

Thursday
5 December 2024

Volume 758
No. 58



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 5 December 2024

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—
Government's Five Missions

1. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): What progress the mission delivery boards have made. [901629]

4. **Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the Government's five missions. [901634]

9. **Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the Government's five missions. [901642]

12. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the Government's five missions. [901645]

16. **Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the Government's five missions. [901651]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): The Government's five missions offer real benefits to people living in every part of the country: higher living standards, more energy security, safer streets, lower waiting lists, and a renewed confidence that the future will be better for our children. We have already made progress, including launching a national wealth fund, providing an additional £22.6 billion for the NHS over the next couple of years, launching a new border security command, providing £1.4 billion more for school rebuilding and removing the de facto ban on onshore wind farms. The Prime Minister will unveil his plan for change later this morning, which sets out how we will deliver further on our missions over the next few years, and I am due to give a statement to the House on that matter later this morning.

Rebecca Smith: How will the Prime Minister's five mission boards learn from the clear lack of join-up between the Treasury and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs over the family farm tax and the family business tax to ensure that they do not become five mission silos?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Lady is right to say that one of the benefits of missions is to work across departmental boundaries. That has been tried many times and is difficult to do, but I believe that farmers and people in rural areas will benefit from greater energy security, from lower waiting lists in the NHS, from rising living standards, and from the other things that are at the heart of our missions.

Andrew Cooper: Too many children face barriers to opportunity. Their life chances are being held back by rationed access to mental health support and diminished by a system that does not do enough to support those with special educational needs and disabilities. What action can be taken on a cross-Government basis to increase the availability of mental health support to cover 100% of schools, so that we can achieve our vital mission to break down barriers to opportunity?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter. He will be aware that we have announced extra funding for special educational needs. That issue is rising up the agenda and is causing a lot of anxiety for parents throughout the country. At the heart of our missions is making sure that a greater proportion of young children are ready to start school, because if that is not the case, it can hold back their opportunity for the rest of their lives.

Richard Baker: With GB Energy headquartered in Scotland and the Methil yard in my constituency—a fantastic facility to build the renewables infrastructure we will need—how is my right hon. Friend ensuring collaboration across Government and with the Scottish Government, to deliver the mission for growth through investment in renewables?

Pat McFadden: As my hon. Friend says, we have made good progress in setting up Great British Energy, a publicly owned energy company, including announcing that its headquarters will be in Aberdeen. This transition to clean power offers huge economic opportunities for the whole UK. I am glad to report to the House that co-operation between the Scottish Government and the UK on this matter has been good, and this is at the heart of our clean energy mission.

Melanie Onn: Can the Minister give us some indication on the timeline for GB Energy? When does he expect it to be up and running at full capacity? Does he think there is any opportunity to incorporate green skills to support new jobs in areas such as North East Lincolnshire, Grimsby and Cleethorpes?

Pat McFadden: In just five months, the Government have made progress in setting up Great British Energy. We have announced £25 million to establish the company, with a further £100 million of capital funding to spend in the next financial year. We have announced the partnership with the Crown Estate and selected the chair, Juergen Maier. As I said a moment ago, we have chosen Aberdeen as the location for the headquarters.

As for the next steps, more information on Great British Energy's early priorities will come in the new year from the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. That will support skills development

across the country, including in the Humber, which is at the absolute forefront of the UK's net zero ambitions and is home, I am pleased to say, to several groundbreaking renewable energy projects, which we support.

Andrew Ranger: A recent report by the Social Mobility Foundation showed that on average people from working-class backgrounds are paid an incredible £6,000 less than their privileged peers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Labour's opportunity mission will be critical to ending that damning statistic and finally smashing the class ceiling that enables it?

Pat McFadden: We firmly believe that, whoever someone is and wherever they come from, Britain should be a country where hard work means they can get on in life, and that their circumstances of birth should never dictate their future. The reality for too many children in Britain today is that that can be the case—that opportunity can be limited—and our opportunity mission is aimed at breaking that link. We will roll out Government-funded childcare to support improved access, delivering on the funded hours expansion and on the Government's manifesto commitment to create 3,000 more school-based nurseries, increasing the availability of childcare places where they are needed most. As I said, we want to get a greater proportion of children ready to start school when they walk into primary school for the first time.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Stepping Hill hospital in Hazel Grove is reported to have a repairs backlog of £130 million. The people on waiting lists, which have been elongated by this repairs backlog, are police officers, teachers and nurses, thereby making it more difficult for the Government to deliver on any of their other missions. Can the right hon. Gentleman assure the House that due weight is being given to reducing NHS waiting lists, so that all the other missions can be achieved?

Pat McFadden: We announced an extra £22 billion for the NHS over the next couple of years in the recent Budget. I can certainly assure the hon. Lady that reducing waiting times is at the heart of our missions, because current waiting times are bad for people's health and bad for our economy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to face the right hon. Gentleman across the Dispatch Box for what I believe is the first time. I am pleased to see three members of the Cabinet on the Front Bench—it is quite right that the Cabinet Office should be so well reflected.

The day after he entered Downing Street, the Prime Minister pledged to personally chair each mission delivery board to drive through change. We now hear that he is not chairing each mission delivery board. Why has the Prime Minister broken his pledge?

Pat McFadden: Let me begin by welcoming the hon. Gentleman to his position; I look forward to our exchanges. He is also the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, so I hope his party leader will be giving him a Christmas bonus for productivity and hard work—he will certainly deserve it.

The Prime Minister is very engaged in the delivery of these missions, and meets for missions stocktakes regularly with the Secretaries of State in charge. That is the benefit of having this kind of programme: the Prime Minister can personally hold Secretaries of State to account and ensure they are all focused on delivery of the Government's priorities.

Alex Burghart: The right hon. Gentleman is right: as the holder of two shadow portfolios, I get double the money. *[Laughter.]* I am sorry not to hear an explanation for why the Prime Minister has gone back on his word. There are growing concerns that the mission delivery boards are not being taken seriously. Those concerns were felt by members of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee yesterday, when the right hon. Gentleman's very capable permanent secretary said that

"the governance and the wiring of how we do this might not be immediately observable",

which is a masterful piece of civil service phraseology if ever there was one.

These boards are not Cabinet Sub-Committees, which means they are not authorised to make policy. The Prime Minister is not there, so his authority is absent. The Government will not reveal who is on them, what they discuss or when they meet. They are starting to sound like figments of the Government's imagination—a litter of Schrödinger's cats. Will the right hon. Gentleman at least commit to regular published updates on what each of the boards is doing, who sits on them, what decisions they make, what work they are undertaking and what achievements they have achieved?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman is going to get a published update in a couple of hours, when he will receive a very full account of what the boards have been doing, how they have been prioritising their work and what the next steps are. He is a former Cabinet Office Minister, so he will know that one of the wonderful things about the Cabinet Office is that it does a great deal of work under the bonnet—sometimes not in the full gaze of publicity—and that that is the privilege of all of us who have served in the Cabinet Office. That is true of this work. However, we are publishing a very important update later this morning.

Trade Barriers with the EU

3. **Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD):** What steps his Department is taking to help reduce trade barriers with the EU. [901632]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission met on 2 October in Brussels and agreed to strengthen the relationship between the UK and the EU. Maroš Šefčovič, on behalf of the European Union, and I, on behalf of the UK Government, will now take forward that important work. We are committed to reducing barriers to trade, including negotiating a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement to reduce checks on food and put food on people's tables more cheaply.

Dr Chambers: We are very proud that UK agriculture has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. It is for this reason that the production of foie gras was banned in 2007, as it is considered to be too cruel. While we are desperate to reduce trade barriers with the EU, are there any steps to ban products like foie gras to ensure that all animal products sold in the UK are produced to at least the same animal welfare standards as those in the UK?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of very high standards of animal welfare in food production. This Government will prioritise that in trade policy, unlike the Conservatives who, when they were in government, negotiated free trade agreements that consistently undermined agriculture in the UK.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): We all support efforts to remove unnecessary trade barriers, but we must also be clear with our European partners on what we cannot accept. What is the Paymaster General prepared to say is off the table: dynamic alignment, British fishing rights, or maybe asylum burden-sharing?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Labour party manifesto set out our red lines in this negotiation. We will not go back to the battles of the past. We will not return to the single market. We will not return to the customs union. We will not return to freedom of movement. What we will do is negotiate with the European Union to make the British people safer and more secure, so we have closer law enforcement co-operation. We will negotiate to reduce trade barriers to make the British people more prosperous.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats are glad that the Government have committed to resetting our relationship with the EU, and that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are actively engaging to rebuild trust and our relationships with our European neighbours through meetings with the European Commission and the Foreign Affairs Council.

Establishing a UK-EU youth mobility scheme would mirror existing capped arrangements that the UK already has with 13 countries, including Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Delivering such a scheme would provide a return on investment in the form of soft power that was never seemingly factored into the approach of the previous Conservative Government. Will the Minister confirm that he will have discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of a youth mobility scheme between the United Kingdom and the European Union?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the importance of the Foreign Secretary's attendance at the Foreign Affairs Council. It is hugely important that we work together with our European partners on security, particularly in the dangerous world environment we find ourselves in at the moment. On youth mobility, we have of course listened to what the EU has to say, but we have no plans for a youth mobility scheme and we will not return to freedom of movement.

Public Procurement Reform

5. Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reform public procurement. [901635]

11. Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reform public procurement. [901644]

14. Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reform public procurement. [901647]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): I spent the last few weeks meeting small and medium-sized enterprises, voluntary and community sector organisations, wider businesses and contracting authorities to discuss how we ensure that the approximately £300 billion that is spent each year on public sector procurement delivers for our communities. With this Government, procurement will deliver value for money, better public services and our national missions. The Procurement Act 2023 commences in February 2025, creating a simpler, more flexible procurement system underpinned by a new mission-led national procurement policy statement to ensure that public procurement delivers on the Government's missions.

Katrina Murray: Small businesses are a crucial part of the economy in Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch. There are huge opportunities to help them further, and one way of doing that is to work across the public sector and with local authorities—in my case, North Lanarkshire and East Dunbartonshire councils, with contracts as big as the redevelopment of Cumbernauld town centre. Will the Minister work with local authorities and the Scottish Government to help more small businesses to bid successfully for contracts?

Georgia Gould: It is critical that we open up public procurement to small businesses. As I have said, £300 billion is a huge amount of public money, and the opportunity to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises have access to that is also critical. As my hon. Friend said, SMEs are rooted in our communities, and provide local, often good-quality jobs.

We are taking action now to crack down on late payments that hit the cash flow of small businesses. The Chancellor announced recently that companies bidding for large Government contracts would be excluded from the procurement process if they did not pay their own suppliers within an average of 45 days.

Bill Esterson: The last Government promised to give more contracts through procurement to small businesses, but failed to do so for 14 years. Instead, they chose to use Government contracting to support their mates through covid. Will the Minister confirm that this Government will use the power of Government spending to contract directly with small businesses to support local companies and economies across the country, in stark contrast to the Conservative party's enrichment of their mates?

Georgia Gould: As I have said, we will work hard to ensure that public contracts are supporting small businesses. I have spent a lot of time talking to them about how we

can do that through the new public procurement policy and the measures in the policy statement. This week the Chancellor announced the appointment of a new covid corruption commissioner, who will be taking action to recover public money.

Euan Stainbank: The residents of Falkirk want a Government who work day in, day out to deliver value for money for the taxpayer. Never has that been so true as now, given the broken public finances left by the Tories and 17 years of waste and inaction from the Scottish National party up the road. Does the Minister agree that the billions we spend on public procurement must deliver value for the taxpayer, and can she tell me what steps the Government are taking to ensure that that is the case?

Georgia Gould: When our public services are facing so much strain and desperately need rebuilding, it is critical that we cut waste and deliver value for money. Under the last Government the procurement system too often failed to drive that efficiency, as was shown by the shocking levels of fraud and waste during the pandemic. We will bring new transparency to public sector procurement, along with a relentless focus on fraud.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Gross spending on public procurement was £400 billion last year. What is the Government's precise target for delivering greater savings from that budget?

Georgia Gould: That £400 billion is an enormous amount of money, and we need to ensure that it is going into growth, delivering for our communities and SMEs, and delivering on our missions. We are determined to act on procurement and reduce inefficiency, and we will provide further information about that in February. We cannot take lessons from the Conservative party about cutting waste inefficiencies, given that they oversaw gross mismanagement—Lord Agnew himself referred to “schoolboy errors”—in the delivery of procurement for this country.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The focus on public procurement will be welcomed by SMEs in the cyber-security sector in my constituency. CyNam has thousands of members, and when I talk to its SMEs they tell me that there is a real risk of our losing talent in the start-ups community to cities abroad such as Lisbon and Toronto. Can the Minister confirm that the steps being taken by the Government are good news for SMEs and Cynam?

Georgia Gould: As I have said, I firmly believe that we need to support SMEs, and I should be more than happy to speak to those in the hon. Member's constituency and discuss the opportunities that are available. There is so much innovation and talent in this country. We need to ensure that public sector money is supporting our growth mission, and supporting good businesses in communities such as those in his constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers. I have a very simple question: what steps have been taken to ensure that we have better procurement measures domestically in the United Kingdom and the devolved nations, particularly Northern Ireland, as opposed to relying on international partners to provide or deliver goods?

Georgia Gould: Through our procurement regime, we are determined to support small businesses, which are often locally rooted. We will continue to do that, while taking account of our trade obligations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I am delighted to meet the Minister across the Dispatch Box. I have also been meeting many SMEs in the aftermath of the Budget. The impact of the Government's decision to raise national insurance on many indirect providers of public services, such as GPs and hospices, appears not to have been fully factored into the Government's workings at the time of the Budget. Now that the Government have had over a month to do the figures, what will be the impact of the national insurance job tax on the cost of public procurement, to the nearest, say, £1 billion?

Georgia Gould: I welcome the hon. Member to their place and look forward to meeting them across the Dispatch Box. Unfortunately, the last Government left this country in a terrible place, with public services in crisis. I was previously a council leader, and every single day I saw the absolute strain on our public services. People were waiting up to 12 hours for ambulances, which sometimes did not turn up. We have had to take action to invest in our public services in order to deliver growth. Through our procurement regime, we are already taking action to support SMEs, to ensure that money is not lost and to ensure that suppliers are paid quickly. I will set out more to the House in February—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have to get through the list. Give me a chance to get through it—we are only on question 6.

Genomics Databases

6. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology on the potential merits of designating genomics databases as critical national infrastructure. [901636]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Genomics is a great British success story, and our genomics databases are vital for world-leading life sciences and health research. The organisations that have such databases have to provide data protection and security training, and have to make sure that researchers can access data only for approved purposes. The opportunities come with risks, which is why the Government will always try to minimise the risks of biological data to protect our bio-economy. We are working on this issue across Government Departments and through our national security structures.

Mr Carmichael: I take it that genomics databases will not be designated as critical national infrastructure, then, which was the question. As the Government seek to reset the relationship with China, will Ministers be mindful of the old maxim that you need a long-handled spoon to sup with the devil, and of the fact that Chinese genomics companies such as BGI do not behave as normal commercial competitors? Will the Secretary of State ensure that the interests of British genomics are not left vulnerable as a consequence of any reset relationship?

Pat McFadden: The right hon. Member asks a very important question about the twin interests of national security and economic growth. In this territory, we work with UK organisations that hold genomic data to make sure that they have robust data protection systems in place, and our security services give them advice on these matters on a regular basis, so that our pursuit of growth does not conflict with our very important national security objectives.

National Resilience

7. **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): What steps he is taking to increase national resilience. [901637]

13. **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening national resilience. [901646]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): The Government's first responsibility is to keep the public safe, which is why national resilience is a top priority for us. In July, I announced that I would lead a review of resilience, and work has been progressing across Government. We have engaged at all levels with the public, private and voluntary sectors, and this work is overseen by the dedicated resilience sub-committee of the National Security Council, which I chair. It is also closely linked to our consideration of the covid inquiry module 1 report, to which the Government will respond next month—within the six-month timeframe set out by the chair of the inquiry.

Richard Foord: The module 1 report recommended resilience and preparedness, and particularly

“Bringing in external expertise from outside government and the Civil Service to...guard against ‘groupthink’”.

How is the Minister planning to bring in that external expertise? Would he consider issuing a brochure to British citizens on preparation for crises, as the Swedish Government have just done?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member raises an important point. The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Ms Oppong-Asare), has done a great deal of work on consulting people outside Government—external experts across business, the voluntary sector, local government and so on. It is really important that, as part of this, we hear voices not just from Whitehall but from beyond, too.

Ashley Dalton: The module 1 report of the UK covid-19 inquiry has found that the impact was most acutely felt by the most vulnerable—the elderly, those with pre-existing health conditions, people living in overcrowded housing, and those on low incomes. As the Government undertake their review, can the Minister assure the House that they will work to deliver resilience for everyone, not just some of us?

Pat McFadden: This is such an important point. If resilience is to mean anything, it has to be for us all, not just for some. My hon. Friend is right to say that one of the lessons of past tragedies, whether it is covid-19, Grenfell Tower or others, is that it is often the most vulnerable in our society who are hardest hit. That is

why it is so important that we learn the lessons of the past and have support for the most vulnerable at the heart of our work.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead, recently met senior representatives from a range of organisations that support people who are disproportionately impacted by emergencies and crises to make sure that resilience is, indeed, for all, and not just for some.

Cyber-security

8. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening cyber-security. [901641]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): As I set out in my speech to the NATO cyber-defence conference last week, we are working to strengthen the UK's cyber-resilience, but there is, of course, still more to do. In the King's Speech, we announced that the Government will bring forward a cyber-security and resilience Bill, which will help to strengthen the UK's cyber-defences and our work with industry to help to make the UK a safe place to live and work online.

I stress to the House that this is an ongoing effort. It can never be perfect, but we are constantly working to make sure we have the strongest cyber-defences possible.

Nick Smith: The college in Ebbw Vale has a brilliant cyber security course training young people for jobs in this growing sector. However, the national cyber-security chief says there is a “widening gap” between the UK's defences and the threats posed by hostile nations, so can the Minister confirm what is being done to scale up the workforce to defend our crucial infrastructure?

Pat McFadden: I congratulate the college in Ebbw Vale on its brilliant cyber-security course.

My hon. Friend is right to point out the threat, which is why I spoke at the NATO cyber-defence conference last week. State and non-state actors are constantly probing our defences. It is a constant effort to keep those defences strong, and we are determined to work not only with education but with business and our critical national infrastructure to make sure we are as well protected as we can be against the threats we face. Security is no longer just about hard military power; it is also about cyber-security, which is why that has to be a real priority for the Government.

