch pollack even when targeting other species—the hon. Member helps me to make the point—so my constituent went and targeted hake. The first thing to bear in mind is this. While he was targeting pollack, he was between 8 and 20 miles off the coast. To target hake, he had to go 40 miles or beyond, and that placed his small boat in significantly greater danger. In other words, it put him at greater risk to pursue an alternative fishery. That is point No. 1 to bear in mind.

The second point is that there is a pollack by-catch if someone is targeting hake. During one month—March of last year—my constituent caught more than 100 kg of by-caught pollack, which he was entitled to land in the market. Indeed, he was required to land it in the market; he could not throw it overboard. He was obliged to land this fish, as a result of which his licence was frozen by the Marine Management Organisation. Following some dispute, he was fined £1,000, and he then had to move out of that fishery. Of course, he was not targeting pollack at the time; he was trying to avoid it as best he could. The MMO did not offer him any kind of solution to the problem that he found himself with.

As a result of all that, my constituent has come out of that fishery and has since been targeting crawfish, of which the industry itself had undertaken voluntary measures to increase the minimum size and to help to recover the stock. Indeed, the minimum size proposed by the industry and implemented in Cornwall has since been picked up, adopted, in national legislation. The crawfish season is now over, so we now have a fisherman who has tied his boat up and is no longer able to fish.

[Andrew George]

The point is that I hope that the Minister, when looking at this issue, bears in mind that when we propose regulation affecting the industry, that is in effect a two-dimensional policy affecting three-dimensional reality. That is the problem. I hope that the Minister will reflect on the lessons learned just from that little anecdote when considering how policy is implemented, and on the unintended detrimental consequence. The measure does not actually help even the species that it is supposed to protect.

I hope that we are not coming back here in 10 years' time, gnashing our teeth about the same issues and continuing this annual bunfight in which we do not even know what the quotas will be in just a few weeks' time; I hope we have multi-annual quotas. One of the best ways of helping the industry is to provide it with all the capacity to manage itself better and for us politicians to try to stand back and keep out of it.

2.48 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under you in the Chair, Mr Efford. My thanks and congratulations go to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. I hope that in the coming years, the Government will find time to return the annual fisheries debate to the main Chamber. That was a good convention that the last Government cast aside, almost as quickly as they did their promises to fisherfolk following Brexit. I am sure that many of us would welcome its return.

This debate takes place in the season of the annual fisheries negotiations between the UK and the EU, as well as the trilateral negotiations with Norway. Last year, those negotiations resulted in more than half of catch limits being set above the scientifically advised levels, yet both international and UK law require that all stocks should be at sustainable levels. That is despite commitments under international treaties and agreements to end overfishing.

We currently have six commercially fished stocks—two cod stocks, two whiting stocks, one herring and a pollack—that are so depleted that the scientific advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea is for zero catches. We need to understand just how poorly managed those stocks have been. ICES provides zero catch advice for a stock when it is so depleted that, even without any catch, it will not recover above the biomass limit reference point for spawning stock biomass, below which a stock's reproductive capacity is compromised and it is considered to have impaired recruitment capacity. In other words, the stock has collapsed.

It is important to note that the decline of those stocks was not unpredictable, and nor was it unavoidable. Consistently fishing at too high a level guarantees that stocks will decline; if fishing is high enough, the stock will collapse.

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman is touching on an interesting issue. The ICES zero quota recommendations are what are called “headline advice”, which basically answers the question, “If you want this stock to recover in 12 months, what would you have to do?” Now, if we ask that question we will, of course, get the answer that

the hon. Gentleman brings to the Chamber. In point of fact, in the early years of this century we had the cod recovery plan, which was the dominant feature of fisheries management in the North sea and went over, I think, 10 years—certainly five. He portrays the ICES advice as accurate, but there is a lot more nuance underneath that headline advice, and he would do well to look at that.

Barry Gardiner: I am, of course, well aware that it is headline advice and that other things come into play, but as the right hon. Gentleman himself mentioned in his opening remarks, the things that come into play—I think he called them the nuances—are often political—

Mr Carmichael *indicated dissent.*

Barry Gardiner: I think *Hansard* will record that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned that himself in his opening remarks.

Overfishing means that the stock is driven down even further. There is no cure to a collapsed stock that involves continuing to overfish. The Celtic sea cod stock has declined by 95% since 2012, but last year the total allowable catch was set at basically the level of the entire adult population—it was actually set just 2 tonnes lower—and now the entire spawning population is lower than that. If we roll over that TAC, the catch limit would exceed the entire spawning population.

The Irish sea whiting stock is currently about 9% of the level it is legally supposed to be. International commitments and the Fisheries Act 2020 commit the UK and the EU, which shares many of those populations, to maintain commercially harvested stocks at a level that can support maximum sustainable yield. The stock is at a mere 9% of that—not 9% of its natural size, but 9% of the already much lower level that is the legal minimum. That is another stock that has declined by more than 90% since the 1980s.

Climate change represents a significant threat to marine life and the fisheries that depend on a healthy ecosystem, but it was not climate change that collapsed those stocks; it was heavy and constant overfishing. We sometimes hear big fishing interests blame climate change for the collapse, and it certainly makes the recovery of those populations harder, but the truth is that we consistently set catch limits above scientifically advised levels. That has crashed those stocks and will continue to do so as long as Ministers are prepared to go into the negotiations and ignore the science.

In introducing the debate, the right hon. Gentleman spoke about climate change and cod stocks. In recent years, every time quotas for North sea cod have been set at sustainable levels in accordance with the science, the stocks of cod have increased. Every time quotas have been set out of line with the science, the stocks have declined. Our understanding of the additional pressures of climate change should be driving us to be even more precautionary in our approach to the protection of fish stocks—not to be pretending that it is the cause of their collapse. While I am thinking about cod and the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) about the processing industry, I should say that the cod that comes to Grimsby is predominantly from Greenland, Norway and Iceland, which have a much more precautionary approach to setting the quota.

Many people here will remember the introduction of the discard ban or the landing obligation referred to by the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George). It is a ban on throwing away perfectly good fish that had been caught. What many people will not know is that this ban applies only to quota stocks of dab, flounder and gurnard. All other non-quota stocks can be thrown away at sea perfectly legally, and many are. About 35,000 tonnes of dab are discarded in the North sea every year—that is roughly 90% of the catch and equates to about 5 million fish. Remember that when we talk about the importance of food security. The irony is that dab actually used to have a quota, but the quota was removed when the landing obligation was brought in.

The purpose of the landing obligation was to create a real incentive for fishermen to use gear types and fishing methods that reduced unwanted bycatch and led to more selective fishing. It was designed to reduce the choke problem by incentivising more selective gear that would avoid choke species. Unfortunately, that works only if it is enforced and all the evidence shows that the landing obligation is now being widely ignored. More worryingly, not only is it being ignored, but potential discards are not even being accounted for in the TAC-setting process.

The only solution to discarding and improving scientific assessments is for the introduction of remote electronic monitoring—cameras, specifically. Without them it is impossible to know what is being caught and being discarded. Monitoring is essential for compliance. We currently have a system that literally incentivises bad behaviour. I was very taken by what the hon. Member for St Ives said about his fisherman and pollack. A fisherman who, like the one the hon. Gentleman mentioned, spends money on more selective gear, abides by the landing obligation and avoids certain areas because of higher bycatch of unwanted species, is massively disadvantaged compared with a fisherman who ignores those regulations. We are, as it stands, incentivising non-selective fishing, rewarding illegal behaviour and punishing those who stick to the rules, such as the hon. Gentleman's constituent.

The fishing industry rightly talks about the challenges it faces, yet its biggest challenge comes from an unhealthy marine environment that is incapable of supporting thriving fisheries. The notion that we can have a thriving fishing industry without a thriving marine environment is an illusion. We cannot have a growing sustainable fishing industry on the back of a depleted marine environment. No measure of Government support or access to markets can make up for no fish. Somehow this self-evident truth goes out the window when it comes to making decisions. We should be clear: if we do not recover fish stocks and start setting catch limits at levels that allow stocks to grow and adopting a precautionary approach that favours long-term sustainability, then we will be back there every year wondering why quotas have to be cut.

There are instances where the advice is for large increases in quota, and they were mentioned by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland; I think he said that when the data became available, it showed a 211% increase in relation to monkfish. When that is the case, I do not think we should chase down every last fish because that will simply result in smaller catches in future years, as well as significant increases in bycatch

of other stocks, which will often result in overfishing. However, the argument the right hon. Gentleman made is absolutely right: we need to get good data and it needs to be comprehensive. Once we have that and we can base the scientific assessments on really strong data, we can make sure we fish in line with the science and that stocks can recover.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It comes back to the point I made about data and about the science that you base the data on. He will have heard in many of these debates over the years the concern that by the time the data is gathered and processed and goes through the ICES process, it is several years old, so it is reflective not of the fish stocks at the point at which the decisions are made, but of some years earlier. The one thing everyone can surely agree is that the better the data gathering, the better the science, and the better it is for fishers, conservationists and anybody with an interest in the seas.

Barry Gardiner: I am delighted to agree with the right hon. Gentleman, who chairs the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. It also adds grist to the mill of the five-year approach, but we perhaps need to be careful. It is perfectly reasonable to move to a five-year approach, but it would not necessarily immediately lead to us increasing quota. It might, in the first year certainly, actually lead to a more precautionary approach because one was looking at things over the five-year period. That might not be something that his constituents would appreciate so much.

We have heard today about spatial squeeze and how the fishing industry no longer has unfettered access to the entire ocean. That is true, but as has been pointed out it is unavoidable; indeed, for reasons of wider sustainability and our energy supply, it is important, but it is also an argument for acting in a way that grows our fish stocks.

Melanie Onn: On that point about the renewable side of things, there is an opportunity to bring the industry into consultation with the likes of the Crown Estate at a much earlier stage so that the voices of all of those co-located spatial sharers can be heard and planned around. There are examples of good relationships between offshore wind developers and fishing communities.

Barry Gardiner: I am delighted that I sat down to receive my hon. Friend's intervention because she is entirely right. What she said goes to the remarks made by our hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) who, because of illness, is no longer in her place. She made a point about ensuring that consultations happen in accordance with the tides so that fisherfolk will actually be at the consultations and not out at sea. Her point was very interesting because that is not always appreciated.