Job Vacancies: Prime Minister's Office

10. **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): What job vacancies in the Prime Minister's Office are being advertised. [901643]

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): There are currently four vacancies in the Prime Minister's office that are being advertised. These roles are all advertised across the civil service or externally. The House will also have seen that the Prime Minister announced the appointment of Sir Chris Wormald as the new Cabinet Secretary earlier this week. I am sure the whole House will join me in congratulating him on his appointment.

Lincoln Jopp: I personally would be delighted to welcome the new Cabinet Secretary to his role. I thank the Minister for her answer, but in her list I did not hear her say whether the Cabinet Office is hiring a new Prime Minister's envoy to the nations and regions, to carry out the vital work that was about to be done by Sue Gray when she decided not to take the job. Is the Cabinet Office hiring another person to undertake that role?

Ellie Reeves: The hon. Gentleman seems to have a curious interest in jobs at No. 10. If he is considering a career change, I would be very happy to have a private word with him.

Public Services Reform

15. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reform public services. [901649]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): As a former council leader, I have seen at first hand the crisis in public services, with people falling between the cracks of systems that are under extreme strain. To reform that, we need to get out of Whitehall and support workers across the public sector to do things differently. From intervening early to support families, a White Paper overhauling employment support and an ambitious programme of reforms of the NHS, this Government are determined to reform public services to deliver for citizens.

Warinder Juss: Under the Conservative party, too much taxpayers' money was wasted on projects and schemes that simply did not work. Does the Minister agree with me that in order to improve healthcare services, including mental health services, educational opportunities and social services, as well as transport provision and public safety in my constituency of Wolverhampton West, it is vital that the Government continue their tests and refine their policies to ensure they are effective, and continue to be effective?

Georgia Gould: I wholeheartedly agree with that. I heard too often from those on the frontline that they are fed up with policy being made in a closed room in Whitehall, and not with those who have real experience of the frontline. The Budget announced the introduction of a public sector reform and innovation fund to support us to test and learn with places around the UK. We are learning from the best evidence across the public sector. On Monday, I met representatives from all the What Work centres across Government, to understand the evidence of what works and how we can scale that to deliver for communities around the country.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): We all remember that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care undertook that there would be no additional money going into the NHS without securing reform. That, like so many other broken promises, was dropped, and £22 billion or £25 billion—whatever it is—of funding was announced. Then afterwards he repeated the pledge that there would be no extra money without reform. Well, the cat is out of the bag. Will the Minister give the undertaking today, on behalf of the Government, that never again will we see vast increases in public expenditure without reform of public services, because we need an improvement in productivity, not just additional spending?

Georgia Gould: I am surprised to hear a Member on the Conservative Benches express concern about money that is desperately needed going into our NHS, when people are waiting for GP appointments and in ambulances. Under the Conservative party, police officers would spend hours sitting with people with mental health concerns. Is that productivity? The Secretary of State has set out an incredibly ambitious reform agenda for the NHS, moving resources into prevention and taking account of the amazing opportunities in digital technology to give people more control over their own health. Labour is the party that backs the NHS and fixes the mess left by the previous Government.

House of Lords Reform

18. **Ms Polly Billington** (East Thanet) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on reform of the House of Lords. [901653]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The Government have brought forward the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill as an immediate first step in reform. That will remove the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. The Bill passed this House unamended and will have its Second Reading in the other place next week.

In addition, I am proud to announce today that I have laid a written ministerial statement that will ensure that political parties nominating people for peerages in the other place will now have to publish, alongside the nomination, a 150 word summary as to why they are putting that person forward. That is another reform that this Government are proud to announce as part of our wider agenda.

Ms Billington: I welcome my right hon. Friend's response, particularly the fact that it will increase transparency for the other place. Does he agree that we have a mandate for reform, and while respecting the individuals, we are absolutely determined as a Government to progress the abolition of the hereditary principle in lawmaking?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It just should not be the case, in a modern legislature, that there are places reserved for people by accident of birth. The Bill has now passed this House unamended. As I have indicated, it will now go before the other place for Second Reading next week. We want to get that Bill on to the statute book as soon as possible.

Topical Questions

T1. [901654] **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): As I said a few moments ago, last week I addressed the NATO cyber-defence conference about the increasingly aggressive and reckless behaviour from Russia, in particular in the cyber-realm, including attacks on NATO members. I made it clear that no one will intimidate us into weakening our support for Ukraine. I also announced the Laboratory for AI Security Research and a new incident unit to help our allies respond to cyber-attacks against them.

We promised to make a tangible difference to people's lives. I will shortly be setting out in this House our ambitious plan for change over the next few years, and copies of that plan will be made available to Members in advance of the statement.

Alison Bennett: During the recent debate on the infected blood compensation scheme, the Government made promising indications regarding boosting engagement with affected groups. Victims and their families in Mid Sussex and across the country have been waiting for decades for answers. It is essential that people begin to receive the compensation that is so long overdue. Why did the Government make last-minute changes to the accepted documents for interim compensation claims required from the estates of people who died after receiving contaminated blood and blood products? Will the right hon. Gentleman tell me what action is being taken to tackle the unacceptable delays?

Mr Speaker: Order. I say gently to the hon. Lady that we are now on topicals, which are meant to be short and punchy. Today, we seem to have a bit of time, but please try to help each other.

Pat McFadden: Let me assure the hon. Lady that my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General, who leads on this, is fully aware of the issues she has raised. He is working with the groups affected and is determined to ensure that initial payments are out by the end of the year.

T4. [901658] **Gill German** (Clwyd North) (Lab): This Government have rightly made tackling child poverty a top priority. Of course, this is not a children problem but a society problem, so I welcome the cross-Departmental approach that has been taken. Last week, the "Get Britain Working" White Paper was published. Does my hon. Friend agree that helping people, particularly parents, into decent, well-paid jobs is a key part of that agenda?

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): It is shameful that child poverty increased by 700,000 under the last Government. Tackling child poverty is at the heart of this Government's mission. The child poverty taskforce, which I sit on, will publish its strategy in the spring. Increasing the number of parents who are working, and their earnings and hours, plays a crucial role and that is why our plans to get Britain working and the Employment Rights Bill are important in tackling the scourge of child poverty.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Was the Cabinet Office's propriety and ethics team informed by Downing Street of the former Transport Secretary's conviction before she was appointed as a Minister of the Crown?

Pat McFadden: The former Transport Secretary had exchanges with the Prime Minister last week, which have resulted in her resigning from the post. She set out her reasons for her resignation in that letter. We now have a new Transport Secretary, who has already made an excellent start in the job.

Alex Burghart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for restating what is already known. Obviously, it is a matter of public interest whether the propriety and ethics team had been informed before the right hon. Lady was made Transport Secretary. I ask him again: will he confirm whether the PET was informed by Downing Street of the former Transport Secretary's conviction before she was appointed a Minister of the Crown?

Pat McFadden: All Cabinet Ministers have an interview and make declarations to the propriety and ethics team before they are appointed to the Government. I am aware of what I told the propriety and ethics team before my appointment, but I do not look through the declarations from every other Minister.

T5. [901660] **Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): The previous Conservative Government exposed themselves to unprecedented levels of corruption and cronyism when delivering contracts during the pandemic. Recent analysis has shown that £1 in every £3 spent went on high-risk contracts, worth more than £15 billion. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that they are always making procurement decisions that are in the public interest, avoiding unmanaged and unmitigated conflicts? What will they do to ensure that taxpayers' money is always spent wisely?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. Earlier this week, the Chancellor announced the appointment of Tom Hayhoe as the covid counter-fraud commissioner. The new commissioner will leave no stone unturned to investigate the unacceptable waste and fraud during the pandemic and to make sure that we learn lessons for the future.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Earlier this week, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to bring in proportional representation for Westminster elections and English local elections. I was delighted that it passed a Division of the House. It was supported by Labour Members, as it reflected Labour party policy on this matter. Now that it is the express will of the House that my Bill gets a Second Reading, will the Secretary of State commit to giving the Bill Government time so that it can be fully debated?

Pat McFadden: I hate to do this as we are approaching the festive season, but I am afraid that I will have to disappoint the hon. Lady. We have no plans to change the electoral system, and I cannot give her the Government time that she requires.

T6. [901661] **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): We owe a great debt of gratitude to our exceptional public servants who have given their lives to serve our nation. Can the Minister update the House on what progress has been made in establishing the Elizabeth Emblem to commemorate former firefighters, police officers and other public servants who have died in public service?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We must never forget those who have given their lives to

protect others in the line of duty. Last month, the Government announced the first recipients of the Elizabeth Emblem. The next of kin of more than 30 former firefighters, police officers and other public servants who have died in public service received the award in recognition of their deceased loved ones. Although families will never be able to replace their loved ones, the Elizabeth Emblem pays tribute to the sacrifice they made, and I know that the whole House will support this award.

T2. [901655] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): The families of DS Ross Hunt and PC George Taylor, who were murdered in the line of duty in 1976 and 1983, were recently awarded the Elizabeth Emblem, following a campaign by myself and others. But due to administrative errors, the police officers did not receive the George Cross. Can a Cabinet Minister meet with me to discuss this issue so that their bravery is recognised as well as their death?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank the hon. Member for raising this matter, and pay tribute to those involved. If she writes to us, we will follow this up.

T7. [901662] **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Due to our dire economic inheritance, it is vital that every penny of public money is spent wisely. In my constituency of Harlow, £29 million was spent on Sir Frederick Gibberd College only for it to be deemed unsafe and to be pulled down. What steps will the Government take to ensure that we spend money wisely, that we do not spend unnecessary money on unnecessary consultants, and that we get the best for the people of Harlow?

Georgia Gould: Under the Conservative Government, too much taxpayers' money was wasted on eye-watering consultancy contracts. We are taking steps to stop all non-essential Government consultancy spending this year and halve Government spending on consultancy in future years. *[Interruption.]* It might be hard for Conservative Members to hear about their record, but it is harder for us to live with it.

T3. [901657] **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Last week, the Government released their latest departmental lobbying transparency data. The data was two months late and relates to the last months of the previous Government, namely April to June 2024. The public will learn who the new Government met during their first weeks in power only at the end of December, a full six months after the election, and that is only if the data is released on time. UK lobbying rules have more holes than Swiss cheese, so will the Government set a timeline for creating a central database of departmental transparency data, with monthly updates, thereby closing the litany of loopholes in the current lobbying rules?

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The Government are committed to transparency around lobbying. That is why we will have regular transparency updates. The approach that we take will frankly be in stark contrast with that of the Government who preceded us.

T8. [901663] **Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Last week, I listened earnestly to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster at the cyber-security conference,

which was timely, given that my local council was subject to a cyber-attack, possibly by a foreign actor, just in the last four weeks. What measures has he undertaken to improve cyber-security resilience in local councils and critical national infrastructure that might impact us in the future?

Pat McFadden: I am very sorry to hear about the cyber-attack against my hon. Friend's local authority. Such attacks can have a serious impact on local residents. As I said in my speech to the NATO cyber-defence conference last week, the Government are determined to strengthen cyber-resilience in the UK. We publish guidance on it and meet with stakeholders. Advice is available from the National Cyber Security Centre. In October, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government launched the cyber assessment framework for local government, which is particularly geared at the local authorities about which he speaks.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): "What now for our special envoy?" lament the people of Scotland, now that Sue Gray has told the Prime Minister what he can do with his job offer. In the spirit of cross-border co-operation, might I suggest that the Minister informs No. 10 that we have known all along that this has been nothing more than an embarrassing fiasco, and a cynical face-saving attempt by the Prime Minister, who must think we button up the back?

Pat McFadden: I thought that the hon. Member was going to give me a Christmas greeting, but I am still waiting. In the absence of any envoys, he will have to put up with me instead, as the Minister for intergovernmental relations. It is a part of my job that I take very seriously, for perhaps obvious reasons. I enjoyed my conversations yesterday with the First Minister of Scotland, the First Minister of Wales, and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. I will keep having such conversations.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): In the light of today's very important announcements about the mission milestones, could we hear a bit about the important work of the mission boards, which have led us to this point?

Pat McFadden: I will have more to say on this shortly, but it is important that Governments set out what they are trying to do and on what timescale, particularly when we have an atmosphere in politics—this is the serious point—of a lack of faith among many in the electorate in the ability of Governments of any stripe to deliver. We take that seriously, and want to do something about it.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Next Tuesday, the Northern Ireland Assembly is to be invited to agree that the European Parliament should make its laws for the next four years in 300 areas of law affecting Northern Ireland. The Cabinet Office issued an explanatory document that does not set out what was meant to be set out, according to the Windsor framework. Article 18 said that the process would be conducted "strictly in accordance with" the UK unilateral declaration of October 2019. That declaration required a public consultation. There has been no public consultation. Why is that, and why is the matter proceeding in the absence of it?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will of course look at the specific document that the hon. and learned Gentleman refers to. He also referred to the important consent vote taking place in the Northern Ireland Assembly next week. This Government support the Windsor framework. That is why, when we were in opposition, we voted with the then Government to support it. We are committed to implementing it in good faith, and that is what this Government will do.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): Public procurement is a vital lever for delivering our growth mission, and growth must be felt by people in every part of our country. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that when taxpayers' money is spent on private contracts, the key workers delivering the contract and local communities such as mine in Darlington maximise the benefits of that public money?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for the time she spent with me last week setting out the opportunities of procurement and the needs of her community in Darlington. We have heard from the whole House today how important it is to back small and medium-sized enterprises that have roots in communities, and we are determined that the new national policy procurement statement will do that.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I am delighted to give Christmas greetings to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and I am sure that most of us in the House feel a great deal of respect for him.

As the Prime Minister knew he was appointing a convicted fraudster to the Cabinet, was it not incumbent on him to tell the propriety and ethics team? If I can slip a second question in, Mr Speaker, will the right hon. Gentleman, who is committed to and leads in the Government on transparency and openness, all of which have been promised, undertake—notwithstanding the fact that he has not looked at these declarations—to find out and let the House know whether she declared it to the House?

Pat McFadden: As I said to the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) a few moments ago, all Secretaries of State give their declaration to the propriety and ethics team upon appointment. The matter was concluded last Friday with the Transport Secretary's resignation. She has been replaced by a new Secretary of State, and she set out her reasons for resigning in her resignation letter. If the right hon. Member has not had a copy, I am quite happy to make it available to him.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to a duty of candour for public bodies. In the light of the appalling crimes of John Smyth, who left over 100 children assaulted and traumatised while senior members of the Church of England looked the other way, what steps is the Minister considering in conjunction with the Church so that

bishops, dioceses, cathedrals and national church institutions are designated as public authorities for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act 2000?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In relation to my hon. Friend's second point, it is right that the Church of England looks very carefully now at its procedures in the light of what has happened and been brought forward. In relation to the duty of candour, I have no idea why the Opposition Front Benchers were laughing about that. It is a hugely important reform that we are bringing forward, and it will make a significant difference across public service. We will have public servants putting the public interest above their own personal reputations and above the reputation of institutions. I hope the Opposition Front Benchers will come to support and help with the leadership required for that step change—that culture change—across public service.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The Golden Valley development adjacent to GCHQ in Cheltenham will pay a vital role in our nation's cyber-security. The recent confirmation of £20 million from the Government for that development is welcome, but will the Secretary of State confirm that the project will continue to feature in future iterations of the national cyber strategy?

Pat McFadden: The best thing to do when it comes to a specific place is for me to look into the exact situation and come back to the hon. Member. I assure him, as I have said several times during this session, that cyber-security is extremely important to the Government. It is not just the Government's job; cyber-security has to be taken seriously by business and the whole of society. That is why we have the National Cyber Security Centre giving advice to bodies of all kinds to ensure that they are defended as well as possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Government's commitment to the infected blood compensation scheme, and everybody in the House and across the country is pleased to see it. As of this month, how many individuals have registered for infected blood compensation payments, and can the Minister provide an update for the delivery of compensation in 2025? I would be pleased to get those figures for the United Kingdom, but in particular for Northern Ireland.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with the figures for Northern Ireland, as I have done in the past; he knows that I am always happy to do that. On the timescale for payments, I have already indicated that the first payments for infected people will be out the door by the end of this year. I have undertaken to bring forward regulations relating to the affected people, and to get them through the House—subject, of course, to the House's approval—by 31 March of next year, so that payments to the affected can start in 2025.

Business of the House

10.30 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): I shall. The 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 one).

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

THURSDAY 12 DECEMBER—General debate on Lord Etherton's independent review into the treatment of LGBT veterans, followed by 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.

The provisional business for the week commencing 16 December will include:

MONDAY 16 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Water (Special Measures) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 17 DECEMBER—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 18 DECEMBER—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill [*Lords*], followed by Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 19 DECEMBER—General debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Christmas recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 19 December and return on Monday 6 January 2025.

Jesse Norman: It is great to see that Christmas has come to the Palace of Westminster. I hope, Mr Speaker, that you enjoyed the Christmas fayre yesterday, and that you loaded up on goods from Frank's Luxury Biscuits from Herefordshire just as heavily as I did—

Mr Speaker: I was wondering who ate all the biscuits.

Jesse Norman: And just in time for Small Business Saturday, too.

I understand that the Prime Minister will deliver a speech later today setting out his plan for change. I must say, I am delighted—I am sure we all are—to hear that the Government are at last adopting a plan and are trying to change. As we have so often noted at business questions, the Government's first five months

have been a festival—no, a carnival, a supermarket sweep, a fill-your-boots, all-you-can-eat blunder-fest—of delay and incompetence.

You, Mr Speaker, more than any Member of this House, will be aware that the effective functioning of Parliament rests on its ability to hold Ministers to account. That has been true since its origins in the 13th century, and arguably since even before that. As you will know, the practice of seeking reasons and explanations for official actions, be they the passage of Bills or the raising of taxation, is not some useful add-on or afterthought; it is absolutely foundational to the whole idea of Parliament as a deliberative assembly, so I am sure that you will understand my disappointment that the Leader of the House has been so persistently unwilling to answer, or even address, the simple questions that I have put to her in recent weeks.