Andrew George: The hon. Gentleman seems to be implying that the fishing industry is resistant to any conservation measures and would resist the proposed management measures that inevitably have to be brought into the industry. From my experience, the industry itself often proposes changes in order to protect its stock for the future. For example, the Trevoze ground closure off the north coast of Cornwall during spring of each year was proposed by the industry itself.

Barry Gardiner: I am sorry if I have given the hon. Gentleman the impression that I think fishing communities would be against this; I do not think that. That is precisely why I welcome the remarks of my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes and for South East Cornwall about the importance of consultation. Look at a case such as Lyme Bay: it was the local community, in consultation with the scientists, who produced the efflorescence that has taken place there. This must be done through the industry co-operating with the scientists.

We should note that MPAs were designed specifically to protect the nature within them from human activity that damaged it, and that includes fishing. It should therefore not be considered a negative that those areas are being protected. The partial ban on destructive dredging and bottom trawling in MPAs has been a success, and I hope it will be extended to a complete ban once the due process and consultation have taken place.

I wish the Minister and his team well in the upcoming negotiations. If he binds himself to the mast of science and turns an Odysseus-like ear to the siren voices urging him to allow greater quota, I cannot promise him popularity, but he would become a unique and respected first voice for common sense and a sustainable future for our industry.

First-hand sales of UK-landed seafood were over £1 billion in 2022, as my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes said. That is a good reminder that wild-capture seafood is a national resource. It is remarkable that the UK Treasury does not benefit directly and that those that benefit the most are large businesses that have managed to aggrandise themselves via the poorly regulated sale of individual quotas over many years. Small-scale fisherfolk and non-sector vessels are left to fish from the pool that accounts for just 4% of opportunities.

In addition, those big businesses that benefit the most by their control of quota also benefit from the free management of the resource via central and local government funding of the MMO, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, Natural England and the inshore fisheries and conservation authorities. It is also clear that big businesses are best placed to make representations and influence policy in a way that a single-handed inshore fisherman simply cannot. A quick scan of successful Government grant applications demonstrates that it is also big business that benefits from grant schemes, with support being provided to companies with turnover in the millions.

The impact of market forces on this national asset has left a handful of families and businesses benefiting the most via consolidation of beneficial ownership of quota, while small-scale fisherfolk and our coastal communities wither and are lost. Depleted stocks and limited funding for robust data collection of all commercial species, leading to precautionary management decisions, are by-products of the current system. I ask the Minister whether it is time for the UK to consider what alternative systems to manage this valuable natural resource could look like.

I welcome the beginnings of transparency that have come about from the publication of quota holdings, but that is only part of the story of who benefits from the amazing national public asset that is our fisheries. We all know that in-year swaps and leases occur. Would the

Minister look at completing the transparency exercise and requiring those swaps and leases to be published too? We need a system that is not based on the happenstance history of 40 years ago, when the current quota system was put in place, but that provides opportunity and certainty more equitably. We need a system that links opportunities to compliance with fisheries and conservation regulations and that helps to fund better data gathering and evidence to inform our fisheries resource management—one where a sustainable bounty from the seas ensures that the interests of our small fishing communities, the taxpayer and the planet are aligned.

It has already been said that fishing is one of the most dangerous peacetime occupations. The marine accident investigation branch accident reports make sombre reading, but they also provide an excellent opportunity for learning and change. Multiple capsizes of small vessels over several years led the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to update its codes for small vessel inspections, but reports from around the coast demonstrate that those new regulations appear to be applied inconsistently, and in some cases they run contrary to the marine architect designs and tested vessel stability.

The financial burden of being tied up by an MCA inspection and being required to make modifications to a vessel's hull can be exceptionally heavy. Owner-operators are forced to sell their vessels and in some cases leave the industry, as they simply cannot afford to comply with an individual inspector's request. I urge the Minister to speak with his colleagues at the Department for Transport to help convene a group of small-scale fishing vessel safety experts? They can help the DFT and the MCA to better understand the impact of their inspection regimes and to find a coherent approach to that vital work—one that provides a consistent set of outcomes, without the lottery of where a fisherman is based and which inspector they get producing different outcomes on similar vessels. The lack of MCA inspectors means that vessels can often wait weeks for an inspection slot. While a vessel is awaiting reinspection, the fisherman cannot earn. What should be a straightforward process can provide huge financial risk and strain, from which some of those microbusinesses simply cannot recover.

Finally on safety, I draw the Minister's attention to a simple fact that the last Government seemed to do little to address. The MAIB reports set out the circumstances surrounding each accident and the component elements that led to it. All too often, these accidents are highly predictable and could be prevented by simply conducting good maintenance, onboard training and safe operations. Here, I would interject that the question of English language skills, which we debated earlier, comes into play: English language skills and the ability to communicate with every member of the crew is vital for crew safety.

Mr Carmichael: For the avoidance of doubt, as I might have said in a previous professional existence, nobody is suggesting that a crew should not have English language skills. The question, rather, is about the level those language skills are required to be.

Barry Gardiner: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, and I thought that his points on visas were well-made, but it is important that we put safety at the forefront. Paradoxically, the common denominator that runs through every report is that the crew involved had all attended

courses and attained the required safety and training certificate. I gently suggest that it is time for the DFT and the MCA to consider their syllabuses to see whether what is being delivered leaves graduates with the practical understanding they need to transfer to their work environment. I think a review is overdue.

The roll-out of CatchApp and inshore vessel monitoring to the small-scale fleet has been widely seen as a disaster by inshore fishermen. I am told that CatchApp is regularly down, and inshore vessel monitoring systems and approved suppliers are not required to provide robust support in a timely fashion, leading to lost days at sea. The stress and anxiety that those two systems are causing around the coast is palpable. The MMO warned, during the roll-out of both those systems, of the risks of pressing ahead with them before they were fully tested and, in the case of the I-VMS, that not stipulating service levels would leave fisherman at the mercy of the providers. We debated the issue in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee at the time, but the Government simply rode over it. I appreciate that the roll-out programme came under the last Government, but can Ministers urgently investigate what is going wrong with those systems from the user's standpoint, and what steps the MMO can take to make things work better?

Small-scale fishermen are the beating heart of so many of our coastal communities. Fishing is not a job; it is a way of life, but one where it is increasingly difficult for new entrants to be found or gain appropriate training. Many of today's fishermen came into the industry via the youth training scheme. It provided college, a small salary and on-the-job training. Some of our country's finest inshore skippers came via that route, but they are now close to retirement. Only large companies can afford to recruit and invest in new entrants, and over the past decade we have seen a growing reliance on foreign crews. We have heard, and will no doubt hear more, about visa problems. Local apprenticeship courses have met with varying success, but they will not provide the numbers or the pace to replace foreign crews, let alone the fishermen who have reached retirement.

When the Minister considers the successor funding scheme to the fisheries and seafood scheme, I will be grateful if he looks at what more we can do to grow our own talent and build the workforce, particularly for the small-scale fishing fleet. It cannot fund apprentices directly itself, but its members have a lifetime at sea and the knowledge to help to grow that talent.

3.15 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for this important debate. I particularly thank the right hon. Gentleman for the tribute he paid to our fishermen who face dangers at sea each day—"For those in peril on the sea". The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) referred to the loss of the Solway Harvester; I well remember covering that tragedy as a journalist, and the shadow it cast on the Isle of Whithorn and Kirkcudbrightshire.

My fishing community and the other communities I represent are quite different from those constituencies. The Western Isles account for 22% of the inshore waters

in what is mostly an inshore fishery, although that might well have been 0% of Scotland's inshore fishing grounds if the SNP-Green coalition had got away with its ludicrous plans for highly protected marine areas, which the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) highlighted. Although those plans were defeated, pushed away by a rebellion across Scotland's coast and the songwriting power of Skipinnish, and have been put away for now, they have created a high level of uncertainty, which means that some fishermen are deciding whether to stay or leave the industry.

In the Western Isles, the picture is mixed and somewhat rosy. We have had some £12 million-worth of tonnage landed in the past couple of years—something like 3,000 tonnes, of which almost 90% is shellfish and only 11% is white fish. Marine Scotland shows that there are 215 registered fishing vessels—small fishing vessels, like those for which my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) has just made the case—and something like 290 fishers, or about 7% of Scotland's national total.

The industry faces many different challenges in different constituencies, but we have a lot in common. I will give some attention to one of the biggest challenges facing the industry and the associated processing sector in the Western Isles. It was a pleasure to go to the annual general meeting of the Western Isles Fishermen's Association a couple of weeks ago and see so many young faces among the attendees. There are young entrants to the industry, helped by locally administered schemes that encourage entrants. One such scheme is community quotas, which the Western Isles council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, has bought and which it licenses from quota to new entrants. That all helps people into the fishing industry and has a significant impact.

That glimmer of hope should not mask something that is a problem for the islands' industry, the Scottish industry and the UK industry: the lack of skilled crews. The demographics in the Western Isles are not good. Although I have talked about young entrants, the working-age population has dropped by 12% over the past 10 years, and there has been a 26% rise in the elderly population. All employers are competing for a reduced number of school leavers, and virtually all sectors are dependent on sourcing migrant labour to grow their business.

The most important ask from the Western Isles fishing industry is that the Minister recognise that there has to be some flexibility in immigration policy to allow the needs and demands of rural and island areas to be accepted. The current sponsored employment scheme seems to have been based on city and urban salaries; it ignores the variation in wages in rural and island communities, which of course are lower and are coupled with increased food, energy and transport costs. I suspect that the £70,000 salary for a processor that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) mentioned has as much to do with the lack of skilled people as it does with the skills involved in doing the job.

Only this week, I had some correspondence from the Isle of Barra. Barratlantic is one of the large seafood processors on our island chain. Christina MacNeil, the general manager, tells me that in 35 years of working in the seafood industry, things have never been more difficult. There is huge demand for langoustine and scallop,

[*Torcuil Crichton*]

but supplying customers is becoming increasingly difficult because of the lack of staff. We can imagine how difficult it is on a small island. She has four Filipino workers, who have been employed there since April 2023; they came through the sponsorship scheme, but given the nature of the work and the lack of available staff, the company needs some flexibility in order to retain them. It can just about manage the salaries now, but if they increased to £38,000 a year the operation would be impossible. The company has been in operation for 50 years, but its future is in the balance because of restrictive immigration schemes.