On 14 November, I drew attention to the Government's incompetence in combining at the same time three measures on national insurance and the minimum wage in a way that drastically raises the cost of hiring entry-level staff, and I asked for an assessment of the total impact of those measures. I am afraid that the Leader of the House's response was to blame the previous Government, and to talk about employers who will pay no additional national insurance, a completely different group—quite irrelevant to the question asked. On 21 November, I again highlighted this problem, and got the same response: blame the last Government and change the subject. I also extended my concern about the Government's incompetence to include their decision to bring the clean energy commitment forward from 2035 to 2030, and highlighted a vast array of public and official worries about whether this was either achievable or financially viable. In response, I am sorry to say, the Leader of the House again did not engage with either question, instead accusing me of political opportunism.

Last week, we saw the same thing once more. For the third time, I raised the question of Labour's triple whammy in combining changes to national insurance rates and thresholds with changes to the minimum wage. This time, the Leader of the House did not simply duck the question and change the subject; she also gave me the benefit of a little homily on the duties of the Opposition. It is true that the duties of the Opposition are a topic on which, unlike the duties of Government, she has built up considerable expertise over more than a decade, but the real point is this: for a month now, I have been putting to the Leader of the House basic questions about the incompetence of this Government. Many different responses were open to her. She could have said, "I agree with you." She could have said, "I don't know," "I will look into it," "I will reply to you," "I will ask a ministerial colleague to investigate and respond," or "I will come back to the House with a proper account," but on no occasion has she bothered to give any kind of proper answer at all.

Instead—and I fear the same will be true this week—the Leader of the House's approach has been to change the subject and attack the previous Government, rather than defend the record of her Government, which is the whole point of these exchanges. Let us see what she says when she stands up shortly. If the Government had made a decent start, of course she might want to talk about that, but the truth is that the Government have made a dreadful start. They have been beset by petty

scandals from the beginning; they have destroyed business confidence through a Budget that is visibly unravelling before our eyes, and only this week, they have lost a Cabinet Minister to new revelations about a criminal conviction for fraud. It is little wonder that the Prime Minister wants a reset.

The Leader of the House's unwillingness to engage, and to recognise and respond to questions, is arguably more important than any aspect of policy, because it strikes at the heart of the very idea of our parliamentary democracy. It is a discourtesy—indeed, possibly even an insult—to you, Mr Speaker, to all our colleagues and their constituents, and to this House. It is made worse because the Leader of the House is responsible for parliamentary business and procedure, and should, one might think, set an example of openness. It is worse still for two further reasons: because she herself has so often called for transparency from Ministers, and because a failure to be accountable is itself a breach of the rules of this House, of the Nolan principles and of the ministerial code of conduct. That is quite a combination, so I ask her whether she plans to continue as she has done, or whether she will change this unfortunate habit and start to engage with the serious questions that I have been asking.

Lucy Powell: First, I put on record that Tuesday was International Day of Persons with Disabilities, and note that the House of Commons now has more disabled Members than ever before. I commend their contribution, and look forward to working with them through the Modernisation Committee, and with you, Mr Speaker, to make sure that this place and our politics are as accessible as they can be. As has been mentioned, this Saturday is Small Business Saturday, when we celebrate the heart of all our high streets. In these sessions, I like to hear about many of our constituents' great cafés, and in particular their bars, especially when an invitation for me to visit follows.

I also put on record my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, for the way proceedings were handled last Friday, and to all of those who took part in the debate on assisted dying, or were in the Chamber for it. That debate was respectful, considered and thoughtful. Whatever view we each took, it was a moment when huge attention was on us, and I thought our democracy and our Parliament showed itself at its best.

Members will see that there are lots of important issues and much important business in the run-up to Christmas. Two thirds of the Bills that we announced in our King's Speech are now making their way through Parliament. The rail franchising Bill has received Royal Assent; the Renters' Rights Bill has completed Committee; and our important Budget measures will soon be passed. We are fixing the foundations and getting on with the job. As has been noted, copies of the "Plan for Change" will be available in the Vote Office shortly, ahead of the statement later today.

It is another week, and another misjudged and confused contribution from the shadow Leader of the House. He really does need to work out what the Conservative strategy for opposition is. Is it to tell people across the country that they never had it so good as when the Conservatives were in office, or to learn from defeat and accept that they got things wrong? I gently advise them to listen to the voters, because acting as if they did nothing wrong and accepting no responsibility will not

do them any good at all. If the right hon. Gentleman does not want to take my advice, perhaps he should listen to his own, because he said that the Conservatives suffered from

"many disastrous recent failures of policy and leadership",

and I agree. He said we inherited a "struggling" economy and "anaemic" growth; I agree with that, too. I also agreed with him when he was a champion of net zero, and when he was Financial Secretary to the Treasury, he was right to care about economic stability. I agreed with him; does he still agree with him? I am not quite sure.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about scrutiny of legislation and debate, but I gently remind him that we have had many debates on the Finance Bill, on the Budget, and the on the national insurance contributions Bill, which is coming back to the House next week and before Christmas. I must remind him yet again, I am afraid, that he was Financial Secretary to the Treasury when the national insurance contributions were raised not just on business but on workers; he said that was a thoroughly "Conservative thing to do." He was also a Treasury Minister when the minimum wage was raised. He has had plenty of time to come to this House and explain why he thought that was okay then but not okay now.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the topic of the economy, but he failed to mention one of the big economic forecasts out this week, from the OECD, which shows that the UK is now forecast to be the fastest growing European economy in the G7 over the next three years. He did not mention that when he was talking about the economy. We have always been clear that growth only matters when ordinary people right around the country feel better off and see public services improve; that is the difference between our economic plans and his.

We have a plan for change; the Conservatives have yet to change—they are yet to learn their own lessons. We are laying out today how we will deliver our clear outcomes. The right hon. Gentleman might not like them, because the Conservatives failed on all their measures, which is why they lost the election. While he and the rest of his party shout from the sidelines and try to rewrite history, we are delivering the real change that the public voted for.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): My right hon. Friend knows that on occasion, this House can come to agreement about key pieces of legislation. In the last Parliament, one such piece of legislation was the Football Governance Bill. Will she give an update on its progress in this Parliament and consider granting time for a debate on the sustainability of football?

Lucy Powell: I am really pleased and proud that this Government have brought back a strengthened Football Governance Bill; it is being considered in the House of Lords. The Conservatives supported it when they were in government, but I have to say that the behaviour of Conservative peers in the House of Lords does not suggest that the Conservatives are still in favour of it, because they have tabled hundreds of amendments to slow down progress of that important Bill. If they still care about putting fans back at the heart of our football, and making sure that we have a sustainable football industry in the future, perhaps they should tell their colleagues in the other place to pipe down.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Sadly, it is difficult to deny that there have been many times in recent years when debate in this House has not been of the highest quality, when Members have not shown the public their best side, and when, dare I say, some have perhaps lost a little of their sense of perspective, as could be seen in the way they conducted themselves. But as the Leader of the House has said, the debate on the private Member's Bill last Friday was entirely different. It was measured, respectful and considered. Members listened carefully, intervened with important and pertinent points, and showed British democracy at its best. In short, it was something to be extremely proud of, regardless of whether we agreed with the outcome or not.

Party politics was largely kept out of that debate, as MPs were rightly given a free vote; a vote of conscience on a consequential topic. Free votes should surely be granted when we are debating issues that transcend party political boundaries, and surely there can be no issue more important than ensuring that our planet is still able to support human life.

The Climate and Nature Bill is a crucial cross-party Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) with support from 250 parliamentarians, including 88 Labour MPs, and sponsored by MPs from six of the parties that sit in the House. Indeed, the Bill was championed in the last Parliament by the hon. Members for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) and for Sheffield Hallam (Olivia Blake), and even, I understand, by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband). Will the Leader of the House ask the Government to commit to a free vote on that crucial Bill's Second Reading on 24 January?

Lucy Powell: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member's representation of the House last Friday and how we really did show ourselves at our very best. I welcome the opportunity to work with her on the Modernisation Committee. One thing we are looking at is how to ensure that Back Benchers can come together more often in the interests of what our constituents want us to be talking about and in the public interest.

The hon. Member asked about the Bill that will come before us early next year. I am not quite sure of its status, but I reassure her that the Government are absolutely committed to being a clean energy superpower by 2030. Many in the Conservative party now want to change the targets, but we are committed to them and to the benefits they will bring, not just to tackling climate change, but to creating the jobs of the future and making sure that we have lower bills and energy security for the long run.

In a cross-party spirit, I will say at this juncture that I saw that the leader of the Liberal Democrats' Christmas song—I am sure everyone will want to download it—is riding high in the charts this week. I hope that it will not be the same as his paddle boarding, which gets off to a great start and then falls flat on its face.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I say to the House that hopefully, with quick questions and short answers, we can get through? I want to make sure that we time the statement, which is important to the House, with the Prime Minister. I am aiming for about 10 past or quarter past 11. Let us have a good example from Jayne Kirkham.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Last month, it was announced that several Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government offices will be closing, including the one in Truro in my constituency. The next nearest office is about an hour and a half's commute away, making relocation difficult. Will the Leader of the House facilitate a meeting between me and the appropriate Minister to discuss the future for Truro MHCLG workers?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear that. I understand that there will be no redundancies, but this is obviously a difficult time for the staff. I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a meeting with the Minister to discuss it.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In addition to the business announced by the Leader of the House, next Thursday in Westminster Hall there will be debates on Disability History Month and the opportunities for floating offshore wind power in the Celtic sea. On Tuesday 17 December, with your permission, Mr Speaker, there will be a debate on the impact of Old Oak Common on rail services to the west and to Wales. There are opportunities for the two remaining debates in Westminster Hall on Thursday 19 December. I remind colleagues that the Committee is closely monitoring those people who sign applications and say they will speak in debates but then fail to turn up.

Yesterday, I met representatives of the Afghan community. This is another of those areas that has been neglected following the general election, with people in Afghanistan in fear of their lives because of the Taliban. Equally, the oppression of women in Afghanistan is outrageous and needs to be called out. There also seems to be a change of policy at the Home Office in respect of issuing visas to people fleeing Afghanistan. Can we have a statement on the Floor of the House on what policy the Government are following to help and assist these vulnerable people at a time of terrible trouble?

Lucy Powell: First, I join the hon. Gentleman in advertising all the debates that happen in Westminster Hall, and I encourage colleagues to attend them more often.

The hon. Gentleman raises the important matter of those fleeing persecution, especially women fleeing the situation in Afghanistan. This Government have always taken a positive view of these issues, as did the previous Government. I will ensure that he gets a full reply on that matter.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): This week, Gordon Brown and the US ambassador to the UK jointly launched a new £6 million investment by Comic Relief and Amazon UK in the Multibank project, which is a fantastic initiative that donates surplus stock from companies to families in real need—everything from basics like baby clothes and bedding to household products. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating John Shaw of Littleborough, who was named Rochdale man of the year recently, for his charitable work for organisations such as Multibank?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating John Shaw, Rochdale's man of the year—perhaps an award that my hon. Friend might one day be lucky enough to receive—for all his work with Multibank, which does great charitable work.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Despite the valiant effort of Superintendent Simon Hutchison of Romford police, who does a superb job looking after my constituency, in the London borough of Havering we do not get the police cover that we pay for. The Mayor of London is not being fair to Romford. Will the Leader of the House ensure that we have a debate about police reform in the Greater London area, so that places such as Romford get police on the streets, looking after the community?

Lucy Powell: We will soon have a debate about police reform, when we bring forward the crime and policing Bill next year. This Government are putting 13,000 extra police officers on the beat, bringing in respect orders and taking tough action—more police and more powers—so that police in his constituency can get on with the job that they need to do.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I have been supporting constituents in North East Derbyshire who face many issues with their new build homes. The construction quality can be poor, communication with the developers unsatisfactory, and key landscaping left unfinished. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on the responsibility of developers?

Lucy Powell: First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on her recent engagement to another Member of this House, my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher). We have a new power couple emerging on the Back Benches. She raises some serious points. The Government are looking at giving the New Homes Ombudsman Service the powers it needs to investigate and resolve complaints. I will ensure that the House is informed of that as it progresses.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The right hon. Lady will be aware from her constituency of the economic value that HOME has brought as a venue for theatre and the arts. In Salisbury, we have a new executive director of Salisbury Playhouse. Will she ensure that, when thinking about regeneration, Ministers from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government come together to centre investment in our high streets on the therapeutic value of arts and culture? That has had such an impact in many other places, and it now must happen in Salisbury.

Lucy Powell: I absolutely agree that the cultural and leisure offer is vital to regeneration and to bringing together our town centres and communities like his in Salisbury. Those Departments are already coming together, and that will continue when we consider how to create great places such as Salisbury.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): At the Excel parking on Copeland Street in Derby, some residents are getting parking fines if they do not pay for their parking within five minutes. I am pleased that the Government will drive up standards in the private parking sector and are on the side of motorists. Could we have an update from a Local Government Minister on when the new code of practice for private parking will be published? I suggest that a five-minute rip-off charge is an example of what needs to go.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend rightly highlights a pretty scandalous case of private parking charges in her constituency. As she said, we will soon announce our plans for the new code of practice, and I will ensure that the House hears about that first.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Rachel was a village postmistress in my constituency, and her life was smashed to pieces by the Horizon scandal. Her claim was decided by a body of professionals put together to work these things out. It was submitted, and the Post Office had 40 days to respond. On the 38th day, the Post Office asked two questions, which were answered on day 39, but the timetable was reset right back to zero. She is now 23 days into the second lot of 40 days, and she still has no offer. She says it is “mentally battering”, and I say it is not fair. Can we have a debate on how we stop big corporations, and the Post Office in particular, playing games with little people, whom they have ruined—financially and reputationally—and continue to bully?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about Rachel’s situation. The hon. Member is right that sub-postmasters have waited too long for justice, and they continue to wait too long for compensation. This Government have set aside for the first time a proper budget to deal with this. We will act swiftly, and I will ensure that the House is continually updated.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): In Doncaster, Thorne and the Isle of Axholme, we are proud to be the home of a few branches of the Lions charity. Each year, in the run-up to Christmas, I feed myself up and swap my usual suit and red tie for a very different festive outfit. The Lions sleigh and volunteers bring Father Christmas to the doorsteps of thousands of smiling children. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising the hard work of the volunteers and their dedication, and wish the Thorne, Doncaster and Isle of Axholme Lions every success in smashing their fundraising goals this Christmas?

Lucy Powell: I hope to see some fancy dress going on as we approach Christmas, although I am not sure Mr Speaker would allow it in the Chamber. I join my hon. Friend in praising the work of volunteer groups such as the Doncaster Lions in his constituency, which he does every week in these sessions. I hope he continues to do so.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): My constituents in Boston and Skegness and people across the whole of Lincolnshire are concerned about the uncertainty surrounding British Steel. There were reports this week that it might be on the verge of collapse. Will the Leader of the House ensure that there is a ministerial statement to update us on the position, with a guarantee that British Steel will not be allowed to close?

Lucy Powell: The Government are working flat-out to protect British Steel, because it is vital to our future economy and our security. We have made some statements to the House about progress, but I will ensure that this House is the first place to hear about any developments.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Community pharmacies are becoming an increasingly important part of our place-based healthcare provision, so I am

[Noah Law]

pleased that our Government are committing to more localised delivery. None the less, numerous pharmacies in the St Austell and Newquay constituency have closed in recent years, thanks to a shocking contract under the last Government. What discussions has the Leader of the House had with Department of Health and Social Care colleagues regarding pharmacies to ensure that they are properly remunerated for the services they provide and that the sustainability of the operating model is secure?

Lucy Powell: Community pharmacies play a vital role in ensuring that healthcare is delivered and is based in our communities. I will ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care has heard my hon. Friend's question today. It would make a good Backbench Business or Westminster Hall debate, as I know there is a vacancy for them.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate about free trade and how best to approach the incoming American Administration to secure a free trade agreement? Will she remind her right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister that we already have a free trade agreement with the European Union, but we do not with the United States, which is our single biggest national trading partner? Such an agreement would be greatly to our advantage, rather than aligning with the EU, which might see the United Kingdom subjected to the American tariffs applied to the EU. That would be very much to our disadvantage.

Lucy Powell: As the Prime Minister made clear the other evening in his speech at the Guildhall, we do not see this as an either/or. Both are crucial partners, and we will pursue the best free trade agreements we can get with the United States and with others, just as we have one already with the EU. These things are a delicate balance, and I am afraid that too many of the trade deals signed by the previous Government signed away many of our farmers in this country. Perhaps that is something the Conservatives should consider.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all the winners of the Saltires, Scotland's national book awards, particularly Jen Stout for her courageous and compassionate dispatches from the frontline in Ukraine? On a lighter note, I congratulate all the Gaelic singers and musicians who triumphed at the Trads in Inverness at the weekend. Will she find Government time for a debate on the Scottish arts, so as to encourage Creative Scotland and the Scottish Government to carry on funding events such as the Eilean Dorcha festival and HebCelt and the dynamic galleries of An Lanntair and Taigh Chearsabhagh in my constituency?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Jen Stout and the other winners of the awards he mentions. As others have done, he raises the importance of culture to local communities. He will know this is a devolved matter, and that the Scottish Government, thanks to this Government's Budget, now have the funds and the powers they need to continue supporting art organisations like his.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): Today, a hugely significant report from Amnesty International finds that Israel has perpetrated three acts against Palestinians in Gaza that are prohibited under the genocide convention. The Government have repeatedly said that it is for judicial bodies to determine whether genocide is taking place, but that utterly fails to take account of the obligation to prevent under the convention. If the Government have a duty to prevent, they cannot wait until a court has made a determination before taking action to—again, I emphasise—prevent. In the light of Amnesty's report, would the Government be prepared to make time to debate this matter, which goes to the heart of UK compliance with international law?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady raises an important issue, and I think the whole House will join in saying that we want an immediate ceasefire. Far too many civilians have died in this conflict, and it is time it came to an urgent end. What we need is a long-term path to a two-state solution with a fully recognised state of Palestine alongside a safe and secure Israel, and that is what this Government will continue to work towards. I will ensure that there is time to consider some of the issues she has raised.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I am frequently contacted by constituents of mine in Haltwhistle who are outraged by the empty buildings that pockmark the town. Will the Leader of the House commit to a debate in Government time on how we can re-energise towns such as Haltwhistle so that they can fuel the growth that this country desperately needs?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. Breathing new life into our high streets is a priority of this Government. We have a range of measures around business rates, devolution of powers and support for local communities that are coming, and I will ensure that the House is always updated.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Dunoon Mugs, based in Stone, is celebrating 50 years producing some of the world's greatest ceramics. Can we have a debate not just to celebrate the amazing work of our potters in Staffordshire but on how we secure their future?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Gentleman raises the future of ceramics, which is so important to his constituency and the surrounding region. It is one of our important, long-standing industries. I am sure that if he were to apply for a debate—as long as he adds his name and then turns up for it—he might get one of the slots that are going.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Today, 5 December, is International Volunteer Day. In the interests of time, I will not list all the voluntary organisations, volunteer groups and roles in my constituency, but the contribution they make is vital. May we have a debate in Government time to celebrate the contribution that volunteers make to our local communities?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the volunteers in her constituency and all across the country. As always at business questions, many Members want to thank their local volunteers and community

groups for their work. As I often say, I think that a Backbench Business debate on the subject would be very well attended.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): My constituent Kirsty is looking to adopt a child, but, because she is self-employed, she is entitled to neither adoption leave nor adoption pay. If she were having a biological child, she would be eligible for maternity allowance, but she will get no Government support. Will the Leader of the House set aside some Government time to debate the support that Government could give to adoptive parents?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the case of her constituent Kirsty. She will know that the Employment Rights Bill, which explores such issues, is in its Committee stage. She might want to consider tabling an amendment to that Bill or raising these issues when the Bill returns for its final stages.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): In 2021 in my constituency, a six-year-old girl, Sharlotte-Sky Naglis, was killed after being hit by a speeding driver who was on drugs and was drunk. The driver spent 11 weeks in a coma and while the police had taken a blood sample they were unable to test it without his consent. Ever since, Sharlotte's mother Claire has been campaigning tirelessly to amend section 7A of the Road Traffic Act 1988 to allow blood samples to be tested without consent in cases where dangerous driving has led to a loss of life. Will the Leader of the House please make time to debate this important matter in the House?