It is the same for fishermen. It is impossible to employ UK crews, as we know, so they must look overseas. Once again, cost is a criterion, but so too is the visa system. Crews need an English qualification at a very high level, which means that they are almost barred from entry. That creates huge difficulties for fishing boat owners and processors in my constituency.

My plea to the Minister—it is echoed by others such as the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), who is no longer in his place, as well as the Migration Advisory Council and almost every coastal community—is that there be flexibility in the visa system. We do not need a separate visa system, as some Scottish colleagues might argue. There is no need to replicate the system: we just need enough flex to take into account the needs of island and rural areas.

Mr Carmichael: In relation to separate systems, I suspect that the hon. Gentleman agrees that the problems for the fishermen in both our constituencies are shared by fishermen in Kilkeel, around the south-west coast and elsewhere in the country. Does that not rather illustrate the truth that the problem is for the sector rather than for any particular constituent part of the United Kingdom?

Torcuil Crichton: That is true. Our problems are not uniquely island problems, nor are they uniquely Scottish problems: they are demographic, economic and social problems for coastal communities around the whole UK. I know that that is not entirely the responsibility of the Minister.

Having risked the ire of the Home Office, rather than the Minister, I will carry on and risk the anger of my hon. Friends the Members for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) and for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd), and possibly of the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George). I am after their tuna, or rather our tuna. One quota for which the Minister does have responsibility is the bluefin tuna stocks, which have increased significantly. Thanks to climate change, bluefin tuna are roaming far north and wild in the Atlantic. There has been a great decade-long catch-and-release scheme around the British coast. The catch is by rod and line, so the catches are selective, of good quality and of the same stock as those caught in other regions of the UK. They have the potential to be a great home market and export market.

The UK was allocated something like 39 tonnes of bluefin tuna in 2023, but so far none of those commercial licences has been granted to a Scottish boat. All 13 were granted to the south-west of England; none of them has come to Scotland, far less to the Hebrides, where operators

have set themselves up not just as rod-and-line operators, but potentially as smokers and exporters to the domestic and international markets.

For all the quota to be allocated to one area seems very odd. It is not what we would expect. We might expect weight to be placed on geography and on socioeconomic impacts: a bluefin tuna fishery in the Western Isles would be economically significant. For rod-and-line operators and others who have prepared themselves to turn commercial, it is deeply frustrating to be turned off in that way.

Jayne Kirkham: I do not wish to make too much of this, but looking at the other side of it, Scotland has been lucky enough to get the headquarters of GB Energy. Maybe we could think about the alternative as well.

Torcuil Crichton: I will turn my attention to GB Energy in a moment. First, I make another appeal to the Minister that from next year onwards the UK ought to allocate commercial bluefin tuna licences not on a “first come, first served” basis, or however the system works, but on a geographic and socioeconomic basis.

While I have the Minister’s ear and we are talking about quotas, let me make an appeal for spurdog fishery, which is managed by the UK Government and allocated on a monthly quota basis to all vessels. Due to the introduction of a management measure banning the landing of individual fish over 100 cm in length, fishermen have been unable to develop a market. All buyers who show an interest in spurdog indicate that they would far rather have spurdog over 100 cm. As a result of the measure, local fishermen end up dumping large fish, which could secure—and, prior to the ban, did secure—higher prices. Some relaxation on the question of permitting the landing of spurdog over 100 cm would at least open a limited marketing opportunity for fishermen on those vessels.

I do not want to wade into the big debate on quotas, on total catch allowances and on 2026—or perhaps I do. I will just wish the Minister well and ask him to consider some of the ideas that my hon. Friend the Member for that famous fishing port Brent West highlighted in his contribution. The quota should belong to no one. It should not be used to enrich those who are already rich from our seas; it should be treated as a national resource and a socioeconomic asset to be distributed according to port, postcode and socioeconomic need. As I say, there should also be a system of community quota, whereby excess quota or new quota is allocated to municipalities or regional development agencies to ensure that it is attached to landing ports and that it creates local jobs in coastal communities.

There has been a lot of talk about GB Energy, spatial squeeze and the conflict between the fishing industry and the new offshore wind farm industry. I understand why the conflict exists. The developments are somewhat controversial, but they would be less controversial if the offshore industry, like the onshore industry, were forced to provide a community benefit or community share or to pay more to the Crown Estate Commission for permission to make wealth from wind, which should, of course, belong to no one. If those funds were allocated regionally and locally, we could address the data deficiency to which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West referred.

We could create our own marine research centres in our coastal communities—not necessarily run by the Government, but certainly run by those communities—so that in the competition for data and in arguments with environmentalists and with Governments, we can have the science, we can tell what is in the waters around us and we can tell how the environment is shaping up.

These are leaps of the imagination, perhaps, for the quota system, but they should be considered seriously by the Government and by the fishing industry itself, if fishing is to have a future as well as a past.

3.29 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dr Huq.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing today's debate on the UK fishing industry. He has been a steadfast supporter of the UK's fishing communities for many years. I echo his words and those of many others in the debate who have paid tribute to all those who have died at sea, and to the valuable work of the RNLI. Fishing is a subject of huge importance to us Liberal Democrats, not only because of the industry's economic significance but because of its cultural heritage, its role in sustaining coastal communities and its relationship with the health of our seas.

We have heard today from communities from all around the UK's coastline, and about many different sectors of this age-old industry. The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) talked about resolving the visa issue for fishers, both within and outside the 12-mile zone, which many others referred to as well.

The hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) spoke about the importance of fish as a low-carbon, high-protein food source of which we should be consuming more, and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) spoke passionately about how we can promote fish and seafood throughout the food chain, and about her brilliant local food-processing industry up in Grimsby.

The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) referred beautifully to Cornwall's proud fishing heritage, and particularly the Fal oysters. On that point, while I have him in the room, I ask the Minister again to reconsider his decision to classify Pacific oysters as an invasive species. They are heading our way anyway—they are going to be here whether we like it or not—so I do not believe that decision makes sense any longer. After all, sheep were once not a native species in the UK; things do change.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton)—did I get that right?

Torcuil Crichton *indicated assent.*

Caroline Voaden: The hon. Member talked about the importance of encouraging young people into the industry. That is important for us all, wherever we are.

It is clear for us all to see that our fishing communities were deeply let down by the previous Conservative Government, and that the promises made to them in the run-up to Brexit have been badly broken. Instead of the “sea of opportunity”—which the hon. Member

for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) optimistically said he thought was possible—the industry has been cast adrift, struggling with increased bureaucracy, reduced market access and rising costs.

We believe fishing communities deserve better. As we enter this annual negotiation period and approach the end of the transition period in 2026, we must learn from the failures of the past and ensure that the mistakes of the terrible, botched Brexit deal are not repeated. As many Members have said, we need multi-annual decision making to give the industry more long-term stability.

Negotiations on fishing quotas must be conducted transparently and be based on the best science available, with fishing communities at the table helping to shape the decisions that will profoundly affect their livelihoods. The Liberal Democrats want a fair deal for fishers—one that sets realistic catch limits, cuts unnecessary bureaucracy, invests in infrastructure and creates opportunities for coastal communities to thrive both on and off the water.

First, we need to tackle the avalanche of red tape that has engulfed the industry for the last few years. The increased paperwork for customs declarations, export processes and landing requirements has created delays, raised costs and caused untold frustration, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) described. Driving from Cornwall to Dover with a piece of paper to comply with an export requirement is utter madness in 2024.

Having to get a qualified vet to personally sign 17 different pieces of paper for one export consignment is also ludicrous, yet that is the reality for Offshore Shellfish, a high-quality mussel farm off the Devon coast—I have written here, “which I had the pleasure of visiting on a very windy day in September”, but I am not sure that it was all pleasure, because it was quite choppy. Mussels cannot afford to be held up by red tape; speed is key when exporting shellfish. We have to cut down on the endless forms that companies are being forced to fill in.

John Cooper: I was involved with the seafood industry in the early days of Brexit as a special adviser with the Scotland Office, and we found that much of the problems with live export, particularly of shellfish and things like langoustines, actually lay on the far side of the channel, rather than our side. I do not know whether it is still the case, but at that time the UK Government had a digital-first presumption to try to take away the pieces of paper the hon. Lady talks about but, in fact, it was those in Europe who insisted on that. I am not sure whether the hon. Lady is aware of that.

Caroline Voaden: I am aware that my predecessor used to say it was digital-first and that the paperwork did not exist, but I can tell Members that 17 pieces of paper have to be signed every time Offshore Shellfish wants to do an export consignment. It does not matter which side of the channel that comes from. The point is that it was a bad deal that was badly negotiated, and we should never have put our fish exporters in that position. The Liberal Democrats want a veterinary agreement with the EU to be signed as soon as possible, to simplify the processes.

Secondly, we must invest in the infrastructure needed to keep jobs and value in our coastal communities. By equipping coastal towns with modern processing facilities, we can retain more of the value generated by fishing

[Caroline Voaden]

within those communities, which will help to revitalise local economies, help coastal communities around the UK, and create high-quality employment opportunities, as was so well described by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes.

The future of fishing depends on the health of our seas, which is why sustainability is at the heart of the Liberal Democrat approach. We believe in a science-led system for managing fishing quotas, to ensure that decisions are based on all the available evidence about stock levels and marine biodiversity, not just the headline advice. We need to iron out the mismatches between data and the actual situation in the sea. Only when those two things match will we have the best data and be able to make the best decisions.

The last-minute decision by the previous Government to cut pollack quotas at a stroke showed the Conservatives' lack of respect for our hard-working fishing communities. Like my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives, I know one skipper who had to sell his boat straight after that decision. It was just the last straw. We must have more long-term decision making so that we do not put people in that situation at the drop of a hat.

We would also establish an innovation fund to support the development of new technologies and practices that reduce environmental harm, while increasing funding for marine conservation projects and expanding the network of marine protected areas—but in consultation with the fishing industry. Protecting our oceans is not just about safeguarding the environment, vital though that is; it is about securing the long-term viability of the fishing industry itself. Nothing is more important to an industry that provides sustainable, quality food, contributes to our nation's food security and wants to carry on doing that for the long term.

In my constituency of South Devon, fishing is not just an industry but a way of life for many of my constituents. Brixham harbour, one of the busiest and most successful fishing ports in England, is a hub of activity sustaining hundreds of jobs and contributing millions to the local economy. I am grateful to the Minister for his visit in July, which was much appreciated by the fishing community. We see bluefin tuna jumping in our waters, as in the Western Isles.

The challenges facing fishers in South Devon are stark. I have met many skippers in Brixham who shared the immense pressures they are under, from rising fuel costs to navigating the labyrinth of post-Brexit bureaucracy. They are deeply proud of their work and their heritage, but they feel abandoned by successive Governments that have made promises they have failed to keep. We are also facing an acute skilled labour shortage, which many have spoken about. Despite efforts to recruit home-grown talent through apprenticeships and partnerships, we simply do not have enough skilled crews to operate vessels or enough workers for our processors.

As many Members have mentioned, the current visa routes for non-UK workers are wholly inadequate. The transit worker visa, which many smaller operators rely on, does not meet the needs of modern fishing, while the skilled worker visa is unaffordable and impracticable for the industry. Its language requirements alone simply do not recognise the reality of working at sea. I ask the

Government to work with the Home Office to create a visa system that meets the needs of the industry and supports its sustainability.

As we review the trade and co-operation agreement, we must look at what has happened. Operating costs have skyrocketed due to Brexit and the pandemic, compounding the challenges for exporters, who are so reliant on EU markets. Administrative burdens and barriers to trade remain a thorn in the industry's side, and those burdens must be eased and smoother trade with the EU must be prioritised. Better access must be negotiated to weight it more in favour of UK fishers. It would be good to hear from the Minister how his negotiators will prioritise that.

Marine spatial planning, to which many Members have referred, must also properly recognise the value of fishing alongside environmental objectives. The industry supports the goals of the Fisheries Act 2020, but the pace and scale of the changes can sometimes feel overwhelming. That highlights the need for careful consideration of the socioeconomic impacts on fishers and coastal communities. Although we in the Liberal Democrats support an urgent move to renewal energy, is it right that we lease out the UK seabed to develop an industry that will export energy abroad at the cost of the UK fishing industry? Fishing and power can share the sea, but fishers must be properly consulted about the siting of new offshore wind, and there must be a discussion about turbines being located in some of our most lucrative fishing waters.

Looking ahead, I hope the new Labour Government will develop a clear and coherent strategy for the industry that takes into account the interconnectedness of environmental and economic objectives. The 2025 renegotiation of the TCA is an opportunity to address the challenges, and I hope the Government will consider socioeconomic factors when shaping future policy. Fishing communities deserve far better than the neglect they have endured over the past decade.

The Liberal Democrats remain unwavering in our commitment to advocating for practical and meaningful solutions that address the immediate challenges faced by fishing communities. We will continue to push for reforms that not only secure the long-term future of the industry as a whole, both at sea and on land, but protect the environment on which it depends.

3.41 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who is Chair of the EFRA Committee, on securing a debate on such an important topic for fishermen and women in our coastal communities right across the United Kingdom. Fish are one of the most valuable and powerful resources for our country; we must protect, preserve and nurture them, and support the industries that harvest them for us. His Majesty's loyal Opposition are committed to supporting our coastal communities and our fishing industries.

We have had a wide-ranging debate. There have been powerful contributions from across the United Kingdom, and there was a lot of expertise within them. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland spoke powerfully about the negotiations, the importance of science, and the

balance between economics and conservation. He also touched on the importance of safety in the industry, a point echoed by many Members.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) talked about the importance of data and monitoring, while my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross), who is a proud champion of her local farming and fishing communities, spoke about the issues of food security and the role fishing plays in that. She talked about spatial squeezing and the TCA negotiations and, at the end of her speech, she talked powerfully about the importance of the RNLI and how much we owe them for keeping people safe at sea.

The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) talked about sustainability, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), who is also a proud champion for both his farming and fishing constituents, talked powerfully about safety and danger in the fishing industry. He also talked about spatial squeezing and gave his expert analysis of the ongoing fishing negotiations, which was welcome.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) talked about the negotiations and the need for a longer-term perspective. She spoke about the importance of the processing industry, which was valuable. I was pleased that she heaped praise on the £100 million UK seafood fund, which was brought in by the Conservative Government in 2021 to support the future and the sustainability of the UK fisheries and seafood sector. I thank her for praising that Conservative policy.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) talked about safety and echoed many of the scientific themes, and the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner)—with whom I served in the previous Parliament on the EFRA Committee, where we received regular briefings from DEFRA about the complexities of the fishing negotiations—talked powerfully about the importance of science and sustainability, data monitoring and the safety implications of fishing.

I will move now to the Western Isles, the name of which I am going to struggle to pronounce, so help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton)—

Torcuil Crichton: You can say the Western Isles.

Dr Hudson: The hon. Member spoke powerfully about safety from his unique perspective representing island and rural communities, and he talked passionately about the appeals for quotas to the Minister as well.

It is important to highlight the benefits that we can and should reap following our departure from the European Union. For our fishing industry, that departure gave us the opportunity to increase our fishing quotas, which I am pleased the last Conservative Government took advantage of. As Members will be aware, the last Government began the process of replacing the EU's common fisheries policy, which I think we agree was flawed, with a new bespoke framework for UK fisheries.

Six fisheries management plans were consulted on, covering major species, including bass, scallop, lobster and crab. The last Government negotiated quotas of 750,000 tonnes in 2024, an 80,000 tonne increase compared with 2023 that was expected to deliver a £70 million

boost for the fishing industry. Can the Minister provide clarity, for the sector and for Members present, on what the Government hope to achieve in the quotas for next year and how they will approach negotiations for 2026 and into the future?

A significant fear is that the Government will use fishing as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the EU. Can the Minister quash those rumours now and assure our fishing communities across the United Kingdom that this Government will not let them down, as they are currently doing to farmers with their policies on the family farm tax on inheritance? We would like some reassurance from the Minister on that point.

The new Government have published consultations for the next five fisheries management plans, which I welcome. Can the Minister confirm that they will remain live documents, constantly open to review, updates and improvements, to ensure that those FMPs reach their objectives?

As has been said, in December 2021, the Conservative Government allocated £100 million specifically to support the long-term future of our UK fishing sector, supporting job creation and boosting seafood exports to new markets. Can the Minister clarify whether the Government will continue with that support or provide any additional funding to benefit the long-term future of the UK fishing sector? Can the Minister also commit to publishing an impact assessment of the Government's new labour and employment reforms, including the increase in national insurance contributions and its specific impact on the fishing industry, including the fish processing sector and coastal communities?

I am also keen to press the Minister on several issues that we encountered on the EFRA Committee in areas that I led on in certain respects. I hope that the Minister can provide some clarity on the Government's position today, not least because the sector has been waiting with considerable concern following the general election, as Labour's manifesto was pretty short on fishing—in fact, it failed to mention it at all.

Last year, in the last Parliament, the EFRA Committee published its cross-party report on marine mammals, after an inquiry that I triggered. The report highlighted the issue of bycatch, in which seals, dolphins and other sea life are tragically snarled in fishing gear. Sadly, it is estimated that more than 650,000 marine mammals die each year from being needlessly caught worldwide, including more than 1,000 cetaceans in UK waters.

The last Government consulted on the introduction of remote electronic monitoring. Electronic monitoring systems utilise a range of technology, including cameras, gear sensors, GPS units and more. The last Government began to implement electronic monitoring systems in all priority fisheries, with the aim of achieving that by 2029. Those monitoring systems apply to all vessels over 10 metres in length and active within fisheries in English waters, including non-UK vessels.

Once we were satisfied that the implementation issues had been resolved for each priority fishery, the plan was to make it mandatory to have such systems installed. It was noted that there would be two years' notice to give vessels time to adapt and for installation to take place. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are going to do in that regard? Does that remain the plan? What are the timescales?

[Dr Hudson]

Marine Management Organisation rules state that fishermen and women in UK waters must self-report all cetacean bycatch within 48 hours of their fishing journey, but very few reports are submitted. According to the MMO, six marine mammals were reported by fishing vessels as bycatch injury or mortality in 2023. In stark contrast, the previous Government's bycatch monitoring programme estimated that between 502 and 1,560 harbour porpoises, 165 to 662 common dolphins, and 375 to 872 seals—both grey and harbour—were captured as bycatch in UK fisheries in 2019. Does the Minister agree that that suggests there is significant under-reporting of cetacean and other marine mammal bycatch? Will the Minister clarify what the Government are doing to improve the monitoring, reporting and prevention of such tragic and upsetting bycatch?

I have worked closely with Whale and Dolphin Conservation, the World Cetacean Alliance, the Sussex Dolphin Project and the Blue Marine Foundation, which are great organisations that seek to make fishing safer for the marine mammals that share the seas and oceans that we harvest fish from. Will the Minister commit to working with such organisations to tackle this issue, which unites us in humanity? No one wants to see those air-breathing mammals horrifically caught up by the fishing industry.

The UK has a very important role to play as a global soft power. Like all Members, I am strongly opposed to the hunting of any cetaceans—dolphins, whales or porpoises. There is no humane way to kill a whale, so that barbaric practice must end. Although there is a tradition in the Faroe Islands of killing pilot whales and dolphins for meat and other products, the previous Government long expressed their concern about the welfare issues surrounding those cetacean hunts and the domestic regulation currently in place. Ministers in the previous Government urged the Faroe Islands to look at alternatives to the hunting of dolphins and encouraged its representatives to consider the many economic and social benefits that responsible cetacean watching can bring to coastal communities.

During the joint committee on trade with the Faroe Islands in 2022, Ministers raised the UK's opposition to the continued hunting of dolphins in the Faroe Islands on animal welfare and conservation grounds. I therefore hope the Minister will confirm that the new Government will uphold the previous Government's position and use every appropriate opportunity to advocate for the end of cetacean hunts in the Faroe Islands.