Lucy Powell: What a tragic case my hon. Friend raises. Many such cases are raised consistently in the Chamber. We are currently considering possible changes to motoring offences to cover such situations. I will ensure that any such changes are announced in the House first.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): We all know that the country needs more homes, but the Government's proposed algorithm throws up anomalies such as an 86% increase in the housing target for East Hampshire, while targets for London actually go down. May we have a debate in Government time on how we make housing balanced and sustainable?

Lucy Powell: We are proud to have set a very ambitious housing target for this Parliament, but that is not to say that there will be a developer free-for-all. These will be locally developed and appropriate plans, but we do need to build the homes of the future. That is what the Government are trying to do.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I was going to ask a more political question, but I will accept the invitation to talk about Small Business Saturday. I invite the Leader of the House to my constituency to meet some of our small businesses. Two in particular come to mind. The first is the Bald Baker, a business started up during lockdown by a single dad. His latest creation is a pie that contains cheese, chips and doner kebab. [*Laughter.*] Perhaps too early, but it does fit perfectly in your hand. If that does not appeal to the Leader of the House, perhaps we could visit the nearby Platinum Barbers and she could be tempted by a haircut just like mine.

Lucy Powell: I did, at the beginning, invite contributions for Small Business Saturday, and my hon. Friend is putting in a good early bid. The Bald Baker's pie sounds incredibly Scottish to me. Cheese, chips and doner kebab in a pie: all the carbs you could ever need in one go! But perhaps I will not take him up on the offer of the barbers. I will stick with the hairdressers downstairs.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Recent figures suggest that approximately 982,000 people are living with dementia in the UK, and that number will go up. Many of those people reside in care homes, while others rely on care provided in their own homes. However, research from the Alzheimer's Society shows that only 29% of care workers have received any specific training on caring for people with dementia. Will the Leader of the House back the Alzheimer's Society's campaign and schedule time for a debate on how we can ensure that more care workers are trained in treating people with dementia?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman raises an excellent point. Dementia is an awful affliction, and the number of people with dementia will only grow and spread in the coming years. The Government are prioritising social care to ensure that social care workers have the training, pay and status they need to do the job, but I will certainly look into the issues he raises.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): Complaints from my constituents in West Lancashire about Northern Rail are prolific. Last month, Northern Rail told me that issues such as freezing carriages, trains cancelled at the last minute and non-existent Sunday services would be resolved by the new working days agreement. I learned yesterday that that negotiation has failed, leaving passengers back at square one. May we have a debate on the Floor of the House on the state of Northern Rail and the impact on passengers across West Lancashire, Lancashire and the whole of the north of England?

Lucy Powell: I know from my own constituency experience that the people of the north have been let down over many years of under-investment and mismanagement by Northern, and its current performance is unacceptable. That is why we have a plan to take the franchises back into public ownership, so that we can improve reliability and ensure that people can get the trains that they need.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): And now, a final pithy question from Sir John Hayes.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Problem gambling first breaks people and then costs lives. It is a far cry from the weekly pools coupon of my father's day, and it is devastating people in Lincolnshire and elsewhere. Given the announcement of a new £30 million statutory gambling levy, will the Leader of the House arrange a debate so that we can discuss how to guarantee that that money is spread fairly, and is not eaten up by organisations sponsored by the gambling industry?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. Online gambling in particular has completely changed the whole industry and increased people's susceptibility to problems such as gambling addiction.

[Lucy Powell]

This Government are taking forward the recommendations made previously to tackle the scourge of gambling, and I will ensure that the relevant Minister comes to the House at some point to talk about these issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for a comprehensive session of business questions.

Plan for Change: Milestones for Mission-led Government

11.10 am

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement about the next phase of the Government's programme.

In July we set out our legislative programme, in October we set out our financial plan, and today we are setting out our plan for change. When we were elected, we said that we would have five long-term missions for the country: to grow the economy, to build an NHS fit for the future, to break down the barriers to opportunity, to take back our streets, and to make the UK a clean energy superpower. These missions mark an important and fundamental break from the record of chaos that we saw under the previous Administration—the constant changes in policy that prevented the then Government from facing up to long-term problems, held people back and, worst of all, helped to spread the belief that politics and government could no longer deliver for people. In fact, by the end they had given up even trying.

We will never submit to the fatalism that says government cannot deliver change for people. We do not believe that living standards have to stagnate as they did in the last Parliament. We do not accept the lowest levels of satisfaction with the NHS ever recorded, which is what we inherited when we came to power. We do not believe that a tawdry surrender to Tory Back Benchers should be allowed to cut off the dream of home ownership for the next generation. We will not sit back and accept a situation in which young children are falling behind their peers even before they start school, damaging their opportunities for the rest of their lives.

A break with all that is more than a political choice. It is a national necessity, so today we turn the page on that record. We reject the hopelessness that it fostered, and we have set out milestones for each of our missions and the foundations that underpin them. We have already stabilised the public finances. We have announced £22 billion more for the NHS, and we are increasing the schools budget by more than £2 billion. We have rejected the plans that we inherited from the Conservatives to cut back on capital investment and on the country's future; instead, we want to build the schools, build the hospitals, build the houses and build the transport infrastructure that the country needs—investments that the Conservatives now say they support, although they reject every means of raising the revenue to pay for them. That proves only one thing: they have given up any pretence of being the party of sound money, and given up on being a serious political party at all.

Our plan for change sets out key milestones for the country. The first is to raise living standards in every part of the United Kingdom, so that working people have more money in their pockets no matter where in the country they live. The second is to build 1.5 million homes and to fast-track planning decisions on at least 150 major infrastructure projects; that is more than in the last 14 years combined. The third is to tackle the hospital backlogs by meeting the NHS standard of patients waiting no longer than 18 weeks for elective treatment in England. The fourth is to provide a named police officer for every neighbourhood, and 13,000 additional officers, police community support officers

and special constables in neighbourhood teams in England and Wales. The fifth is to secure home-grown energy while also protecting bill payers: we want to be on track for clean power by 2030. The sixth is to give children the best start in life by ensuring that a record percentage of five-year-olds in England are ready to learn when they start school.

Underpinning those milestones are the strong foundations that the country needs. Economic stability is the foundation for growth, following a Budget that restored stability to the public finances and put in place investment to move the country forward. We will reduce net migration from the record high level that we inherited from the previous Government, clear the asylum backlog and increase returns of people who do not have the right to be here—work that has already begun. We will also fulfil the Government's first duty of protecting our people through strong national security. Those are the milestones in our "Plan for Change". None of them is easy, but worthwhile change seldom is. To deliver them will require relentless focus and facing up to the trade-offs involved.

Governing is not just about what we want to do, but about how we want to do it, so we have to reform the state itself to deliver our goals. That is why we want value for money, and are cracking down on fraud and waste through the new covid corruption commissioner. That is why we will raise £6 billion by going after tax avoiders—unlike the Conservative party, we are putting in the money to make it happen. That is why the Chancellor demanded efficiency and productivity savings of 2% from each Government Department next year. That is why we want to get more people off welfare and into work. That is why we will tackle the delays and blocks in our planning system to make it faster to get things built.

The old debate was just about Government budgets. The new debate has to be about how those budgets are used, and about how people can be equipped with the right technology and the right systems to deliver, so we will ask the following questions each time. Is power being devolved enough? Is technology being used enough? Are we learning enough from those on the frontline? We will have more to say about reform of the state soon.

I know there may be scepticism from those who first accused us of being far too cautious and now accuse us of being far too ambitious, but stop and think about what would happen if we did not set such goals. Politics needs a change when people have lost faith in its capacity to deliver, and the Government system itself needs a change to focus on the goals that we have set.

If we had just carried on in the same old pattern, we would have too many children who are not ready to start school, with opportunity cut off within the first few years of their lives. We would carry on with huge NHS waiting lists, which hurt both our people and our economy. We would have more and more young people cut off from having a home of their own and asking what all their effort and hard work will ever lead to. We would continue with too many of our town centres being no-go zones for people after dark. We would still be at the mercy of dictators when it comes to energy prices. Perhaps most of all, we would have an economy like the one the Conservatives ran, in which living standards continue to stagnate, just as they did in the last Parliament. If we did that, the loss of faith would simply carry on.

It is not a matter of whether we should do this. We have to do this to stop the country falling behind, and to meet the challenges that we face. If we meet these goals, we will have a country where living standards are rising, more children are ready for school, fewer people are waiting in pain for NHS treatment, more people have the chance to have a home of their home, and our streets are safer because we have the community police we need. That is change worth having and change worth fighting for, and I commend this statement to the House.

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

11.19 am

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for advance sight of his statement. It was very nice to receive it only 12 hours after *The Times*, although I must say that I received the policy document itself only at 11.05 am, unlike Labour MPs at Pinewood studios who, according to social media, had the document some time before. While the Prime Minister is at Pinewood, I hope he will hear its owner's concerns about the very substantial increase in business rates from 2026, which will affect the profits and viability of what was, under the Conservatives, a flourishing sector.

The Opposition congratulate the Government on their most recent reset—there are only a few more resets left before Christmas. The Labour party might want to try turning it off and, well, maybe just leaving it off, but it is good that it has taken the time to come up with an emergency list of priorities. After only 14 years in opposition and five months in power, it has finally decided on some things that it is going to work towards.

The statement was quite punchy about the past, unusually punchy for the right hon. Gentleman. If he is rattled, and he is not the rattling type, it is a sign that the Government must be feeling pretty unstable at the moment. Labour Members talk about legacy, and I wish them good fortune in government—I genuinely mean that.

The last Government had to clean up the mess from the greatest financial crisis in a century. The last Government had to deal with the biggest pandemic in a century. The last Government had to deal with the biggest war in Europe since 1945. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members might gloss over that, they might pretend it is not important, but history judges it very differently. It reflects very badly on the Labour party that it refuses to acknowledge the importance of those extremely significant events.

I will now turn to each of the new millstones in order.

First, raising living standards in every part of the United Kingdom so that working people have more money in their pockets, no matter where they live. How is this to be measured? What are the metrics? When will the data be published? Who will be held to account? We all need to know.

Secondly, building 1.5 million homes and fast-tracking planning decisions. The Office for Budget Responsibility has already said that this Government are very unlikely to build more homes than the last Conservative Government. What has changed since the Budget? Why do the Government now believe they will be able to achieve this? Is there more money? Have the spending plans changed?

Thirdly, tackling hospital backlogs. We have already seen funding first, reform later—a disastrous way to do business. NHS bosses have been briefed about this, and

[Alex Burghart]

they are already briefing the press that this requirement will put enormous pressure on A&E without additional money beyond that given at the Budget. Is more money going to be made available for the NHS to fulfil this milestone?

Fourthly, policing. Only 3,000 of the 13,000 neighbourhood police officers are extra new police officers. This target is not genuine. Is there a proposal to deal with the backlog in the courts? Without that, extra police officers will lead only to greater backlog in the courts. Does the Labour party have a plan for this?

Fifthly, energy. In March, Labour's missions document said that, by 2030, the UK would be the first major country in the world to run 100% on clean and cheap power. Since March, this has been degraded by 5%. Can we expect the target to be degraded by 5% every nine months?

Sixthly, getting children ready to learn. This is a genuinely wonderful target, but what does the right hon. Gentleman mean by "ready to learn"? How will it be measured? When will the House be told whether progress is being made?

Obviously, on all of these, there are good things to be done, but the missions will only mean anything if the Government are honest about what they are doing and about the milestones they are hitting or not hitting. Also, why have the Government downgraded certain other priorities? How have they chosen these six issues over immigration, over GP surgeries, over A&E, over defence, over the £300 energy bill reduction target or over becoming the fastest-growing economy in the G7? Why have the Government chosen these priorities? The House should be told.

Finally, who is taking responsibility—I mean real responsibility—for achieving the targets? A lot of us were pleased when, the other day, the Health Secretary said that individuals at the top of the health service would be held accountable with their jobs if targets were not hit. Will the same apply to Ministers? Who in Government is taking real responsibility for the targets? If the Government are serious, we need data, accountability and transparency. Will the right hon. Gentleman guarantee to the House that we will get that?

Pat McFadden: I have spent more of my life than I would have liked in opposition, and I learned one thing about being in opposition: one has to decide what one's attack is. As I listened to the hon. Gentleman, I was not sure whether he supported or opposed the plan.

The hon. Gentleman refers to millstones. Let me tell him very clearly: the only millstone that this Government and this country have is the appalling legacy left by the Conservatives. Let us contrast what we are announcing today with their milestones of failure. They had record high waiting lists, the worst Parliament for living standards on record, a surrender on house building, a failure on infrastructure and a £22 billion hole in the public finances—those are their milestones of failure.

These are our choices today. The metrics by which we measure things are set out in the document before the House. The targets will make a real difference to people's lives: higher living standards across the country, more housing, fewer people on NHS waiting lists, more community police and the best start in life for all children. That final metric is already measured when children

start school at the age of five; under the hon. Gentleman's Government, that metric fell, so our plan is to raise that, so that three out of four children can start school ready to learn. That is the measure that we will choose.

The truth is that the Conservatives could not tackle the challenges we have set out today, and they know it. They could not unblock the housing system or get the growth the country needs because they are the ones blocking the new housing and the infrastructure that we need. They could not fix the schools or the hospitals, or get more police on the streets, because they are still saying that they support the investment while opposing any revenue measure that pays for it, thereby sacrificing any reputation for economic competence that they had.

What a contrast. We will not subscribe to the fatalistic view that all we can look forward to is more of the kind of failure we saw over the past 14 years. We believe in setting out plans that will improve people's lives, because we know that a united Government, with a clear sense of priorities, prepared to do the hard yards and make the difficult long-term choices for the country, can deliver a better future for people. That is what is set out in the plans we have published today.

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's plan for change, which will ensure that the Government are focused on delivery, not the dither we have seen for the past 14 years with the Conservatives. I especially welcome the NHS target of 18 weeks; the last Labour Government were able to deliver that target and NHS satisfaction levels were at their highest in history. Fourteen years of the Conservatives running the NHS into the ground have left it in an appalling state. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that that must never be allowed to happen again?

Pat McFadden: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. When we came into office in 1997, we were also faced with an NHS that was in severe difficulty. Let me be clear with the House: meeting that target is extremely challenging, but we believe that by setting it and driving the system towards it, we can make real progress towards reducing waiting lists. What a contrast in terms of what the public felt. When we left office in 2010, the public satisfaction rates with the NHS were the highest ever recorded. When we came back into office in July, those satisfaction levels were the lowest ever recorded. That is what we are trying to turn around through the plan we have published today.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for advance sight of the statement. This new Government have followed the disaster of the previous Conservative Administration. The Conservatives broke the NHS, they crashed the economy with the disastrous mini-Budget and they managed the staggering feat of delivering five Prime Ministers in six years. It should not exactly be a hard act to follow—and yet, too many people feel like this new Government are still not listening to them.

When my colleagues and I speak to our constituents, they simply cannot comprehend decisions such as the increase in national insurance, which will hurt jobs just as we need to get the economy going; the tax on family

farms; or the utterly misguided removal of the winter fuel payment. The right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, therefore, if I approach today's announcement with a degree of scepticism. New targets are all well and good, but people have heard lots of similar pledges and targets before. As they know all too well, without a proper plan for delivery, they fail. I hope the Government recognise that pursuing the targets at the expense of all the other things left broken by the Conservatives will not cut it. The British public will not be taken for fools.

On that point, I want to focus on the NHS. Yes, bringing down waiting lists for treatment is a crucial part of the picture, but doing so at the cost of neglecting A&E waits or the ability to see a GP is like robbing Peter to pay Paul. We know that to fix the crisis in the NHS we must also fix the crisis in our care system. Indeed, it is on fixing health and care and delivering on the issues that people care about most that we on the Liberal Democrat Benches will continue to hold the Government to account. When will we hear more detail about how the plan is to be delivered, and particularly, about spending allocations for the NHS to fix our hospitals and reduce those waiting lists?

Pat McFadden: I welcome the questions from the Liberal Democrat spokesperson. She is right to point out the Conservatives' record, but I gently say that she too seems to support extra spending but oppose all the revenue-raising measures that go towards that. The truth is that if we are serious, we cannot do that. The reason we have had to raise revenue was the appalling legacy that we inherited. We had to stabilise the public finances and fix the situation we were left with. Now that we have done that, we can look forward to delivering on these key goals.

The hon. Lady asks how the plans are to be paid for. There will be a spending review next year, as she knows. However, we have already announced £22 billion extra for the NHS over the next couple of years, which is accompanied by the reforms that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has set out.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): This Labour Government's plans to make work pay will give thousands of workers in my constituency a much-needed pay rise after 14 years of failure by the Conservative party. Does my right hon. Friend agree that plans to support low-paid workers in insecure jobs will be not only crucial but absolutely central to our plan for change?