This issue sadly stretches further than the Faroe Islands. Horrifically, whaling is still practised in various countries, including Norway, Iceland and Japan. Will the Minister outline how the Government are approaching countries that still conduct whaling?

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman missed out the United States of America from that list.

Dr Hudson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention.

What steps are the Government taking in international negotiations to stop that cruel practice? When negotiating fishing arrangements, trade deals or anything else, UK diplomats and Ministers must make the ethical case to

countries that those unacceptable practices must end. Can the Minister reassure the House that the new Labour Government will continue to play their part on the world stage to end whaling once and for all?

It is important to work collaboratively with our international partners to ensure that global waters can thrive. Sustainability in fishing is pivotal to preserve these diverse ecosystems. Indeed, using a scientific, evidence-based approach that ensures high ecological and environmental standards in fishing from all fishing countries is paramount for sustaining our precious seas and oceans and ensuring responsible global trade.

I welcome the introduction of highly protected marine areas that protect all species, habitats and associated ecosystem processes within the site boundary, including the seabed and the water column. HPMAs allow the protection and full recovery of marine ecosystems. By setting aside some areas of the sea with high levels of protection, HPMAs allow nature to fully recover to a more natural state, and allow the ecosystem to thrive. Can the Minister update Members on the Government's plans regarding the development of HPMAs?

Mr Carmichael: I am interested in what the hon. Gentleman says about HPMAs. Does he agree that the Government in Whitehall should learn the lessons from the experience of the Government in Edinburgh? That is, if we are to move to that level of protection, it is of primary importance that the communities that are going to be most closely affected are brought along as part of the process, rather than it just being visited on communities in a top-down closure that would result in the economic ruin we would have seen in Scotland.

Dr Hudson: I thank the right hon. Member for that intervention. I agree that it is important to have joined-up thinking across the United Kingdom, and that communities should be consulted. If we are designating different areas of our seas and oceans, we should make sure that harvesting the sea goes in parallel with conserving it.

It is important to touch on how dangerous fishing is, an issue that has been spoken about powerfully by many Members across the Chamber today. It is undeniably a dangerous and demanding industry, so I welcome measures to improve safety in fishing. There is more that we need to do, and today's debate has shone a light on that. I urge the Government to move ahead on a cross-party basis to see what we can do to make this industry much safer.

The hon. Member for Brent West touched on the stress and anxiety within the profession, and I want to touch briefly on mental health. The mental health of our fishing communities is very fragile, because it is such a tough and unsafe industry, there are financial pressures, and those communities do not know what is going to happen as the negotiations move forward.

The statistics show that people who are struggling with their mental health are more likely to have accidents, certainly in the farming sector, and the same is probably true in the fishing industry. It is important to acknowledge that and to support the mental health of our fishing communities. I commend the work of several charities that help in this area, such as the Bearded Fishermen Charity, Fishermen's Mission, FishWell and the Angling Trust. All those charities do an amazing job in working with fishermen and women to support their mental

health. Will the Minister join me in commending their work, and outline what specific support he believes can be put in place—as a Government and on a cross-party basis—to support our fishing communities with their mental health? If we want sustainability of fishing, we need to have sustainability among the people who work in that profession. We need to nurture it and support it moving forward.

To conclude, fishermen and women, fish processors and coastal communities all do incredibly tough and dedicated work to help the UK's food security, as has been powerfully said by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan and by Members on both sides of the Chamber. The work that they do is important for feeding the nation with healthy, locally sourced and locally processed food that is key to a balanced diet. Mike Cohen, chief executive of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, has said:

"The costs of doing business as a fisher and the rewards to be obtained from it also need consideration in government policy."

I hope that the Minister agrees, and that the views of all the key fishing stakeholders and communities will always be considered at the heart of future policymaking.

3.59 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq.

I start by thanking the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who is the Chair of the Select Committee, not only for securing this debate—a really important one, which has been conducted in a civil and constructive way, and I look forward to similar discussions throughout this Parliament—but for his continuing commitment to championing the fishing industry, of which he is extremely knowledgeable.

Orkney and Shetland are crucial parts of the UK seafood industry, and their rich fishing grounds and aquaculture sites provide quality produce that is in demand across Europe and beyond. Back in the summer, I was very pleased to visit the area. In fact, while listening to many of the contributions to the debate, I realised that I have had the pleasure of visiting the constituencies of many Members who have spoken today.

We have heard some excellent speeches today, including the excellent sales job by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), who gave a powerful account of the importance of fish processors. We also heard a point that is perhaps not widely understood—that so much of the fish we consume is, sadly, not caught by our own fishing fleet but frozen and brought here from other countries.

There was also strong representation from Scotland and the south-west of England. The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) made a similarly strong sales job. In passing, I thank Chris Ranford and the others who made me so welcome in Cornwall back in the summer. When I was in Shetland, I also had the pleasure to hear directly from some of the organisations there—the Scottish Fishermen's Association and the Shetland Fish Producers Organisation. There are many people to whom I am grateful for informing me about this hugely important, hugely complicated issue.

I was struck by the comments about the safety issues, and indeed the danger that the people working in the industry face. Fishing is a really difficult and dangerous job. One of my first visits to a fishing area was to King's Lynn, in my own part of the country. I remember standing on the quayside on a very cold January morning, looking at the relatively small craft setting out into the grey and thinking, "This looks like a very, very tough job." It really is, and of course the risks involved have been outlined very well by several Members today. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, who secured and introduced the debate, made the point about the risks involved very strongly, as did the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper). The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) also outlined those risks. I am very grateful to him, not only for his warm words today, but for his warm welcome when I visited his constituency.

We should all thank the people who do these tough jobs. The Marine Accident Investigation Branch published its 2023 annual report in October, sadly reporting on a year in which three fishing vessels were lost, with the loss of four lives. Those are four tragedies—far too many. We also heard today, from other speakers, about tragedies in the past. Having said all that, I think the industry deserves praise for its efforts to improve safety. That good work must continue, including, as a priority, addressing concerns flagged by the Marine Accident Investigation Branch about potential under-reporting of incidents.

I will try to address the points made by Members today, but I will start by setting out some of the Government's priorities, because that information was sought by several Members.

We absolutely recognise that the fishing and seafood industry is culturally a significant part of the UK and integral to many communities, particularly our more remote coastal communities. Our fishing fleet and the associated onshore activities play an important role in boosting the growth of regional and coastal economies, including providing jobs. The industry also plays a vital role in our food security, bringing a nutritious source of food to dinner tables across the country. My job title is the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, and I see the fishing sector as playing a vital role in feeding the nation.

Through our fisheries management and our international responsibilities, the UK is absolutely committed to managing our fisheries in a sustainable way—a point that was echoed in virtually every contribution today. By meeting our responsibilities, we will support a vibrant, profitable and sustainable fishing industry alongside a productive and healthy marine environment. I think that goal of achieving a balance is shared by everyone.

What we now have, as an independent coastal state, is the ability to pursue our own approach to managing fisheries, both at home and on the international stage. We want to work increasingly closely with the industry to ensure that we deliver the best outcome for the UK. I will come back to this point: I am really keen that we co-create policy with those who are impacted by it. That point is made repeatedly by the Secretary of State.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): On consultation, too many meetings are held in the middle of the day in the middle of the week. That creates a huge

[Noah Law]

burden for some of the fishers that want to attend them. They are often held in Newlyn or Brixham, the main centres, which can create logistical challenges for those wanting to voice their views on the formation of fisheries management plans. Will the Minister consider that when trying to reach a more hand-in-glove consultation with our fishing communities?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend makes an important point—one that I used to make when in opposition, and one that I have impressed on officials. The effort has been made to ensure that is considered wherever possible. It is not always easy to find the right times, but we are doing everything we can.

This Government will always back the British fishing industry. We are absolutely keen to boost trade, deliver benefits to UK businesses and push for sustainable fishing opportunities for British vessels; but we recognise the huge challenges that the sector is facing and are engaging closely with industry to create a more secure, sustainable and economically successful fishing industry that we believe will in turn support local communities.

On some of the specifics raised around post-2026 access, as I am sure hon. Members will be aware, a full and faithful implementation of the fisheries heading of the trade and co-operation agreement will see access for EU vessels to the UK zone become a matter for annual negotiation to sit alongside our annual consultations on catch limits with a range of coastal states and international fora on fishing opportunities. That is significant. We will always listen to what the EU has to say on the matter, but we are absolutely determined to protect the interests of our fishers and continue to fulfil our international commitments to protect the marine environment.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland rightly asked who would be leading those discussions; they will be led by my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office. He asked who would speak up for UK fishers; the answer is the UK Fisheries Minister, which is me. I admired the slight cheek of the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) in challenging me not to let fishers down in those negotiations. I do not want to dwell on past misery, but let us say we are determined to do much better.

Dr Hudson: Does the Minister not acknowledge that in the last year, the tonnage secured for the United Kingdom was greater, and that was one of the benefits of the negotiations? Does he not acknowledge the fact of tonnage?

Daniel Zeichner: I recognise that there have been some opportunities—not many, but some—and we will do our very best to make more of them. But I do not get a general sense that people in the fishing sector look back and think that was our finest hour. We can do better.

Our ambitions for fisheries are no longer tied to the EU common fisheries policy.

Andrew George: I should have intervened earlier. The Minister is making a strong point. On the back of that, all we have to do is talk to the pollack fisherman in Cornwall to find out how they feel about what has happened in the last year.

Daniel Zeichner: Indeed. I am not sure that the two things are directly related, but having spoken to the pollack fisherman I am under no illusion about how difficult the situation they face is. There was a series of reasons why they had particular problems.

We now have the opportunity to set our own objectives for the UK fishing industry. As I have already set out, we want a thriving, sustainable fishing industry in the future.

I will turn to our ongoing negotiations with the European Union. Fishing opportunities for 2025 for jointly managed stocks between the UK and EU are under negotiation as we speak. I suspect Members know this well, but it is an important and complex agreement covering 74 quota stocks and arrangements for non-quota stocks, too. In those negotiations, as in others, we balance the objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020 and the joint fisheries statement to achieve outcomes that can support both the environmental and economic sustainability of our fisheries. That has been referenced extensively, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), but we start with the best scientific advice, including advice on maximum sustainable yield where that is available.

Members have also raised the so-called UK-EU-Norway trilateral negotiations, which are also taking place as we speak, in Oslo. We are hoping that they will come to a conclusion before the end of the week. They secure around a third of the UK's quota opportunities. The UK's objectives will include following the scientific advice closely in setting those quotas and securing workable arrangements on northern shelf cod.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): In recent years, fish and chip shops have—excuse the pun—taken rather a battering. Will the Minister comment on what he is doing to ensure that my constituents, and indeed those of all Members, will be able to continue tucking into that tasty British staple?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the challenge facing the fish and chip shop sector. They are an iconic part of our national landscape, and they have indeed suffered heavily from rising costs. These negotiations are really important, but let us all send out a clear message of our strong support for the future of the UK fish and chip shop sector.

I will turn to the annual bilateral negotiations with Norway and the Faroes, which are also in progress; it is a busy time of year, as Members probably realise. Those negotiations focus on quota exchanges and access to each other's waters. I made a point earlier about the Secretary of State wanting to encourage co-design. When he was appointed in July, he made it clear that he wanted to improve the way DEFRA engages with stakeholders, and put more emphasis on co-delivering its policies and programmes in partnership with them. In that spirit, I have asked sectoral groups for this year's UK-Norway fisheries negotiations to send proposed quota exchanges to the Government, and if deemed viable, they will be presented to Norway. I am determined that we try to do things differently and make the co-delivery model work.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes will be listening closely to this point. I know that UK Fisheries, and Members

representing constituencies around Humberside, will be particularly interested in those negotiations to secure distant water fishing opportunities. I value the contribution that UK Fisheries makes to the UK fisheries and seafood sector. It is an important part of the UK fishing industry, but we need to remember that the total allowable catch for Arctic cod—one of the main stocks that the company has historically targeted in the Arctic—has fallen dramatically in recent years. It is down by about 60% since 2021, and the TAC is now at its lowest level since the early '90s. Securing a large amount of Arctic cod for that sector is extremely challenging against the backdrop of a rapidly declining stock.

There was also a reference, quite rightly, to the fisheries management plan programme; the hon. Member for Epping Forest asked me to say a bit about that. We are grateful for the support of the fishing sector and wider stakeholders in helping shape those plans. We completely support them and think they are the right way forward. They have been developed collaboratively with the industries, and they will play a crucial role in supporting the long-term sustainability of businesses and delivering growth in coastal communities.

It is interesting that the plans are now internationally recognised as a gold standard in managing fisheries; I give credit to the previous Government for their work on that. They protect, and, where necessary, set out to maintain or restore fish stocks to sustainable levels. We are currently consulting on our next batch of fisheries management plans. I acknowledge that it is sometimes a challenge for people in the sector to keep up with all the work, but it is important and we are committed to working closely with people to co-design sustainable fisheries management policies, including implementing the short, medium and long-term actions set out in some of those plans.

We laid our first fisheries management plan-related statutory instrument on 16 October. That implements actions from our first fisheries management plans, many of which included suggestions from the industry. Beyond that, we are also progressing a wider set of other fisheries management reforms that are in line with our own domestic priorities as an independent coastal state. That touches on some of the points that Members have raised: the way we manage discards and the introduction of remote electronic monitoring.

On the powerful points made by the hon. Member for Epping Forest around cetacean catches, I absolutely share his concern. We are committed to continuing with remote electronic monitoring. It has started to be introduced. We think it has a real potential to transform how we get the better data that many Members have referred to. In the future it could inform the science, improve traceability and improve fisheries management. We are working to implement remote electronic monitoring in priority fisheries over the next five years. We will start with volunteers to design and test systems. We started work this summer with volunteers in the large pelagic trawl fishery on the Frank Bonefaas, the largest vessel in the fleet, primarily targeting mackerel, herring and blue whiting.

I very much hear the hon. Gentleman's point about the concern that many of our constituents raise about the Faroe cetacean hunts. I assure him that Ministers continue to make that point strongly to our colleagues in the Faroes.

Dr Hudson: I am grateful that the Minister is acknowledging the importance of protecting marine mammals while harvesting from the seas and oceans. When he is around the table with his officials, will he address the other countries, such as Norway? Perhaps it will be his colleagues in the Department for International Trade when they are negotiating arrangements with Japan. On talking about the horrific nature of whaling continuing in the 21st century, can he assure everyone that this UK Government will stand firm and use their power in those rooms to put an end to whaling right across the world?

Daniel Zeichner: I think we can speak with one voice from this Parliament on those kinds of issues. I assure the hon. Gentleman that at events such as the G20 and the G7 that I have attended, we have raised those important questions.

I turn to the coastal state negotiations on quota shares.

Barry Gardiner: Before the Minister does that, could he look at what we might learn from the American fish management plans, which are gold standard and have had the clear management objectives that, I am afraid, many of ours lack?

Daniel Zeichner: I will certainly look at that. These are relatively early days in the fisheries management plans. A huge amount of work has had to be done quite quickly. We have established a good structure to look to the future—a much better way than in the past.

On the quota shares, it is because we are now an independent coastal state that we have the right to negotiate with coastal states in the north-east Atlantic on management measures for mackerel, blue whiting and Atlanto-Scandian herring. Those are important stocks for the UK that have been overfished in recent years because there are no sharing arrangements in place between the coastal states. We continue to push for comprehensive quota-sharing arrangements that are in the best interests of stock sustainability and of the UK catching and processing sectors. We see the three-way management arrangement with Norway and the Faroes that we signed in June this year as an important stepping stone towards securing a fully comprehensive deal on mackerel.

Almost all the speeches touched on the very challenging issue of marine spatial prioritisation. We know that considerable pressure is being put on the fishing sector by all the competing demands in our seas. And we know the seas are going to get busier over the coming decades. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) and the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) both raised those points. We absolutely need to factor in increasing spatial pressures and new activities such as the growth of new types of energy.

As a Government, we will very carefully consider the evidence marshalled by the cross-Government marine spatial prioritisation programme for English waters. Lots of work is ongoing on this. I am absolutely determined that we have a full and open debate and dialogue because it is such a complicated issue, and I am very grateful for the constructive engagement we are having with industry representatives.

I move on to labour shortages, which, again, were raised by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and others. We are, of course, aware of the concerns

[Daniel Zeichner]

about labour shortages in the sector. Members spoke about the opportunities being there, if only we had the people to do the work—I thought that was very telling. My Department is working with industry to understand what we can do to alleviate those shortages, but they have to be understood in the context of our wider immigration policy objectives. I am sure Members will understand that there is an ongoing dialogue with the Home Office on that.

I pledge that we will work closely with industry to understand people's labour needs—including, of course, what can be done to make the industry more attractive to the domestic labour market, which is an issue that people have worked hard on. The points made on training were really quite uplifting; it was very good to hear about the work being done in Grimsby, for example.

Dan Norris (North East Somerset and Hanham) (Lab): What will the Government do to assist with training for the fishing fleets, not least in landlocked areas? In the west of England, we are very keen to promote training for things that are not necessarily associated only with our area. Are the Government having any discussions with metro mayors and others with large budgets for training and skills?

Daniel Zeichner: I will happily have a discussion with anyone who has a large budget at the moment, so yes—I will happily come and have a discussion with any mayors who are interested. We have also recently launched the UK seafood careers project, which works closely with industry and across Government and the devolved Administrations to look at how the sector can improve the recruitment and retention of UK workers. Please be assured: we are in constant dialogue and discussion with colleagues in the Home Office and in the education sector to see what we can do on this matter.

I will pick up another point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland on enforcement and illegal fishing. We absolutely condemn any illegal fishing taking place anywhere, but particularly in English and UK waters—this is partly a devolved issue. We work closely as a Department with the Marine Maritime Organisation, the inshore fisheries and conservation authorities and other organisations. In fact, I was talking to the Marine Maritime Organisation about this matter only yesterday. We use a risk-based and intelligence-led marine enforcement model and carry out regular inspections in ports, onshore and at sea, which should ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to enforce fisheries regulations and protect our waters. I was very interested to hear the right hon. Gentleman's account of the approach taken in Ireland, and I will look closely at that.

Barry Gardiner: Does the Minister actually believe that the discard ban is being observed? If he has doubts about that, would he agree that ensuring there are onboard cameras and monitoring is the best way to put an end to that element of illegal fishing?

Daniel Zeichner: I very much hear what my hon. Friend says. I agree that the evidence rather suggests that we could do much better, which is why we are making that commitment to remote electronic monitoring.

I am coming close to a conclusion, Dr Huq. Many have talked about support for inshore fishers, and we are absolutely determined to do more. We are looking at the role of the inshore and under-10 metre fleet and at how best we can support them. We think a number of initiatives will benefit them; we are looking at provision of additional quota and new quota trials, which we believe will help the fleet in the long run. We are engaging with the five regional fisheries groups set up for inshore fishers to discuss concerns with policymakers and regulators, helping to identify problems, contribute to policy development and secure solutions. Certainly on my trips around the shores of this country, I have been struck by the concerns that people have and the points raised about some of the boat inspections. Obviously, that is a responsibility of the Department for Transport, but I continue to pursue that.

I have been struck also by the calls from key figures in the fishing industry, including Mike Cohen from the NFFO, for a proper fisheries strategy. I am very interested to talk to stakeholders in the industry in more detail about what that might look like—again, in the spirit of collaboration and co-design that we want to introduce.

I thank hon. Members. This has been a really informative and useful debate. Things have been raised that I will take away and raise with officials today. As I said at the beginning, I recognise just how tough this industry is because of the work involved and the safety issues, but I also recognise that it feels particularly tough as an industry at the moment. It is hard. But I genuinely think there are real opportunities ahead for the fishing sector, and this Government are absolutely committed to making the most of them to ensure that the industry can best contribute to our country's food security and economic growth.

4.26 pm

Mr Carmichael: I thank you, Dr Huq, and Mr Efford for your efforts in chairing us. We have had a genuinely excellent debate. Somewhere in the region of 19 Members of Parliament have taken part. I observe in passing that we have outlasted not one but two main debates in the main Chamber, plus petitions and an Adjournment debate. If that does not make the case for us retaking our rightful place in the main Chamber next year, I do not know what does.