Pat McFadden: I welcome what my hon. Friend said about pay. The Chancellor announced a significant increase in the minimum wage at the time of the Budget a few weeks ago. Of course we want public sector workers and everybody who helps to deliver a plan to be rewarded well, but it also has to come with change in the way the state works, to make sure we get the best value for money and the best productivity and make the best use of technology. We cannot have that just in the private sphere; we have to apply it to the public sphere to make sure we get the best bang for the taxpayers' buck.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I do not think anybody doubts the sincerity of the new Government in wanting to achieve these laudable aims. I remind him, however, of John Lennon's line:

"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

Notably absent from the priorities are ones such as reducing the national debt or dealing with the demographic challenge or the lack of defence and security that we need to build up to confront global challenges. Are these aims the Government's only priorities or will we see a bigger list that deals with some of the really existential challenges that threaten the independence and survival of our country?

Pat McFadden: I welcome the hon. Member's question. He referred to defence and security. I did deliberately mention that area in my remarks, because it is an absolute foundation of any Government that their first duty is to protect their people. That is why there is a specific section on it in the document, and why it is an underpinning foundation for the goals that we have set out today.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): I listened carefully to the shadow Minister's reply, and it sounded to me like he welcomed much of the investment that our Government will deliver, but, funnily enough, he will not support any measures to pay for it. I was always taught that the Tories were against a something-for-nothing culture. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this will only compound the Tories' reputation for economic recklessness?

Pat McFadden: I do think the Tories have a problem. The new Leader of the Opposition stood at that Dispatch Box a couple of weeks ago and said that she supported all the extra investments. Therefore, every time the Opposition stand up and oppose the revenue measures that are designed to fund them, all they do is expose their own economic incoherence. It is quite simple: if the Opposition support the investments, they have either to support the revenue measures that we have set out, or set out alternative revenue-raising measures to meet the investments that they support. So far, they have utterly failed to do that.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Five months in and after a Budget that the Office for Budget Responsibility says will lower growth over five years, increase inflation and reduce the number of people in jobs, it is extraordinary to see a document that has so many areas not covered. I want to probe the right hon. Gentleman specifically on his goal of increasing disposable income for working people. What would he say to those 44,000 terminally ill older people who, in shocking news last week from Marie Curie, will not get their winter fuel allowance this year? Will he be judged by his governance actions?

Pat McFadden: Every Government are judged by their actions and by the legacy that they leave to their successors. We had to take that decision on winter fuel precisely because of the legacy that was left to us. We do want to see a rise in people's living standards and in their disposable income. Those stagnated under the previous Government, and let us not forget how unusual that was. This was the first Parliament in living memory that saw stagnated living standards across the whole population. We aim to change that and make sure that people see rising living standards wherever they live in the country.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): When I was a child in Denton Holme in Carlisle, PC Kevin Scott was a very familiar figure. He knew us and we knew his name. Does the Minister agree that not only does society exist, but it is woven from thousands of communities such as Denton Holme, and that our commitment to reintroducing named community police officers will strengthen those communities, strengthen society and take back our streets?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right. Let me praise PC Kevin Scott and other officers like him who are known in the community. While I am here, Madam Deputy Speaker, let me mention Kenny, our police community support officer on Bilston high street, who helps to keep us safe. We want to see more named officers like that, so that people know who is keeping their streets safe and can put a face to the name, and we can restore proper community policing to make our streets and our town centres safe.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): However the Minister tries to dress this up, there is an unmistakeable whiff of panic about it. One would have thought that a decade and a half of opposition would have been ample time to prepare a plan for change, rather than the relaunch of a Government whose five-year plan seems to have unravelled after just five months. I was particularly interested, however, to hear about the Government's commitment to reform of the state. He said that each time, they will ask, "Is power being devolved enough?" Given that the Scottish Government have asked for powers on migration, employment law and the constitution to be devolved, when can we expect to see some action on that reform of the state, and that important commitment to devolution?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member calls this a relaunch. I hate to break it to him, but the Government he supports in Scotland produce a programme for government every single year. Does that mean that they relaunch every year, or does he put that accusation only to us? He asks about devolution. We were the party that created devolution because we believed in a powerful Scottish Parliament. We still do, and it has just received its biggest real-terms increase in funding since devolution came into being. He missed out his thanks to the Labour Chancellor who made that happen.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome today's statement, which is a real plan for change and hope. It is clear that the Conservatives do not like us talking about their record, but it had a real-world impact in constituencies such as mine, particularly when it came to bobbies on the beat. For 14 years, the Conservatives stripped us of bobbies on the beat, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) said, neighbourhood policing was stripped out of many local communities. I particularly welcome the requirement in today's plan for more neighbourhood policing, which will have a real-world impact on my constituents.

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we saw huge cuts in the number of police officers after the Conservative party came to power, which really affected the neighbourhood community policing teams that we had set up during our period in Government.

We want to ensure that there are proper neighbourhood policing teams in every community, with a named officer, so that people can feel safe on their streets and in their communities. That absolutely underpins our quality of life. There is no freedom if people do not feel safe, which is why it is such a core part of the plan that we have produced today.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I welcome the Minister's commitment to revitalising faith in democratic politics, and I agree that Government can be a force for good, but he will know that perhaps the biggest macroeconomic challenge that we face is productivity; indeed, he mentioned it today. I am therefore disappointed to see in the plan no real mention of work-force skills or national economic resilience, in terms of growing more of the food that we eat and making more of the goods that we need. Will he look at those two areas and set productivity targets, for which Ministers can be held accountable, so that what really counts is not just what we spend but what we get for what we spend?

Pat McFadden: The right hon. Member might have noticed that I said in my opening remarks that an old debate just about the size of the budget is not enough for the situation that we face. Of course budgets, resources and investment matter, but so too does reform of the way the state works, the application of technology, and the balance between what is done centrally and what is done in devolved areas. Alongside any delivery goals there has to be a real plan to make them happen that reforms the state. I am clear that that must go alongside the goals that we have set out today.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Waiting lists on the NHS have already been mentioned, but they need to be mentioned again, because the last 14 years have made such a difference to constituents in Truro and Falmouth. They have really struggled to work and to live, having to wait one or two years for orthopaedic operations. Please will my right hon. Friend speak again about what has already been done to deal with those waiting lists, and how that will lead into the future?

Pat McFadden: This is a hugely important problem for the country, because the current levels are not just bad for those waiting a long time for NHS treatment; they are also bad for the economy, because we have so many people in that position. That number has started to fall slightly since we came into office, but it will take a long and sustained effort and a combination of investment and reform. I am glad that we were able to announce the biggest increase in NHS funding since 2010 outside the pandemic period, but that has to be used in a way that gets waiting lists down, helps the people waiting for NHS treatment and, crucially, helps produce the economic growth and productivity we need. The truth is too many people are waiting in pain and too many people of working age are out of work on long-term sickness benefits, and we have to do something about both those things if we are to meet our economic growth targets and get the rising living standards we want to see.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): In the document, the Government have downgraded their pledge to have the fastest-growing economy in the G7 and junked their pledge to cut energy bills by £300, breaking

two promises to the British people. Of the milestones they are keeping, who is accountable for each one, what are the detailed metrics, where are the implementation plans and will Ministers take responsibility if they fail to meet them?

Pat McFadden: If the hon. Member reads the document carefully, he will see that the growth target is very much in the document, but the document also says that it is not enough just to have economic growth; people have to feel it in their standard of living. That should be an important lesson for all of us in politics.

The hon. Member challenges me on accountability. Of course the targets are challenging, but let us look at the alternative. We were not prepared to carry on with the thinking that announcements were something real, with no real focus on delivery and driving the system. In case he has not noticed, there is a crisis of faith in politics out there. We have set out targets today that will make a real difference to people's lives. I accept that they are challenging, but if we have fewer people waiting in pain, more people able to own their own home, safer streets and a better chance in life for children starting school, that is change worth having, and that is why we published the plan.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the statement. Harlow is a town plagued by low-paid and insecure work and people being forced out of work due to waiting for operations. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster describe how the plan will help tackle those issues for residents in my town? I gently say to the Conservatives when they talk about metrics that they are the party that criticised schools during their tenure because apparently half the schools were below average.

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right that when people do the right thing and they go out to work and try to earn a living, they should have a decent reward for what they do. That is why Labour introduced the concept of a national minimum wage in the first place—opposed by the Conservatives, who said it would destroy jobs—and why the Chancellor announced at the recent Budget a significant increase in that wage so that when people do the right thing, they are rewarded and can get a decent living for the hard work they do.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Flexible affordable childcare is a critical part of our economic infrastructure. It gives parents more choice over how to organise their life, and it helps them return to work if they want to, as well as giving children a good start in life. Yet nurseries in Marple in my Hazel Grove constituency have told me that the Government's increase in national insurance charges will force them to increase costs to families. The Government rightly say they are serious about fixing early years provision and tackling the attainment gap for disadvantaged children, so do they plan to exempt early years and nursery settings from their ill-advised hikes to national insurance charges?

Pat McFadden: If the hon. Member looks at the document, she will find that an expansion of nursery places is in it, because we know it is good for children and for working parents. That is part of the plan we set out today, and part of our plan to ensure that children

in early years have the best possible start in life. I cannot announce anything further to the Budget on national insurance, but she knows the background to why we had to take those decisions.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Listening to Conservative Members, one would think we were left a golden legacy. Despite that halcyon legacy, it is no wonder the Conservatives were resoundingly beaten in the last election—my constituents want an NHS that can be relied on, yet Lord Darzi's report was clear that we have not sorted out the health service or social care. Indeed, 13% of NHS beds are taken up by people who could be in social care. Will the Minister outline what he will do to ensure that we finally get to grips with that crucial issue?

Pat McFadden: The legacy of the Conservative Government was not just economic or in policy, but a loss of faith in government's ability to do things. That is part of the backdrop to the plan that we are publishing today. I commend Lord Darzi's report to anyone who has not read it. It fully sets out the legacy in health. We have put getting waiting lists down at the heart of the plan that we are publishing today because that drives the whole system; if we get them down, we will have a healthier population, more people ready to work, more people to contribute to the country and more people to contribute to our productivity. That is why it is at the heart of the plan.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for taking the time to come to the House to set out where the milestones are—that is a positive move for a Government to make in order to give clarity. However, it would also be incredibly helpful if he set out how he will keep the House updated—perhaps on a six-monthly basis—to track the plan's development and the Government's delivery of it. There is a long time until the next general election, so it would be good to see how the plan is progressing throughout this Parliament.

Pat McFadden: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's welcome for the plan, which stands in marked contrast to the scepticism shown by his party's Front Benchers. He will have plenty of opportunity, now that we have published the plan, to ask Ministers about these things as we move forward. We know that they will be challenging to deliver. We have not yet followed the advice of the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara), who suggested that we do this every year, but I am sure that the Ministers in charge of these goals will keep the House regularly updated.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): My constituency saw the highest price rises in the country back in August, as a direct result of the Conservatives' opposition to building the houses that are clearly so desperately wanted and needed in my constituency. Can the Minister assure young people in my constituency, who are desperate to buy their own homes, start families and get on with their lives, that Labour will deliver for them?

Pat McFadden: Building more houses is a challenging thing to do because there are always people who will object and blockages in our planning system, and things

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take too long. We have a major planning and infrastructure Bill coming in the new year that aims to unblock some of that. We know that the target is challenging, but we must build more houses in this country—and not just houses, but more infrastructure in order to get the economic growth that we need. It takes too long for major investments to happen. I look forward to the Conservative party's support for our planning and infrastructure Bill when it is introduced in the new year.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): The Conservative Government brought the NHS to its knees. There is a legacy of crumbling hospitals, of doctors and nurses working at burnout, and of patients being treated in corridors. The Liberal Democrats welcome the extra investment in the NHS and support the ambition to get waiting lists down, but the Government cannot fix the NHS without first fixing social care. At Winchester hospital—part of the Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust—almost one in five beds are filled by someone who could be cared for through the social care package but is stuck in a hospital bed. That has the knock-on effect of increasing A&E and ambulance waiting times, and of elective surgeries being cancelled. Will the Government review the national insurance increase for social care providers and hospices, and will they commit to cross-party talks so that we can have a long-term plan to fix social care?

Pat McFadden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but there is a contradiction at the heart of it. He began by saying he welcomed the extra investment in the NHS, and ended by saying he opposed the national insurance increase that is necessary to fund these things. As I have said before, people cannot support the extra investment we have announced, but oppose every revenue-raising measure that contributes to it—it simply does not work like that. If we want the extra investment, we have to support the revenue-raising measures that make it possible.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): The plan for change is clear. This Government will restore order to the asylum and immigration system, clear the asylum backlog, end the use of hotels, increase returns and cut small boat crossings. Does the Minister agree that this plan stands in stark contrast to the open borders policy that the Conservative party subjected the country to?

Pat McFadden: It is striking that when the Conservatives came into power, they began by promising to reduce net migration to under 100,000, and bequeathed us a situation where that figure was 10 times higher. This happened on their watch with their policies, and now we are left to clear up the situation and restore some order to our migration policy. The country will always need migration, but the "Plan for Change" document sets out what my hon. Friend said; we will reduce net migration and deal with illegal migration in the way she set out.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am very pleased to read that Labour's drive is for the working man and woman—that has to be welcomed, and I very much welcome the £25 billion for the NHS. It would be churlish of me, or of anyone in the House, not to do so.

However, the Budget put a question mark over the viability of working farms. It stripped pensioners of their winter fuel allowance and put what could possibly be unsustainable pressure on 99% of microbusinesses and small businesses in Northern Ireland. That is not helping the working man or the working woman. Everybody in this House wants the Labour party to succeed, for the sake of the country and for its people—actually, I might want it more than most, if I can say that. I once again ask whether the Government will have the strength to acknowledge and put right the wrong calls that have been made, to lead this great nation successfully to prosperity with no pensioner, small business or family farm left behind.

Pat McFadden: I appreciate the spirit in which the hon. Member has asked his question. On farms, as the Chancellor made clear, a couple would have an allowance of £3 million before any inheritance obligation kicked in, and then it would be at half the rate that other people have to pay, so significant protections are built into the policy. On pensioners, it is very important to remember that we have said we will protect the triple lock, which is reflected in the pension increase that has been announced for next year.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): After 14 years of repeated broken promises, it is hardly surprising that many people are distrustful of politicians and the ability of government to do anything positive. Does the Minister agree that in setting out a clear plan for change, the Government are offering the British people not just the hope of a better future, but clear, measurable metrics against which they can be held to account?

Pat McFadden: This question of distrust and loss of faith is really important, because after so much chaos in recent years, it is very easy for our constituents to turn off from politics—to think that no Government of any political colour can deliver for them. We were determined not to allow that scepticism to set in and become the norm, so we have set out targets. I acknowledge, not for the first time today, that those targets are challenging. They are not easy to meet, but progress towards them—with lower waiting times, more houses built, and the other things set out in the plan for change document—will show that the Government are trying to deliver for people and that politics can bring productive change. That is change worth having.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), I welcome these milestones, and I agree with what the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said about the need to restore trust. How will Labour's health policies in England differ from those that they pursued in Wales?

Pat McFadden: I am sure that in every part of the country, Governments who run the NHS want to see waiting lists fall. We put that at the heart of the plan for change today because it drives the whole system, and because the levels of satisfaction with the NHS that we inherited were the lowest ever recorded. No Government can be content with that; I can tell the right hon. Gentleman honestly that no Labour Government are content with it. That is why it is an important part of the plan.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): In West Brom, one issue dominates all else: the fact that people are working harder and harder, but can afford less and less. That is the record of the Conservative party, who crashed our economy and oversaw the worst cost of living crisis in a generation. Can my right hon. Friend set out how the plan for change will make ordinary people better off and deliver exactly what people voted for in July?

Pat McFadden: I very much welcome that question from my parliamentary neighbour. We represent very similar communities, and I agree that when people go out to work and do the right thing, they want to be rewarded, rightly. That is why we protected people's payslips in the Budget. It is why we announced an increase in the minimum wage in the Budget. It is why we made sure in the Budget that carers could earn more before losing part of their revenue. We want work to be rewarded. We are the Labour party; we are the party of labour. When people do the right thing, they should be treated fairly.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): The Conservatives have always claimed to be the party of law and order, but they took police officers off the streets. Knife and youth crime, antisocial behaviour and local drug activity are some of the most common complaints in my constituency. I welcome the Labour Government's urgent action to recruit more neighbourhood police officers. My right hon. Friend knows my constituency well, because it adjoins his in Wolverhampton. Can he confirm that this action will make a real difference to my constituents?

Pat McFadden: I welcome the question from my parliamentary neighbour on the other side of my constituency. He is right that people in his constituency and mine care deeply about the safety of their community. They saw the cuts in policing after the Conservative party came to power. They saw their neighbourhood officers being more and more stretched, trying to cover more and more area with not enough officers. It is really important to restore a sense of community policing, so that people feel safe in their community and on their street, because that underpins the freedom that people need to live their life.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. When these achievements are reached, the impact on communities like mine will be profound. For too long, people have been told that government does not work. They need to understand that when government is done well, it can and will work. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the British people need these milestones for progress, after 14 years of milestones of failure?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. As I said in my statement, let us consider what the situation would be if we did not do these things. We would just carry on with the situation that we have, in which, for example, young people work harder and harder and think, "How will I ever get a home of my own?", and people waiting for NHS treatment are told that they might have to wait for 18 months or two years. That is too long to wait for treatment. That is why we put those things at the heart of the document today.

It will make a real difference to people's lives if we manage to meet the milestones. They are challenging, but doing this can help drive the system and ensure progress towards our goals.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): The NHS has long been a top issue raised by local residents when I have been out knocking on doors across the whole of Filton and Bradley Stoke, so I welcome not only the investment, but the reform alongside that, and these clear milestones for change, which are what the country voted to see. Will the Minister give a commitment, on behalf of the Government, that no matter the lack of support from the Conservative party, he will persevere with this, as that is what the country wants?

Pat McFadden: I can give my hon. Friend that commitment, and I can assure her of the passion that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care feels for this goal, for turning around the system and for reducing waiting lists and waiting times. He knows how important that is for patients, and for our goal of growing the economy, and that is why the goal is part of the document.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I welcome each and every one of the milestones, and the real, tangible difference that they will make to the lives of my residents in Rossendale and Darwen. Each is a crucial step in the process of mission delivery. I also welcome the recognition that to get them met, we need to do government differently. Devolution and a move away from command-and-control government represents a real opportunity to enable more effective and efficient delivery, and perhaps even restore some of the trust in politics that was so broken and destroyed by the Conservative party.

In Lancashire, we have been held back by an outdated two-tier local government system. Does the Minister agree that it is time for Lancashire leaders to come together to grasp the huge opportunity that devolution offers?

Pat McFadden: As I said, if the goals are to be reached, it will require reform of the state itself, and part of that is about local delivery. There has been a lot of innovation in recent years. We started devolution when we were last in power, and the Conservative party took it forward with the creation of a number of mayors around the country. There is further to go with that. Having mayors and strong local leaders as partners can really help us to deliver the goals set out in the document.

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. He has set out concrete, deliverable and measurable milestones against which the British public can judge us. What a stark contrast to Conservative Front-Bench Members, who still refuse even to acknowledge the Liz Truss economic disaster that was the mini-Budget, and to apologise for it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any sort of U-turn that sees the Conservatives backing our steps to restore economic stability is unlikely, and that they will continue to cling to the idea of the magic money tree?

Pat McFadden: The Conservatives did deliver some things. They delivered a huge economic crash, a Bank of England intervention in order to prop up the pension

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system, and significant increases in mortgage rates, which people are still paying today. The most important thing about defeat is to learn from it, and I have to say from observing the Conservative party that they are not yet doing that.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): The legacy of 14 years of the Conservatives in government and a century of Tory complacency in Hexham is seen in how police numbers in Prudhoe fell under the last Government, and indeed in Callerton and Throckley. They have also fallen in our most rural communities. Rural crime is unfortunately brought up with me regularly. That is an example of how the Conservative party has failed to understand the modern countryside. Will the Minister outline how this plan will make a measurable change for our rural communities, as well as towns like Prudhoe?

Pat McFadden: The goals in this document can make a real difference to rural communities. We know that many people in rural communities are worried about rural crime, so more neighbourhood policing can help them. We also know that many young people in rural communities are wondering how they will ever have a home of their own. That is why we support more house building, as well as shorter hospital waiting lists and neighbourhood policing teams, as set out in the document.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I am the last Member to be called, but I will try not to take too long. I welcome the scale of the ambition in the Secretary of State's statement, but I challenge what he said about there being only one millstone in the UK.

My residents in Edinburgh South West increasingly feel held back by our incoherent Scottish Government. Yesterday was a fine example of that. In the Scottish Parliament, the SNP Government set their Budget—one largely funded by the hard work of Scottish Labour MPs in this place, who secured the biggest ever settlement for Scotland. Meanwhile, SNP MPs in this place voted against our money-raising measures. They want to eat their cake and have it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Supplementary questions should be short and not a speech. Perhaps the hon. Member would like to come to the conclusion of his question.

Dr Arthur: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always good to be guided by you. The Secretary of State set out how living standards will increase right across the UK, and Scotland is part of that. How will he work with the Scottish Government and the incoherent SNP Government to do that?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that the recent devolution financial settlements were the biggest in real terms since devolution was introduced, as a consequence of the announcements made by the Labour Chancellor at the Budget. That provided the funding, and it is completely incoherent to welcome that funding—in fact, to run around saying that it will be spent on this and that—but then to vote against the revenue measures that contribute to it. If we want increased investment and boosted services, we must support the revenue-raising measures that make that possible; and then we have to combine investment with the reform necessary to deliver. That is the next step.

Backbench Business

Detained British Nationals Abroad

12.12 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned by the number of arbitrarily detained British nationals at risk of human rights abuses abroad and the apparent lack of active support for those detained; and calls on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to provide regular reports on when it last raised the cases of those people with its international counterparts.

I am enormously pleased that the Backbench Business Committee agreed to find sufficient time to debate this issue. Too often, the issue of British citizens detained abroad gets washed away in all the other debates, no matter who is in government. As I have said before, regardless of who is sitting on the Government Benches—be they Conservative, Labour or whatever—I tend to find myself in opposition on issues such as this, as do many Members here. We have serious concerns that the issue is not raised enough, and cases are locked behind a wall of silence. I want to change that today.

My intention is to call on the Government, first of all, to provide regular reports—something they never do—on when the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office last raised the cases of British nationals who are arbitrarily detained abroad and at risk of human rights abuses. Individuals detained abroad are particularly vulnerable to torture, ill treatment and other serious human rights violations from the moment that they are detained. At least 100 UK nationals are tortured or ill treated abroad every year. In 2023, the FCDO received 188 new allegations of torture and mistreatment from British nationals overseas. It goes on and on.

Arbitrary detention and hostage-taking are devastating, but are practised by a number of regimes, chief among those being Iran. That is devastating for the individuals affected and their families. Survivors bear the physical, psychological and socioeconomic scars of their captivity. Survivors' families also endure significant psychological distress, often facing vicarious trauma as they fight for their loved ones' release and feeling that they are fighting a losing battle against even the establishment here in the United Kingdom.

The support that the British Government can provide to their nationals in these harrowing circumstances is crucial. They are sometimes the only link between the individual and the outside world.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The right hon. Member mentioned support from the British Government. Does he agree that that support is not always as consistent across the globe as we might like and as many members of the public would imagine it to be? There is no guarantee or legal right imposed on the UK Government to do it in the way that there is, for example, on the American Government. Does he think that the situation is unsatisfactory and, if so, what does he think the Government should do about it?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I completely agree. I have no problem agreeing on this matter. It has been a long-standing issue for families and Members of Parliament that,

somehow, the FCDO puts a cloud of obscurity in the way of real knowledge about what is going on. For families, that can be incredibly difficult.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): The right hon. Member may be aware of the case of Alaa Abd el-Fattah, a British national who remains in an Egyptian prison. Like me, is he very concerned that Mr el-Fattah's mother, Laila Soueif, who is 68 years old, is now on the 67th day of a hunger strike? As I understand it, the Foreign Secretary last raised the case on 14 November. Does the right hon. Member agree that more needs to be done beyond just raising the case?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I absolutely agree. That case will be raised today. All of us who want to speak in the debate have agreed that we will make sure that individual cases are raised in detail. I will touch on some to summarise them, and I will detail a couple of them. The hon. Lady is quite right. What has happened is appalling, and we need to ensure that more is done—that is critical.

Those who fall prey to detentions are too often let down by British Governments. I say, without let or hindrance, that that includes the Conservative Government who were in office previously, the Labour Governments before that and the present Labour Government. I hope that that will now change.

The Foreign Secretary recently confirmed that there are 28,000 prisoners in the system, yet the Foreign Office refuses to disclose exactly how many are British nationals who are being arbitrarily detained. Why not? What is so ground-shaking about discovering who the British nationals are, for goodness' sake? I hope the Minister will agree that it is essential that the Government publish data on the number of British citizens who are arbitrarily detained or held hostage abroad. Sadly, there are British nationals in arbitrary detention in repressive countries all over the world. Quite often, we are not aware of them. As I said in response to the hon. Lady, those cases will be raised.

With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I remind the House that family members are watching this debate from the Gallery. I will quickly name them, if that is all right with everyone here. We are joined by Omar Robert Hamilton, Alaa Abd el-Fattah's cousin, and Sanaa Seif, Alaa's sister. We are joined by supporters and family members of Ryan Cornelius. I am deeply sorry that Ryan's wife, Heather Cornelius, is unable to join us today, but Ryan's brother-in-law, Chris Pagett, and his wife Diana are with us, as well as Ryan's sister-in-law, Wendy Thompson, and her husband David. Also sitting in the Gallery is Matthew Hedges, a victim of arbitrary detention in the United Arab Emirates, and Peter Humphrey, a former prisoner of China.

Too often, families feel that they are fighting two battles: one against the foreign state that has detained their loved one, and another against the UK Government, who do not seem to prioritise the case. I am deeply sorry that that should be the case, and today's debate is about, hopefully, sowing the seed of change.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): The right hon. Member mentioned the families who are here today to listen to this debate, and in doing so highlighted the impact on not just those detained or held hostage but their loved ones, friends and family. I take the opportunity

[Matthew Patrick]

to invite him to recognise the family and friends of British-linked hostages held in Gaza—Oded Lifschitz, Eli Sharabi, Avinatan Or and Emily Damari—and their cases.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I was going to say it, but as the hon. Member has raised it, I will do so now: we must not forget those hostages. What has happened to them is appalling, and he is right to raise it. Families across the UK listening to this debate will be appreciative of that.

A critical issue is the lack of a clear and proactive response strategy from the FCDO. There is no centralised approach for dealing with arbitrary detention cases, and that absence of structure adds to the stress for families, who feel unsupported and often ignored.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My right hon. Friend's point is surely the critical one. Traditionally, the best and the brightest went into the diplomatic service and the Foreign Office intake, but even the brightest people need to specialise if they are to do a good job. Given that so many people are being detained in this way, surely the answer is to have a small dedicated unit within the Foreign Office that can handle the co-ordination of a systematic response every time someone is arbitrarily detained abroad.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The point I am really getting at is that the days of the shifting jobs of generalists are long gone, I am afraid. I have often made the case, having run a Department, that the civil service and the Foreign Office need to catch up with what is happening outside. We need specialists in place, and we need that to be considered an important job.

In cases where British nationals are detained abroad, the families of those detained have often found the UK Government reluctant to act to prevent torture or to seek accountability where it occurs. If they are acting, they do not relay that to the families, so the families are left believing that nothing has happened, even if something has happened. For instance, when Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British-Iranian dual citizen, was detained in Iran, her family first raised allegations of torture with the FCDO in 2017. It was not until May 2021—following outside pressure from Redress and others, by way of a submission to the FCDO of a medical report as evidence of her severe suffering—that the then Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, an old colleague of ours, acknowledged that she had been a victim of torture. Why did it take so long? It seems to me that this is pointless.

In the case of Jagtar Singh Johal, a British national tortured by police in India, FCDO officials would only raise the allegations of torture with the Indian authorities once they had sought consent from him directly, which took two to three months. I know that the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) intends to speak about that case, but I just raise it generally as an illustration of what is going wrong.

Families of detainees face significant challenges in their engagement with the FCDO. Many report vague or inconsistent communication, which breeds mistrust. There is a critical need for a designated point of contact for families, as happens in the States, to ensure transparency

and accountability in the handling of cases. Without that, families feel abandoned by their own Government while simultaneously battling the detaining state with few tools.

The FCDO also lacks a consistent policy on the treatment of dual nationals, often citing states' refusal to recognise dual nationality as a barrier to action. That is a practical challenge, not a legal one, and it should not stop UK officials from attempting to access prisons or courts. When the Government fail to act, it risks sending a damaging message to dual nationals that they are less British and, by extension, less deserving of protection.

For instance, that reasoning was used very much in the case of Jimmy Lai, who is a British citizen. China decided, because it does not recognise dual nationality, to call him a dual national. He has never been a dual national, and I have lost count of the number of times that I have literally shouted at Government Ministers in Westminster Hall that he is not a dual national. When they got up to speak, they just said that he is a dual national. He has never been a dual national. He is a proud British citizen. He got into Hong Kong long before he was of an age to have a nationality in that sense or a passport. He has been a British national non-stop since then.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it does not matter whether someone is a dual national or not? If they are British, they are British and they are proud to be British. We should simply talk about them being British citizens, and not even bother talking about dual nationals.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I could not agree more with the right hon. Lady, and I welcome her to the debate as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. She is absolutely right, but the problem in this case is that dual nationality was used as an excuse for why the Government did not want to raise the matter, because China did not recognise that British citizenship. She is right that if someone is a British citizen, they are a British citizen, and the inside of the passport tells us why that is important. It seems to be ignored too often.

We know that sanctions are a vital tool for deterring and punishing state actors involved in arbitrary detention, yet that tool is often underutilised by UK Governments. I will touch on that later, because compared with the Americans, we fail to utilise it as a possible way to leverage changes to what is going on outside.

Another area of concern is the inconsistent application of Government policy regarding international legal standards. When the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box, will he confirm the Government's official definition of arbitrary detention? How does it align with international legal standards, such as those established by the United Nations working group on arbitrary detention? I have never been able to get an answer out of any Foreign Minister yet, but I ask him, given his experience in the Department, to kindly find out the definition for us and let us know.

I said I would raise specific cases, so I will run through some of the list. Ryan Cornelius is a British citizen unjustly detained in Dubai for more than 16 years, originally in isolation. His case represents an egregious violation of human rights and, importantly, of due

process. He was arrested in 2008 on false fraud allegations relating to a \$500 million Dubai Islamic Bank loan, and his 10-year sentence was extended by 20 years in 2018 through retroactive application of a new law without proper legal proceedings. The bank seized assets worth \$1.6 billion from Mr Cornelius, far exceeding the original loan amount. The UN working group on arbitrary detention has ruled categorically that Ryan's detention is arbitrary and in violation of international law, calling for his immediate release and compensation. However, there still appears to be FCDO resistance.

Mohammed Ibrahim Al Shaibani became DIB chairman shortly before Mr Cornelius's arrest. He appears to have orchestrated Mr Cornelius's continued detention and the asset seizure. Mr Al Shaibani holds influential positions in Dubai's Government, indicating an abuse of power. Mr Cornelius is now 70 and has suffered severe health issues in prison, including tuberculosis that went untreated for 18 months. Meanwhile, his seized property, originally claimed to be "worthless" by the bank, is now being redeveloped as a luxury project called The Acres, worth, strangely, \$3 billion.

Under the last Government, I raised Mr Cornelius's case finally with the former Prime Minister Lord Cameron while he was Foreign Secretary. Subsequently, he engaged personally in seeking clemency for Mr Cornelius. He met the family, raised the case with the UAE Foreign Minister and wrote personally to the ruler of Dubai. That was a first, because everybody else seemed to have shied away from this one, not wanting to upset the UAE, it appears.

To be fair to Lord Cameron, he got the issue and he started to tackle it, and that was important. The present Foreign Secretary, who replaced Lord Cameron in July, failed to raise Mr Cornelius's case in his recent visit to the UAE in September, which perplexes me, given that it had already been raised. That just encourages a country like the UAE to carry on and to double down. I do not understand why.

In response to my written question to the Foreign Secretary, I received this answer:

"The Foreign Secretary raised the importance of consular issues, although not this specific case, during his visit to the UAE on 5 September and first meeting with Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed."

I understand that on Sunday, the Prime Minister is expected to visit the UAE and, I think, Saudi Arabia. Will the Minister make it clear to the Prime Minister—I believe this is the view that will be expressed in this debate—that he must not only raise the case, which is important, but demand categorically that Ryan Cornelius is released into the hands of his family without delay? I hope that whatever is summarised from his meetings, that specific issue is there in black and white for this House to record.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) raised Mr Cornelius's case several weeks ago in an Adjournment debate, when he was reassured by the Minister for Development, the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), that:

"the case will continue to be raised with the UAE authorities",—
[*Official Report*, 19 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 241.]

and yet it was not. If Ministers give assurances in this House, Madam Deputy Speaker, do you not agree that they should actually back up those assurances? I wonder if the Minister present will explain why that was the case.

Although individual cases are raised with international counterparts, often no concrete action follows. I hope the Minister agrees that once a case is raised, it will be followed up. In Mr Cornelius's case, I believe the path could culminate in sanctions, so there is a process. It is clear that raising the case with the UAE authorities has yet to produce a result. What we want is a real record that the authorities are now being warned that should they fail to take action, individual sanctions under the Magnitsky rules will follow.

Will the Minister therefore now look to imposing targeted Magnitsky sanctions on those responsible for Mr Cornelius's arbitrary detention and asset seizures? There are a number of them: His Excellency Mohammed Al Shaibani, who was the chairman of the DIB; Yahya Saeed Ahmad Nasser Lootah, the vice chairman of the board of directors; Hamad Abdulla Rashed Obaid Al Shamsi, who was a board member; Ahmad Mohammad Saeed Bin Humaidan, a board member; Abdul Aziz Ahmed Rahma Mohamed Al Muhairi, a board member; Dr Hamad Buamim, a board member; Javier Marin Romano, a board member; Bader Saeed Abdulla Hareb Al Mheiri, a board member; and Dr Cigdem Kogar, a board member. All were involved in this case; all are eligible for Magnitsky sanctions. Mr Cornelius should now be released immediately, or sanctions, I believe, should follow.

I will deal reasonably quickly with the case of Jimmy Lai, and then I will give way to others in the debate. Jimmy Lai is a renowned pro-democracy campaigner, journalist and media owner. I wear the badge to free him with pride. This man has been treated abominably—he is a hero, and we should recognise that. He is 77 and a proud British citizen. He is also a Catholic, and has been denied the normal communion that he would expect as a believer in Catholicism; it has been shut off from him for a long time, which matters a great deal to him. He is a prisoner of conscience. He could have fled Hong Kong after the Sino-British agreement was trashed, but he chose to stay. Why? He wanted to set an example for the many who could not flee and who were going to be arrested—that he was not going to run away just because he had money. This is a brave man.

Mr Lai is currently on trial in Hong Kong for alleged offences against national security and alleged sedition, said to arise out of his work as a newspaper publisher and his pro-democracy activism. His case is emblematic of the crackdown on the media in Hong Kong, civil society and the rule of law. On 15 November 2024, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention published its opinion that Jimmy Lai is being unlawfully and arbitrarily detained and called for his immediate release. The working group found multiple violations of Mr Lai's rights and freedoms, expressed alarm at his prolonged detention in solitary confinement and stressed that he should not be on trial at all.

This case, I say to the Minister, is very urgent. Mr Lai has been arbitrarily detained in prolonged solitary confinement for nearly four years, often in insufferable heat during the summer months. Securing Jimmy Lai's release requires effective action across the Government to bring him home and reunite him with his family in London. At the moment, he is bravely giving evidence in his trial—at which, by the way, a number of Members present have been named. I have been apparently named. I am already sanctioned by the Chinese, but I have also

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

been named as being party to the case being brought against him. I have to say publicly that I have, sadly, never met Jimmy Lai or corresponded with him. I wish that I had. I wish that I could tell him what a brave man he really is. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Will the Minister outline today what urgent steps the Foreign Office is taking to secure Jimmy Lai's release?

I remind the Minister and others that what we see in front of us now is a rise in hostage taking by nation states. The biggest abuser of this process is, of course, Iran. I worry about this abuse growing more and more in Iran. In January 2023—we must not forget about this—Iran executed British-Iranian national Alireza Akbari, who was arrested, charged and executed on spying charges, which he denied and which were totally untrue. It was the first execution of a dual national since the 1980s. Only four months later, the Iranian authorities executed a second dual national, Swedish-Iranian Habib Chaab. In October 2024, it executed a third dual national, German-Iranian Jamshid Sharmahd. At least one more dual national, Swedish-Iranian Ahmad Reza Djalia, has been sentenced to death since 2023.