I thank the Minister for a very comprehensive response to the debate. It will gladden his heart to know that I am confident that the Select Committee will be wanting to run the rule over quite a lot of the material that we have had here today. I genuinely thank all Members who have taken part, because it is important that we understand that this is not a contest between urban communities and fishing communities. There is an interest for all of us to be served here.

Finally, in response to the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), I place on the record a little bit of context: for the last three years we have set quotas for North sea haddock and whiting well below the ICES advice, and that was supported by the fishing industry. We all have opportunities to learn from one another.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the fishing industry.

4.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 28 November 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Republic of Korea Upgraded Free Trade Agreement: Round Three Negotiations

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The third round of negotiations on an upgraded free trade agreement (FTA) with the Republic of Korea (RoK) took place in Seoul between 5 and 14 November 2024.

The talks were the UK's first with the RoK since the Secretary of State for Business and Trade announced the Government's intention to deliver the UK's FTA negotiations programme in July.

Economic growth is our first mission in Government and FTAs have an important role to play in achieving this. An upgraded FTA with the RoK will contribute to growth, jobs and prosperity in the UK, and provide long-term certainty to UK businesses. Improvements to the existing agreement will include a comprehensive chapter on digital trade, simplified rules of origin and a range of additional commitments that capture advancements in trade policy beyond our existing terms. Total trade between the UK and the RoK was worth £17 billion in the four quarters to the end of Q2 2024. An upgraded FTA is intended to support further growth in this trade.

Negotiators made good progress on a number of areas, including but not limited to:

Digital trade

Constructive discussions were held to build on the existing agreement's limited digital provisions. Discussions during the round covered a range of areas, including data, trade digitalisation, and co-operation on emerging technologies.

Rules of origin

Good progress was achieved towards securing a new rules of origin chapter that supports current and future supply chains. Discussions covered the chapter's general provisions and origin procedures text, as well as product specific rules.

Services and business mobility

Productive discussions were held across a range of areas including domestic regulation, financial services, business mobility and professional and business services. The UK is seeking commitments to open up new opportunities for services trade.

Customs and trade facilitation

Good progress was made, with sides agreeing a large part of the chapter. These commitments will make customs processes more predictable and facilitative.

Good regulatory practice

Negotiators made significant progress towards agreeing the RoK's first good regulatory practice chapter, which will support companies to operate in a more transparent and predictable regulatory environment.

Other areas

Positive discussions were held across a range of areas of the FTA including supply chains, trade and gender equality, and anti-corruption.

The Government will only ever sign a trade agreement which aligns with the UK's national interests, upholding our high standards across a range of sectors, including protections for the national health service.

The fourth round of negotiations is expected to take place in London in the spring of 2025. The Government will continue to work towards delivering outcomes in the FTA that secure economic growth for the UK and will update Parliament on the progress of discussions with the RoK as they continue to develop.

[HCWS258]

CABINET OFFICE

COVID-19 Inquiry Response Costs: Quarter 2 2024-25

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden):

The covid-19 pandemic impacted each and every person in the UK. The work of the UK covid-19 inquiry is crucial in examining the UK's response to and impact of the covid-19 pandemic. There are evidently lessons to be learnt from the pandemic and the Government are committed to closely considering the covid-19 inquiry's findings and recommendations, which will play a key role in informing the Government's planning and preparations for the future.

The Government recognise the unprecedented and wholly exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, and the importance of examining as rigorously as possible the actions the state took in response, in order to learn lessons for the future. The inquiry is therefore unprecedented in its scope, complexity and profile, looking at recent events that have profoundly impacted everyone's lives.

The independent UK covid-19 inquiry publishes its own running costs quarterly. Following the publication of the inquiry's financial report for quarter 2 2024-25 on 24 October 2024, I would like to update colleagues on the costs to the UK Government associated with responding to the UK covid-19 inquiry.

Figures provided are based upon a selection of the most relevant Departments and are not based on a complete set of departmental figures and are not precise for accounting purposes. Ensuring a comprehensive and timely response to the inquiry requires significant input from a number of key Government Departments, including, but not limited to, the Cabinet Office, the Department for Health and Social Care, the UK Health Security Agency, the Home Office and HM Treasury, many of which are supported by the Government Legal Department. While every effort has been made to ensure a robust methodology, complexities remain in trying to quantify the time and costs dedicated to the inquiry alone.

It should be noted that alongside full-time resource within Departments, inquiry response teams draw on expertise from across their organisations. The staff costs associated with appearing as witnesses, preparing witnesses and associated policy development work on the UK covid-19 inquiry are not included in the costs below.

Breakdown of staff and costs

The Government’s response to the UK covid-19 inquiry is led by inquiry response units across Departments.

Number of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff: 284 full time equivalents.

Cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff: £5,303,000 (including contingent labour costs).

Financial year 2024-25 (Q1 and Q2), total cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff: £10,352,000 (including contingent labour costs).

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Cumulative total
Cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff (including contingent labour costs)	£5,049,000	£5,303,000	£10,352,000
Number of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff (full-time equivalents)	280	284	N/A

Total inquiry response unit legal costs

Inquiry response units across Government Departments are supported by the Government Legal Department, co-partnering firms of solicitors, and legal counsel. These associated legal costs—excluding internal departmental advisory legal costs—for Q2 are below.

Q2 legal costs: £5,818,000.

Financial year 2024-25 (Q1 and Q2), total legal costs: £10,054,000.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Cumulative total
Total legal costs	£4,236,000	£5,818,000	£10,054,000

[HCWS259]

EDUCATION

School Funding: Provisional 2025-26 Allocations

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):

Today we are confirming provisional funding allocations for 2025-26 through the schools, high needs and central school services national funding formulae (NFFs). Overall, core schools funding (including funding for both mainstream schools and high needs) is increasing by £2.3 billion in 2025-26 compared with the previous year.

Within this £2.3 billion, high needs funding is increasing by a further £1 billion in 2025-26 to help local authorities and schools with the increasing costs of supporting children and young people with SEND. The majority of this increase will be allocated through the high needs NFF. Through this formula, local authorities will receive at least a 7% increase per head of their population aged two to 18, compared with their 2024-25 allocations, with some authorities seeing gains of up to 10%.

The overall high needs funding increase of £1 billion includes over £90 million to increase the high needs element of the 2024-25 core schools budget grant (CSBG)

to a full-year equivalent of over £230 million. This will be incorporated with the other teachers’ pay and pensions grants into a single CSBG (totalling £480 million) for special schools and alternative provision in 2025-26.

Funding for mainstream schools through the schools NFF is increasing by 2.23% per pupil compared with 2024-25. This includes a 1.28% increase to ensure that the 2024 teachers and support staff pay awards continue to be fully funded at national level in 2025-26. The 2025-26 schools NFF includes funding for pay and pensions costs that was previously allocated outside of the NFF, but is now being rolled into the formula—the 2024 to 2025 teachers’ pay additional grant (TPAG), teachers’ pension employer contribution grant (TPECG) and core schools budget grant (CSBG). This ensures that this additional funding forms an ongoing part of schools’ core budgets.

On top of this rolled-in funding, the core factor values in the schools NFF are rising, to increase the funding available to schools. Through the minimum per pupil funding levels, every primary school will attract at least £4,955 per pupil, and every secondary school at least £6,465 per pupil.

Central school services funding funds local authorities for the ongoing responsibilities they continue to have for all schools, and some historic commitments that local authorities face. The total provisional funding for ongoing responsibilities is £342 million in 2025-26, which includes £4 million for additional costs of copyright licences for schools.

Across the schools, high needs, and central services NFFs, we have kept the structure of the formulae largely unchanged from 2024-25. This is to minimise disruption for schools and local authorities due to the shorter than usual timescales for the 2025-26 funding cycle, given the timing of the general election. For 2026-27 and beyond, we will consider changes to various funding formulae, recognising the importance of a fair funding system that directs funding where it is needed.

Updated allocations of schools, high needs and central schools services funding for 2025-26 will be published to the usual timescale in December through the dedicated schools grant allocations, taking account of the latest pupil data at that point.

[HCWS264]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Counter-terrorism Disruptive Powers Report 2023

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I have today published the counter-terrorism disruptive powers report 2023 (CP 1212). The report has been laid before Parliament and will be available in the Vote Office and online on gov.uk.

It is important that there is transparency in the use of our counter-terrorism tools. Publishing this report ensures that the public can access data and information on the range of powers used to combat terrorist threats to the United Kingdom, the extent of their use and the safeguards and oversight in place to ensure that they are used properly.

[HCWS262]

Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation: 2022 Report and Government Response

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): In accordance with section 36 of the Terrorism Act 2006, Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, has prepared a report on the operation of the Terrorism Acts in 2022, which is being laid before the House today.

I am grateful to Mr Hall KC for his thorough report and have carefully considered the recommendations and observations included within. I am today also laying before the House the Government's response to the report (CP 1211). Copies of the report and the Government's response will be available in the Vote Office and will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS261]

Serious Crime Prevention Orders in Terrorism Cases: Review of Police Powers

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I have today published the review of police powers to apply for serious crime prevention orders in terrorism cases. The report has been laid before Parliament and it will be available in the Vote Office and online on gov.uk.

This report is published and laid before Parliament to discharge the statutory duty under section 44 of the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021.

[HCWS260]

Visa Sponsorship

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): The Home Office is committed to minimising abuse of the visa and immigration system by unscrupulous employers. We are now setting out our first steps to deliver on our manifesto commitment to ban rogue employers from sponsoring overseas workers. We are setting out stronger controls to prevent employers who flout UK employment laws from sponsoring overseas workers, alongside going after those who show signs of non-compliance. No organisation is above the law or too big to fail.

For the first time, visa and employment laws will be brought into close alignment, to ensure strong protections for those who come to work in the UK, especially in important areas of our economy such as adult social care.

The Government will deliver legislation for the flagship Fair Work Agency, ensuring fair and strong employment rights for all. Through this legislation, we will ensure that any business found guilty of serious employment law breaches, such as failing to comply with the national minimum wage, will have robust action taken against them—up to and including having their visa sponsorship licences refused or revoked. Alongside this, we are strengthening powers to ensure the compliance of those on the register of licensed sponsors.