I conclude on the simple basis, as I raised at the beginning, that we can no longer go along with the idea that we somehow lose influence if we raise these cases publicly. We can no longer go on with this idea that we can manage a generalist approach to this in the Foreign Office. As has already been raised, we need a much more professional, deliberate and permanent status in the Department to deal with this matter.

Finally, we have in our hands the Magnitsky sanctions legislation. With the case of Ryan Cornelius and others, it is high time that those who were party to the arrest and incarceration of innocent British citizens find themselves facing Magnitsky sanctions, unless they recant and that individual is released. That at least gives us a tool. I ask the Government to get to the Dispatch Box, when the time comes, and commit to that process.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

12.37 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing today's incredibly important debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us the time to debate it.

Throughout my time in Parliament, I have seen far too many sad and desperate families protesting outside the Foreign Office; going on hunger strike; standing for election against the Prime Minister, as one of my constituents did in support of Andy Tsege; singing Christmas carols, as I did outside the Foreign Office in support of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe; and organising petitions. They do everything they can to get their loved ones back, believing—rightly or wrongly—that the Foreign Office genuinely does not seem to be doing enough, and does not seem to care.

The public understandably have huge amounts of sympathy for these individuals and for the families of those who have been arrested, and I believe the standing of the Foreign Office is undermined as a result. We are told that the Foreign Office does everything it can, but

it needs to do most of that quietly and behind closed doors, and the difficulty is that it is hard for some families to see the difference between doing nothing and perhaps doing a great deal. That is the dilemma. When those families see detained people from other countries being released—whether those are Canadians, Americans, French or Germans—and the Brits are not, they do wonder whether it is because the Foreign Office is simply not doing its job properly. That is the issue.

The Minister will be assured that I do not want to spend all the time I have in this debate just moaning about the Foreign Office. I have some positive suggestions, which I hope will be taken seriously, because I believe that this is an issue on which we could do much better. There are some ideas that are currently circulating, and they are not all mine—I am stealing other peoples' ideas and trying to put them together in order genuinely to try to help.

The first of those ideas is that we have to put this in context. There are now many more Brits travelling all over the world and going to all sorts of places—the numbers are going up all the time—and that is to be encouraged. Of course, while more Brits are travelling around the world, we are also in a world where fewer and fewer countries pay much attention to anything that might be seen in any sense as any form of rule of law, so Brits get themselves into terrible trouble and some of them are arbitrarily detained. As I say, I am stealing other people's ideas, so I want genuinely to compliment the previous members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The problems of arbitrary detention and how to solve people being detained abroad are complex and cases that many people have worked on, so the work of the previous Select Committee, very ably chaired by the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), needs to be mentioned in dispatches. I am proud to be the second female Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I hope that my Committee can meet the standards set by the hon. Lady.

The previous Committee's report on state hostage taking made recommendations which, had they been implemented by the previous Government, would have been very effective in cases that have been raised today. Chief among them were the recommendation to formalise and publish the criteria for determining whether the detention of a British national by a foreign state is considered arbitrary, and the recommendation to establish a senior position in the Foreign Office solely committed to arbitrary and complex detentions.

There are examples of criteria: the United Nations has criteria and the Americans have criteria. They are different criteria, but they are very interesting and I certainly hope there is someone in the Foreign Office at this moment looking at potential criteria and looking to draft some. I agree with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green that it is about time we had established criteria, so there is a little more transparency on this issue.

It was very disappointing that a number of the previous Government's Foreign Secretaries disregarded and kicked into the long grass the recommendations set out by the Committee. It does not have to be that way. I am encouraged that the Labour party has, since October last year, been committed to having a special envoy for UK citizens seized abroad. Last week, in front of my Committee, with Sebastien Lai and Sanaa Seif sitting

behind him, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary reconfirmed his commitment to that. I am encouraged to see that the Labour manifesto went further than the previous Foreign Affairs Committee's recommendations on consular access. Labour pledged to ensure the legal right to consular access and I certainly hope the Government will deliver on that, but we must act quickly because the likes of Alaa and Jimmy and their families cannot, and should not, have to wait any longer. I therefore call on the Government to be clearer in their timelines for implementing those promises.

Having thought about that, and having met families of a number of those detained, I think we should institute an office in the Foreign Office that is committed to arbitrary detention which establishes proper criteria for categorising someone as wrongfully detained. As soon as someone is arrested, the local consular office should inform the Foreign Office, which should apply the criteria to the case and make recommendations to the Foreign Secretary. It would then be up to the Foreign Secretary to decide whether that case would be given the benefit of the special envoy, who would then take leadership of the case. There will not be many of them, but those determined as victims of arbitrary detention will be very special cases, and will have the sorts of resources and focus that they need and deserve. It will be the job of the envoy to get their prisoner out, first and foremost, using all the levers of the state. They should be given permission to think laterally and be creative, and to think of every way we can ensure we get our British citizens out. It will also be their job to keep in close, active and respectful contact with the families, so that they know what is going on.

I know that a number of people have concerns. I have heard the counter-arguments and I understand them, but if we look at what the Americans are doing, many of those concerns may be allayed. Let us look at what is going on at the moment in the United States. I am grateful to the officials from the United States Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs who spoke with me at some length yesterday. I found the conversation I had with them as enlightening as I did inspiring. I want to go into that in some depth, because I want to enlighten and inspire Members who are listening to the debate today, so that they will agree with me and continue to put pressure on the Foreign Office to get on with things.

The office is based in the US State Department. It deals with about 35 to 45 wrongful detention cases a year, as well as the more black-and-white cases of US citizens taken hostage by the likes of ISIS. The office is responsible, in collaboration with other Departments, for making recommendations, on the basis of 11 criteria, on whether an individual's detention is arbitrary. The recommendation is made to the Secretary of State, who remains responsible for signing off each individual case. It is a civil servant-led unit that applies the criteria, but with ministerial oversight.

The team is about 30 people. There are experts in negotiation, experts on a specific region and experts in supporting families. Within those teams are people whose sole role is family engagement, including trained psychologists. In much the same way as the police in this country, where victims of crime will have a dedicated family liaison officer in really serious cases, one main function of the office is to support the family. In our

discussions yesterday, they told me that within hours of a US citizen being categorised as wrongfully detained, the special envoy calls the family of the individual to introduce themselves and explain the next steps. The envoy or his staff then remain the direct contact with family members, providing them with regular updates and answering questions they may have, including answering the phone at eleven o'clock at night to calm down a parent who fears they will never see their child again.

We need to do things better. The Foreign Office's communication with families is not good. In my belief, it is clearly inadequate. As Laila Soueif told the media, she thought she was being ignored by the Foreign Secretary since he had taken up the post. I should make it clear that I am glad that he has since had time to see the family, but the message cannot be sent out that the Foreign Secretary is simply too busy to meet detainees' families. It makes those families feel ignored and feel that the Government do not really care. The reason that families want to see the Foreign Secretary is that that is the best way for them to get reassurance that the Foreign Office is paying attention. They should not need to see the Foreign Secretary if they are being looked after properly by a specially dedicated team whose only job, other than ensuring that the family is reassured and kept in the loop on what is going on, is to get their loved one out.

I know the Foreign Office remains committed to the release of all arbitrarily detained individuals, but even the perception that they are not doing all they can to get someone released is not only incredibly distressing to a family who have already suffered such unimaginable pain, but damages the credibility of the diplomatic service, the Foreign Office and the Government as a whole. None of us should want that. Quite simply, we should not look like we are incompetent, incapable or uncaring.

I was also told that the moment a Secretary of State declares a case to be one of arbitrary detention, the SPEHA team kicks the whole Government system in motion to work on the case. They work across Government Departments, as well as with Congress, external organisations, private industry and the media, immediately gathering a strong team effort to begin putting sustained pressure on to the country holding their citizen.

A key point that struck me from my conversation with them is that without an office solely focused on these cases, the team simply does not come together. In my discussions with British detainees and campaign groups, I have heard one major concern for years, which is the UK Government's lack of cohesion on these cases. Let me give a recent example. Why did the Department for Business and Trade organise an industry delegation to Cairo in June 2024, and UK Export Finance help host an Egypt-UK investment opportunity forum in London in September, all while the Egyptian Government had one of our citizens, Alaa Abd el-Fattah, wrongfully held in prison without consular access? Who thought that through? Did anybody think that through? Or was it one of those things that, because there is not a focus, just happened? I suspect that it is the latter and that is why we have to change.

I am fully committed to this Government's rigorous focus on growing the economy, and I support the building of a prosperous UK-Egypt trade partnership. It is so important that we get investment into this country. But

[Emily Thornberry]

I wonder what mixed signals we are sending. What leverage do we have when one Department is criticising a Government for detaining our citizen, while another Department is also trying to encourage British businesses to invest and form partnerships in that country? What message is that sending to a detainee's family?

When I raised this question with the Americans, and asked them, "Do you not step on the toes of ambassadors? How do you not send out mixed messages?", they were keen to stress that it actually made life easier for the ambassadors, because they were there as the hard cops. They were there as almost a self-contained unit. Their job was to get people out, and that is what they did: they pulled the levers together in order to ensure that they did. They described ambassadors as their secret weapon, experts on the country who knew the key players and, most important, knew what ideas would work. They said that they were there to remove the "boulder" when ambassadors have to deal with cases of this kind, because it takes up so much bandwidth that the poor ambassadors cannot deal with other issues. Obviously they will still give advice, but there is that special team to deal with arbitrarily detained people so that the ambassadors can get on with our financial relationship with Europe. I believe that if we had a similar unit in the Foreign Office, the Foreign Office would be more effective, and it would be of great assistance to the Foreign Secretary, who cannot give his full attention to these uniquely complex cases. It would also give the families a senior point of contact on which they could rely.

The American unit has the power to impose specific sanctions, through the Levinson Act, that target those who are responsible for, or complicit in, the unlawful or wrongful detention of US nationals. We should be making better use of our sanctions policy to deter the wrongful detention of British people, or as a tool to apply pressure to those who hold British nationals. I have even heard stories of jailers being sanctioned. This can be done by those who are sufficiently ambitious, can think laterally and have the necessary focus. If we had better parliamentary scrutiny of our sanctions policy, perhaps we would make better use of it, but that is a debate for another day. Perhaps we simply do not know how the Government decide what cases warrant sanctions.

However, the whole-government approach, using the embassies in the country, the regional experts in the State Department and the negotiation experts in SPEHA, strikes me as absolutely the right approach. I think it is a lesson that we should learn from the Americans, and I hope that the Foreign Office takes this recommendation seriously, because it is about time we changed things. We cannot go on like this. I do not want to see anyone else outside the Foreign Office starving themselves in the hope that, somehow or other, that will help their son or daughter to come back to this country, so I say, "Please focus on this, and please sort it out."

12.52 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing the debate, and on the tremendous amount of work that he has done in this area. It is also a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Islington and Finsbury

(Emily Thornberry), the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which I have been delighted to join as a new member in the last few weeks. I am pleased to be able to say that I thought she made an excellent contribution, and I agreed with every word of it. I also join her in recognising the amount of work that was done by the previous Committee in the last Parliament, under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), who continues to chair the all-party parliamentary group on arbitrary detention and hostage affairs and to take a strong interest in the subject. The APPG produced an extremely good report, although I have to say that the Government response was a bit disappointing, so it is right for us to press these matters further today.

I myself chair the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom. Media freedom is also under huge pressure across the globe: far too many journalists have died in pursuit of their profession, or are currently in prison. According to the latest report, 546 journalists and media workers are detained as of today. The UK has rightly championed the cause of media freedom, especially in the Foreign Office, and we need to go on making that case. It is doubly concerning that some of the journalists who are in prison are British.

My right hon. Friend has mentioned a few specific cases, and I want to do the same. Both he and I were privileged to attend the Magnitsky awards dinner a couple of weeks ago. Bill Browder, now Sir William Browder, has done a huge amount, initially to support prisoners in Russia and to bring sanctions against those responsible for the death of Sergei Magnitsky, but he has widened his campaign to highlight cases of detained political prisoners around the world.

In respect of the first case I shall mention, I am able to congratulate the Government on the part that they played. At the dinner, it was a privilege to meet Vladimir Kara-Murza. I have raised his case in the House, and many other people have done so over the last few years. We were seriously worried, particularly after the death of Alexei Navalny, that Kara-Murza would be next. There was certainly evidence to suggest that he would have died had he remained in prison, and I know that the British Government, along with the American Government and others, did a great deal to obtain his release through a prisoner swap that took place a few months ago. I have some concerns about the concept of prisoner swaps, because there is always the risk that carrying out a swap to obtain the release of innocent people in return for sending back people who are certainly not innocent—which is what happened in this instance—simply encourages the detention of other innocents in the future. In Kara-Murza's case, however, I think that had he not been released he would have died. The release at the same time of Evan Gershkovich, an American journalist, was clearly another strong priority.

It is welcome that here is a case in which we have actually obtained the release of a British national, but sadly a number of others are still in prison. My right hon. Friend mentioned several of them, but I will start, as he did, with the case of Jimmy Lai, a remarkably brave man who is now detained under the draconian national security law that has been introduced in Hong Kong. It is noticeable that, just two decades ago, Hong Kong was 18th in the world rankings for press freedom; it is now 135th. Jimmy Lai was a publisher who worked

to uphold freedom of speech; he was imprisoned as a result, and his health is now under severe pressure after four years in solitary confinement. I have met his son Sebastien, as has the Foreign Secretary, and we will continue to raise his case here until he is released.

There has also been reference to Alaa Abd el-Fattah. Like a number of other Members, I was able to speak to his mother, Laila Soueif, very recently. She is on a hunger strike to obtain his release. He has been convicted of spreading false news, and has been a long-standing target of the regime. It is notable that, in opposition, the Foreign Secretary was very vocal in condemning the Egyptian Government in respect of his case, and actually called on the Government to deny the Egyptian ambassador access to Whitehall until he was released. I have not observed the Egyptian ambassador being denied access, and Alaa Abd el-Fattah is still in prison. I therefore ask the Foreign Secretary to reflect on what he said in opposition, and to strengthen the progress that we are making.

The third case that I want to mention is that of a British journalist who is not in prison. Clare Rewcastle Brown, an independent journalist, has been the target of abusive lawsuits in Malaysia since she exposed corruption there. This year she was sentenced, in absentia, to two years in prison on a bogus defamation charge, having not even been told that she had been put on trial. Obviously she is anxious to appeal, but she has been told that if she is to appeal, she must attend the court in Malaysia in person. Very understandably, she is extremely reluctant to do so, given the amount of personal risk. The Government, as far as I am aware, have not commented on her case, and she has struggled to obtain support from the Foreign Office, so I ask the Minister specifically to look into her case as well.

There is also the case of Gubad Ibadoghlu, an Azeri activist but one who was a senior adviser at the London School of Economics. He returned to visit his family in Azerbaijan in 2023, and was promptly arrested and locked up. His family were quite badly assaulted during his arrest, and my right hon. Friend and I, and any others who were at that dinner a couple of weeks ago, will have heard his daughter speaking about that and about her fears for his health. He, too, is seriously ill and needs assistance.

Sir Julian Lewis: On that point, it is worth mentioning that Dr Ibadoghlu's son visited Parliament a few weeks ago, when we had an opportunity to discuss his case. He has a close association with part of the University of London, and he was given assurances that it would be safe for him to return to visit his ailing mother. Subsequent to his arrest, a PhD student, whose name is Fazil Gasimov, was extradited from Turkey and tortured into giving evidence against Dr Ibadoghlu, and he has felt it necessary to go on hunger strike. There seems to be a huge effort by the Azeri Government to persecute people, even at the same time as a COP meeting was scheduled to take place in their capital.

Sir John Whittingdale: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend, who makes the point that I was just coming to. As the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee pointed out, all too often one part of Government may be pressing for somebody's release while other parts of Government seem to have a normal relationship with the foreign Government responsible and do little.

We managed to send many delegates to COP29—I cannot remember how many there were, but it was certainly in three figures—but I would be interested to know how many of them actually raised with the Government in Baku the case of Dr Ibadoghlu.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I and a number of others wrote to the Prime Minister before he departed for Baku, urging him to raise that case. I understand from the Foreign Office that he did not raise it with his hosts.

Sir John Whittingdale: I am very disappointed to hear that but, sadly, not surprised. I think I added my name to the letter that my right hon. Friend sent.

Sir Julian Lewis: In fairness to the Government, I have reason to believe that one of the Foreign Office Ministers was very concerned about the case. I think there is a high probability that it may have been raised quietly, if not publicly.

Sir John Whittingdale: Let us not argue about whether or not it was raised. Let us agree that what we should do is continue to raise it with the Government of Azerbaijan until Dr Ibadoghlu is released.

The final case that I must mention, given that it was raised, quite rightly, by the hon. Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick), is that of Emily Damari, one of the hostages being held in Gaza, who is a British citizen. She is 28 and has been held for 425 days. Her mother is obviously deeply anxious to know that she is still alive, so the Government must do everything possible to try to obtain her release. I know that other Members intend to raise other cases. It is sad that so many British citizens are detained arbitrarily on trumped-up charges around the world, and that this debate is so vital and necessary.

I will finish by endorsing some of the recommendations made by the Foreign Affairs Committee in the last Parliament, which have been echoed by its current Chair. A legal right to consular access is very important, and is something that the Labour party said it would bring in. We raised that legal right with the Foreign Secretary the other day, and I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that the Government still intend to introduce it.

I agree with hon. Members including the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee that the establishment of a separate directorate for arbitrary and complex detentions within the FCDO would be a really valuable addition. There is confusion at the moment, because all too often we are told that cases are being pursued, but nothing happens. Unfortunately, with the single exception of Vladimir Kara-Murza, all too many of those cases involve British nationals who continue to be unfairly and unjustly imprisoned, sometimes at risk to their lives. I look forward to the Minister's response on those points.

1.4 pm

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this debate, and on continuing to be a discomfort in the *derrière* for successive Governments on these issues.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) talked about the brightest and the best going into the Foreign Office, so I will begin by recognising

[Blair McDougall]

the unfairness of this debate. We will all stand up and talk about the worst failings of the Foreign Office, and I recognise that the debate will be responded to by a Minister who represents some of the best efforts of civil servants, who go into incredibly dangerous and difficult circumstances to try to serve our constituents. I want to put that on the record.

There is a lot of talk in this Chamber about the legacies that this Government have inherited, and it is good that we are talking about one of the worst ones: our country's record of securing the release of those who have been arbitrarily detained overseas. I will come to some of the policy issues that other Members have touched on, but I will deal first with the principle behind such cases.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote:

"To sin by silence, when we should protest,
Makes cowards out of men."