Over the last two years, there have been a growing number of allegations about sponsors seeking to charge workers for sponsoring them, particularly in the care sector. Where these charges are inappropriate, individuals can fall into work-related debt and experience a significant amount of harm. To combat this, we are now taking

action to ensure that if a business wishes to recruit internationally, they will be required to pay for certificates of sponsorship, sponsor licences and the associated administration themselves. This will end the intolerable practice of recovering these costs from workers, which has led to the exploitation and unfair treatment of staff, particularly care workers who have been left in debt to their employers. These rules will apply to the skilled worker route first and will be in force by the end of the year. We intend to build on this in due course, widening it to other sponsored employment routes.

This Government are also taking robust action against businesses that show signs of non-compliance such as committing minor visa rule breaches. Current rules impose action plans on businesses for only three months, but today we are committing to extending this to up to 12 months. While these longer action plans are in place, employers will be restricted in how they can use their licence, including limiting or removing the ability to sponsor overseas workers. If they do not comply with the action plan, fail to pay for the plan or make the necessary improvements by the end of their action plan, their sponsorship licence will be revoked.

We will take strong action against employers who do not comply with the rules, where necessary revoking their sponsor licence. We will strengthen this by making it harder for those with a long-term record of non-compliance to return to the sponsor register. The current penalties for breaking visa rules are too weak, with all revoked businesses facing only 12 months of sanctions—regardless of their track record. That is why we will be introducing longer cooling-off periods for businesses that repeatedly flout these rules or commit serious immigration breaches, barring them from applying for a sponsorship licence over this period and therefore hiring overseas workers.

This set of new measures shows how seriously the Government take maintaining the integrity of the visa and immigration system, ensuring that those who would seek to abuse the system face strong consequences. These measures are part of wider efforts to tackle the root causes behind the UK's long-term reliance on international workers and wider action to link migration policy with skills and wider labour market policy. All those who work in the UK deserve decent employment with decent employers—this Government are working to ensure that happens.

[HCWS263]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Finance

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): Today, the Government have published details of the local government finance settlement for the next year for councils across England, and our wider ambitions for the sector over the course of this Parliament.

Councillors, officers and frontline staff are due our respect and appreciation for the work they have done to keep services going through very difficult times. This Government are under no illusion about the scale of the issues facing local government. We know that the demand for, and cost of, services has increased significantly—

and that this has made the job for councils in recent years much harder. After a decade of cuts and fiscal mismanagement inflicted by the last Government, compounded by spiralling inflation and a failure to grow our economy, councils of all political stripes are in crisis. Our fiscal inheritance means that there will be tough choices on all sides to get us back on the path to recovery, and it will take time.

We are taking immediate action to address these challenges. The autumn Budget announced over £4 billion in additional funding for local government services, £1.3 billion of which will go through the local government finance settlement. Outside the settlement, the Government have also announced additional funding to support local government across a range of priorities, including special educational needs and disabilities and homelessness services, a guarantee for income from the extended producer responsibility for packaging scheme, as well as funding for local roads maintenance.

However, fixing the foundations of local government requires a programme of reform over the course of this Parliament. After years of delays, we will update the local government finance system. The current funding system is fundamentally broken, wasting taxpayers' money and starving authorities of the funding needed to provide the services we all rely on. The previous Government agreed with us on the need to reform the system, proposing a similar approach in its fair funding review, but where they were unable to, we will finish the job by consulting on and implementing an up-to-date assessment of needs and resources, starting in 2026-27. This will be the first multi-year funding settlement in 10 years.

Reform of local public services, so that they focus on prevention, is also critical if we are to end the cycle of system failure and cost escalation. We will reform services that have for too long been overlooked by the previous Government to improve outcomes for the most vulnerable residents who rely on them—particularly children's social care, homelessness and rough sleeping, special educational needs and disabilities, and adult social care services.

We will reset the relationship with local government, working as equal partners to ensure that the sector delivers continuous improvement for its communities, operates at the highest standards of probity, and provides value for money, all while giving the sector greater autonomy, certainty and flexibility. We will rebuild the system of accountability and oversight in local government, including through an overhaul of local audit, scrutiny and standards, and will consult on strengthening the standards and conduct framework for local authorities in England.

Our upcoming English devolution White Paper will set out plans for a new governing settlement for England. This includes our landmark programme of devolution and reorganisation, which will give local leaders with skin in the game powers to generate new jobs, skills and, ultimately, the growth that our public services rely on, and to create more efficient and accountable local authority structures, moving towards suitably sized unitary councils.

There is no magic wand. It will be a long, hard slog, working with councils, to rebuild from the ground up, in order to deliver the services that taxpayers need and deserve. Together, this year's settlement and our programme of reform mark the first steps towards stabilising and rebuilding local Government.

Local Government Finance Settlement 2025-26

This year's settlement will begin to put us on the right course, spending taxpayers' money efficiently, and ensuring that funding goes to the places that need it most. The autumn Budget announced over £4 billion in additional funding for local government services, £1.3 billion of which will go through the settlement. Overall, the provisional settlement will ensure that local government receives a real-terms increase in core spending power of around 3.2%.

In addition, the Government announced at the autumn Budget that they will guarantee that local authorities in England will receive at least £1.1 billion in total from the extended producer responsibility for packaging scheme in 2025-26.

In 2025-26, the settlement will target additional funding at the places that need it most. We will deliver additional funding for a number of priorities, including an additional £680 million via the social care grant; a new children's social care prevention grant, worth £250 million; and a new recovery grant, worth £600 million, for places with greater need and demand for services (we have used deprivation as a proxy for this) and less ability to raise income locally. This tackles head-on the combination of rocketing demand, low tax bases that restrict the ability of local areas to raise income locally, and weakened resilience in many of these councils after substantial central Government funding cuts during the 2010s. Alongside this, our commitment can be judged against a guarantee that no local authority will see a reduction in their core spending power in 2025-26, after taking account of any increase in council tax levels. This will provide the protections required for all authorities, including district councils, to sustain their services. Taking into account both money allocated to councils through the settlement and the pEPR guarantee, every planning and social care council will have more to spend on services in 2025-26 than in 2024-25; and for almost all authorities we expect this to be an increase in real terms.

The Government are clear in their commitment to tackling the issues that matter most to rural communities. We are focusing on the services that people rely on, such as social care, where pressures have grown across the country in recent years. This will deliver for rural areas, just as it will for the whole country. In this context, funding from the rural services delivery grant will be repurposed, through improved methods for targeting areas with greater need and demand for services, while we invest in the priority services that people care about, such as adult and children's social care. The Government believe that the rural services delivery grant is outdated and does not properly assess rural need. A large share of predominantly rural councils receive nothing from the rural services delivery grant. Put simply, it does not do as it claims. This is clearly not right, and the Government are keen to hear from councils about how best to consider both the impact of rurality on the costs of service delivery, and demand, as part of our longer-term consultations on local authority funding reform.

Further support for local government

The Government are under no illusions about the scale of the issues facing local government, and this settlement will begin to address the pressures that councils are under. We recognise, however, that we may see some

continued instability as we adjust to the new system. Any council concerned about its financial position or its ability to set or maintain a balanced budget should contact the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The Government have a framework in place to support councils in the most difficult positions. We will not seek to replicate conditions that made borrowing more expensive. Where a council in need of exceptional financial support views additional council tax increases as critical to maintaining their financial sustainability, the Government will continue to consider requests for bespoke referendum principles. In considering requests, the Government will take account of councils' specific circumstances, including the potential impact on local taxpayers.

The Government have committed to providing support to Departments and other public sector employers for additional employer national insurance contribution costs. This applies to those directly employed by local government. More information will be provided at the provisional settlement.

Supporting households

Many households are still feeling the impact of the prolonged cost of living crisis, and the Government are committed to protecting local taxpayers from excessive council tax increases. The previous Government, and the Office for Budget Responsibility in March 2024, both assumed core council tax and adult social care precept referendum principles of 3% and 2% respectively. The Government are now formally confirming that they will maintain the proposed core (3%) and adult social care precept (2%) referendum principles for next year. These strike the balance between protecting taxpayers and providing funding for local authorities.

We are ensuring that households receive the support that they need from programmes outside the settlement. The autumn Budget confirmed the extension of the household support fund for a further year, from 1 April 2025 until 31 March 2026. This will ensure that low-income households can continue to access support towards the cost of essentials, such as food, energy and water. Funding of £742 million will be provided to enable the HSF extension in England, plus additional funding for the devolved Governments through the Barnett formula, to be spent at their discretion, as usual.

Proposals in the policy statement for the 2025-26 settlement will be subject to the usual consultation process at the provisional local government finance settlement in December 2024.

This written ministerial statement covers England only. The policy statement will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses, and has been published on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-government-finance-policy-statement-2025-to-2026>

[HCWS265]

TRANSPORT

Integrated National Transport Strategy

The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):

The Government have today set out our vision for the first integrated national transport strategy in over two decades, delivering on the commitment made in our manifesto.

For too long there has been no national plan for how transport should be designed and delivered in England, which has led to a fragmented and inefficient system that lacks join-up and cohesion. As a result, many of the people in our cities, towns and rural areas are poorly connected, with transport systems that do not work for them.

The strategy will drive a cultural change where people are put at the heart of how we design, build and operate transport. At its core will be a single national vision for how transport systems should work together, empowering local leaders to deliver integrated local transport that meets the needs of their local community.

The transport system should be safe, reliable and accessible for everyone—improving passenger experience and unlocking equal access to opportunities across England. Walking and cycling should be the best choice for shorter journeys and, where driving is the right choice, these journeys should be smoother and more predictable. I want public transport to be a more attractive option and for people to experience a seamlessly integrated transport network that works for them.

Today, I have announced my vision for this strategy and launched a public call for ideas, which gives everyone the chance to share views about their own transport experiences and what could be done to improve them.

In the new year, my Department will host a series of regional roadshows around the country, giving local leaders, transport operators and passengers the opportunity to help shape the way we deliver a truly integrated transport network.

This Government are committed to ensuring that transport works for everyone, and this strategy will set the framework for how we meet people's needs today and in the future.

[HCWS266]

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**not later than
Thursday 5 December 2024**

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