What is true of individuals is also true of nations. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), spoke about the example of the US, which is relevant here. When other countries' citizens are held unjustly, it is treated as an affront, an injury to all and a national slap in the face. Yes, quiet negotiation takes place politely behind the scenes on behalf of those countries' prisoners, but alongside that polite and patient diplomacy is their citizens' full-throated outrage.

I know that the staff working on this issue in the Foreign Office care deeply about it, but the right hon. Members for Chingford and Woodford Green and for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) both raised the case of Jimmy Lai. We have to ask why Canada was successful in securing the release of the two Michaels, and how Australia secured the release of journalist Cheng Lai. Just last week, the Americans secured the release of three more of their citizens, yet Jimmy Lai, who is a British citizen and one of us, and who has been arbitrarily detained in solitary confinement for nearly four years, has not been freed. We could talk about Jagtar Singh Johal, Alaa Abd el-Fattah and so many others.

Our first responsibility as a Parliament, a Government and a country is to be publicly, vocally and unanimously furious about this issue. Everything else follows from the righteous anger that we should all feel on behalf of our citizens who are rotting in foreign jails. That anger should drive us to ask what is behind the failure of British diplomacy in the past. A lack of strategy is certainly part of the answer.

Like the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I was encouraged by the noises that the Foreign Secretary made last week about making good on his promises, both on the issue of a special envoy and on the right to consular access. I welcome the Government's commitment to step up the engagement on these cases, but that needs to be part of an entirely new approach. I am not naive: I know that it is only because we are having conversations with foreign Governments about trade that we are able to get in the room and discuss our citizens who have been unjustly detained. Indeed, when I was an adviser in the Foreign Office, the role of Minister for trade and human rights was a stand-alone Cabinet position.

Because I believe we must make deals around the world—our constituents' standard of living depends on it—I question whether our current policymaking framework

on arbitrary detention can ever deliver the kind of response that we would all expect if we found ourselves in a prison cell in one of the darker corners of the world. For me, this is about the balance we strike between charming and chastising those we are negotiating with. I wonder whether our current approach to those who are arbitrarily detained makes it inevitable that attempts to secure the release of our people become either a prologue or an epilogue to the main story, which is one of securing our economic self-interest. Are we sending our representatives into these negotiations with red lines that those on the other side of the table know are written in pencil rather than in pen?

After 16 years in a Dubai jail, Ryan Cornelius has had more time than anyone to contemplate that tension. He shared with me a letter he has written to the Prime Minister ahead of the Prime Minister's trip to the Gulf on behalf of the UK, in which he identifies the inherent challenge in diplomacy I describe:

"Making it clear to your interlocutors that there can be no normal relationship with a friendly country which treats our citizens in this way may be an uncomfortable thing for you to do on this visit...if you look the other way in the interest of sealing a few deals you will have diminished this country's standing in the eyes of the rest of the world."

For me, Mr Cornelius's letter gets to the heart of the matter. In asking our delegations and diplomats to balance arbitrary detention against trade outcomes, the risk is that they will leave those rooms having failed to achieve either objective.

If the arbitrary imprisonment and mistreatment of our citizens is not a red line, what is? If it is a red line, it cannot be something that the people we send into these rooms might have to give up in order to secure other Government priorities. The release of our people must be understood by those on the other side of the table as non-negotiable.

That is why it is essential that any special envoy we appoint has the power, the status and the degree of independence from Ministers to make it an immutable principle not just that the policy on the release of hostages will not be sacrificed for other priorities, but that it cannot be sacrificed for other priorities.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury, the Chair of the Select Committee, was far too delicate, perhaps not wanting to appear engaged in a power grab, when she said that this is a debate for another time, but we have to debate the fact that other jurisdictions place the power for designating state hostages, or for applying sanctions in response to such cases, in the hands of the legislature.

The value of such an approach is that it allows the Executive and their diplomats to honestly say in those negotiating rooms that they cannot separate their wider relationship with a country from the mistreatment of citizens by its Government. I know that the suggestion of losing such power would be greeted with horror in the corridors of King Charles Street, but we cannot simply continue with the current model, which has left British citizens in jail.

As well as greater independence in policymaking, there should also be a degree of automaticity in our policy response. As has been suggested by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, when an individual is designated as being arbitrarily detained, there has to be a consistent application of Magnitsky sanctions. This would not only provide an incentive to

release the British citizens already held, as it would hold perpetrators to account, but it would also act as a disincentive to those who might target our people in the future. Inconsistent action in these cases simply emboldens those regimes and makes our citizens less safe.

Finally, we have to act in concert with like-minded countries that are similarly committed to the rule of law. Recent years have seen the erosion of norms around arbitrary detention by autocracies that are increasingly working in concert with each other. Only co-ordinated action by democracies, and by those committed to the rule of law, can help recreate a global order in which such actions are deemed universally unacceptable.

There is no cause more urgent than ensuring the liberty and freedom of our own citizens. I commend the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate.

1.14 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I, too, wish to thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this debate. It is heartening to see that finally, the plight of arbitrarily detained UK nationals has been given long-overdue attention.

For transparency, I put on record that I am vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on arbitrary detention and hostage affairs, which is brilliantly chaired by the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), who I know well from my days on the Foreign Affairs Committee. She is ably supported by Baroness Kennedy and the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca). The APPG gives the families of those held abroad a voice and an opportunity to tell their story directly to Members of both Houses. Although people's stories differ markedly in the circumstances of their detention, there is a striking similarity in how they feel about how they have been treated, and about being let down by successive United Kingdom Governments. Following the APPG's inaugural meeting, we launched an inquiry on why that perception exists among those who are or have been arbitrarily detained and their families, giving them a voice that they have hitherto simply not had. I put on record my sincere thanks to Emily Foale of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, which provides the APPG's secretariat and has been the driving force behind our inquiry. I urge all Members and Ministers to read the report when it is published.

At our first evidence session, we heard from Jimmy Lai's son Sebastien, and his lawyer Caoilfhionn Gallagher KC, as well as from Ambassador James Cunningham, the former US consul general to Hong Kong. I know that they will be listening to today's debate and will be extremely grateful to every single Member who raises Jimmy's case this afternoon.

Our second evidence session, held last week, was devoted to the case of Alaa Abd el-Fattah, the British Egyptian dual national who has spent most of the last decade in an Egyptian prison for his writings on democracy and human rights. Alaa became a British national in 2021 through his mother, who was born in London. However, the Egyptian authorities have refused to recognise his UK nationality and have therefore denied him the UK consular access to which he is absolutely entitled.

Alaa was due to finish his latest five-year sentence on 29 September, but in an unprecedented twist and a clear violation of both international and Egyptian domestic

law, the authorities in Cairo refused to release him, declaring that the two-and-a-bit years that he spent in pre-trial detention would not count towards his sentence, and that he will be kept in prison until 2027. In protest, as we have heard, his 68-year-old mother, Laila Soueif, began a hunger strike. Today marks the 67th day of her hunger strike. I am delighted that Laila's daughter and Alaa's cousin Omar are in the Gallery. Such is their determination that Laila and Omar attended our second inquiry session last week to give their account of what is happening to Alaa. They feel that he has been let down by successive British Governments. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) has secured an Adjournment debate on this topic today, and I am sure that he will build a formidable case for the UK Government doing much more to secure Alaa's release. Rather than making an identical contribution to the hon. Gentleman's, I will use my time to share some of what Alaa's mother and cousin said to our inquiry last week.

As I have said, one of the biggest blows to the family was Egypt's decision not to release Alaa when his sentence was spent. When I asked the family how they thought the UK Government had reacted, Alaa's mother said:

"I got the impression that they hadn't registered the fact that Alaa had actually finished his sentence, even though I made sure to notify the British Government two months before...it was as if they hadn't actually registered the significance of this date."

Alaa's cousin Omar added:

"On July the 8th, I sent an email congratulating the Foreign Secretary on his appointment...and then saying the fear now was that the Egyptian Government wasn't going to release him".

He continued:

"Then, on the 25th of September, the Foreign Secretary met with the Egyptian Foreign Secretary for the first time publicly, and there was a picture of them smiling together... four days before the release date on 29th of September."

It really is not a good look for the Foreign Secretary to have posed for photographs with his Egyptian counterpart four days before a UK national—a human rights activist—was due to be released from prison, and after being warned that moves were afoot to detain him illegally.

Alaa's mother says, "we warned them". She said:

"We did warn them that it might happen, when we warned them that this date was coming up".

When asked about Alaa's reaction to all this, she said:

"He is disappointed very much by the behaviour of the British Government. You sort of expect the Egyptian government to do atrocious things. The fact that the British Government swallows them is not good."

Much of the family's criticism of successive UK Governments relates to the way that the same approach is taken time and again, regardless of who is in office. As Laila said,

"Four successive UK Prime Ministers, including Keir Starmer, have called for Alaa's release, but none have taken any action beyond 'raising the case'."

She is absolutely right; that is a very valid point. The impression, rightly or wrongly, is that awkward human rights conversations are had, and there is much shuffling of feet and a few embarrassed platitudes are exchanged, before the discussion on trade takes place. One has to wonder how far that observation is from reality.

What the families want—not just Alaa's family, but all the families we have spoken to—is a "whole government" approach, not just to securing Alaa's release, but to

[Brendan O'Hara]

ensuring that if something like this happens again, any regime arbitrarily detaining a UK national will understand that there will be serious consequences. They want the UK to send a clear signal that normal bilateral relationships will not apply. We have to make those relationships a lot more difficult, and be clear that there are certain things that the UK Government can do but will not do, and can give but will not give, because of the regime's behaviour.

In the case of Egypt, that "whole government" approach would include changing the travel advice, and warning UK nationals travelling to Egypt that consular assistance cannot be guaranteed if a citizen is arrested. As former British diplomat James Lynch told our inquiry last week,

"The US Embassy has on its advice, a warning that it may have a limited ability to provide consular services in case of arrest or detention."

More than 100 Members of both Houses wrote to the Government to suggest that they do the same, because tourism from the United Kingdom makes up 1% of Egyptian GDP. The Egyptians look closely at FCDO travel advice, and they would certainly take notice of UK travel advice if it changed to be in line with what the Americans have done.

As we have heard many times this afternoon, and as we have heard from the families, the UK has leverage, but unlike other countries, it is reluctant or unwilling to use it to secure the release of arbitrarily detained nationals. If the UK is to be taken seriously in this arena, it will have to use leverage and adopt a "whole government" approach, which includes trade.

People in Cairo believe that there is an Egypt-UK trade summit in the pipeline. The UK trade envoy recently visited Egypt, and there was a significant trade delegation from Egypt to the UK in September, which included the Ministers for finance and trade, as well as the deputy governor of the central bank. Was Alaa's case raised? I strongly suspect not, but it could and should have been. Was the Egyptian ambassador summoned by the FCDO when Alaa's release date was changed? He should have been, but I strongly suspect that he was not.

In short, Alaa and his family feel badly let down by this and previous UK Governments. In opposition, the now Government said all the right things, but when in power, they have proven to be just as ineffective as the last Government. I have no doubt that the Minister and the Foreign Secretary are sincere in what they have said, so that tells me that there is something fundamentally wrong with the system. That system might work for Government, but it does not work for people in their hour of greatest need. That has to change.

I give the last word to Alaa's mother Laila, who told our inquiry:

"If the government thinks it's risking problems with Egypt by pushing to let Alaa out, it is risking the same problems in a different way by not pushing. We are going to do our best to embarrass this government and to embarrass British companies who are investing in Egypt if Alaa is not let out. I am sorry to say this, but if things go as far as me collapsing and dying, it is embarrassing universally. The best-case scenario for them is to get this resolved any way they can."

I sincerely hope that the Minister takes note.

1.27 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for bringing the debate to the House. I want to talk about Jagtar Singh Johal, a Sikh activist and blogger from Dumbarton in Scotland. He is not a constituent of mine, but very soon after I was elected as the MP for Wolverhampton West, I received many emails from my constituents raising concerns about his detention in India, which has been ongoing for seven years. My constituency may have one of the largest Sikh populations in the United Kingdom, but a lot of the emails that I received were from non-Sikhs. That shows that people, whoever they are, wherever they are, are concerned about human rights breaches.

Jagtar is a British citizen who travelled to India in October 2017 to get married, and it is said that three weeks later he was abducted by plain-clothes police officers, who tortured him with electricity to get a false confession linking him to an alleged conspiracy to murder. Over time, further charges were added, some as late as 2021. Jagtar continues to be held in a Delhi jail. In November 2021, a United Nations working party stated that Jagtar had been arrested because of his Sikh activism, and in May 2022, a UN working group on arbitrary detention found that Jagtar's detention was arbitrary under international law and lacked any legal basis, and that his fair trial rights had been gravely violated. UN experts call for Jagtar Johal to be released immediately.

The campaign seeking Jagtar's release has received cross-party support from MPs in this House. In July 2023, 100 parliamentarians wrote to the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), asking him to call for Jagtar's release when he travelled to India for the G20 summit. Leaders of both the Labour and Conservative parties have previously suggested that there is no legal basis for Jagtar's detention, which is arbitrary, and moreover, that this Government must act decisively to negotiate his release. I particularly commend the Prime Minister for raising Mr Johal's case with Prime Minister Modi in India on 18 November, and our Foreign Secretary for meeting Mr Johal's brother, his MP and the NGO Reprieve to discuss Mr Johal's case on 30 October.

We need to do more. What has happened to Jagtar Johal is against all the rules of natural justice. We have a British citizen who, by all consensus, has been detained in a foreign jail arbitrarily for seven years. We are therefore right to be concerned and right to want to know what is being done to secure his release. We have a right to know on a regular basis what is happening with Jagtar Johal.

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for bringing the matter forward and, as he does so often in the House, for setting the scene clearly, clinically and evidentially. Today's debate is happening thanks to his request to the Backbench Business Committee and we are pleased about that.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss). I will speak about Jagtar Singh Johal as well, and it would be remiss of us

in this House not to recall the efforts of Martin Docherty-Hughes, who was the MP for Mr Johal's constituency and who valiantly fought the case throughout the time he was here. There was not a time in the week or month that he did not bring it up. He certainly did his bit with dedication and commitment. It is frustrating that after this period of time, we still see little headway.

I rise today to highlight an urgent and deeply troubling matter that strikes at the heart of what we stand for as a nation: the unjust detention of British citizens abroad for their belief. Those individuals embody the values of freedom, justice and dignity, and their plight calls for nothing less than our unwavering solidarity and absolute action. Just last week during oral questions, I asked the Foreign Secretary whether a section should be set aside within the FCDO tasked specifically with looking at this matter—it was after a question posed by right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green—and he gave an indication that he was considering that. Can the Minister give us more information on where we are with that?

The clear and strong indication from the Foreign Secretary on that day was that that would happen. If it happens, it would follow on from what the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) referred to as well. What she requested would be incredibly helpful. If there was a section, it could take up the cases of British citizens. Quite honestly, a British passport has to mean something more than a bit of paper that I carry in my inside pocket everywhere I go. It means something for our rights, our citizenship and our protection under the citizenship of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I will begin with the harrowing case of Jagtar Singh Johal, the young British citizen from Dumfries. In 2017, he travelled to India to celebrate his wedding, with all the joy that occasion would give, only to find himself abruptly detained. I talked to Martin Docherty-Hughes about it, who was a fount of knowledge on the case and always gave us the details on his contacts with the family. Since then, Mr Johal has endured more than seven years of imprisonment under charges that credible sources indicate are baseless. Allegations of torture during his detention further compound the gravity of the case.

It is clear that Mr Johal's activism for Sikh human rights has made him a target. I declare an interest as the chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, which stands up for those with Christian faith, those of other faiths and those with no faith. We are fortunate within the APPG to have a number of Sikhs, and we stand side by side with them on their right to human rights and on issues of persecution.

The treatment of Mr Johal is not just a tragedy for him and his family; more than that, it is an affront to the very principles of justice and human rights that we cherish in this House and of which every one of us will speak highly and sincerely today. His situation also underscores systematic failures in the protection of British nationals abroad. The prolonged inaction has left his family and the whole Sikh community across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to grapple with unimaginable anguish. That cannot stand.

I know the Minister has been in place for only the last five or six months, but in that time he has made a reputation of being one who has a deep interest in these

matters and who looks to find a way forward. No pressure on you, Minister, but in all honesty, we are looking for something fairly edible at the end of this so that we actually have an idea of just where we are going. I urge the Foreign Secretary and the Minister to use every diplomatic tool available, from public advocacy to behind-the-scenes negotiations, to ensure Mr Johal's release and to secure accountability for those responsible for his abuse.

I turn my attention to Jimmy Lai, about whom I have spoken on a number of occasions, as have many others. He is a British citizen and it is clearly underlined that his passport is a British passport. He is a devout Roman Catholic who represents the courage of standing for democracy in the face of tyranny. A founder of the pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily*, Mr Lai has long been a vocal advocate for press freedom and human rights in Hong Kong. We salute him and we acknowledge his courage.

I have never met Mr Lai, but there are many people in the world I have not met and it does not stop me speaking up for them. It does not stop us revering their names in this House and stating their right to have the freedom and liberty that we enjoy. Mr Lai now finds himself in prison under the draconian national security law imposed by Beijing, facing charges of colluding with a foreign country—my goodness—and conspiracy to defraud. Those are vague accusations with no evidential basis whatsoever, wielded to silence dissent and suppress freedoms.

Jimmy Lai's imprisonment is emblematic of the broader erosion of civil liberties in Hong Kong, a region where promises of autonomy and democratic rights under the Sino-British joint declaration are being systematically dismantled. How tragic it is to watch what is going on. His willingness to stay in Hong Kong despite escalating provocation and persecution speaks volumes about his commitment to the principles he holds dear. I ask all Members of this House: would you have had the strength of character to have done the same, knowing what was coming down the road towards you? His willingness to stay in Hong Kong cannot be underlined enough. The House must unequivocally condemn the actions of the Chinese authorities and demand Mr Jimmy Lai's immediate release.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Freedom of religion and belief is important. The case of Jimmy Lai is illustrative because they do not have to, but the Chinese authorities have locked him away from any involvement with his faith. He cannot receive communion and he cannot give confession. For those who do not believe in it, I note that that really is powerful for a Catholic. He has had to endure that, which, although petty and pointless, is a way of trying to break him. Would the hon. Gentleman like to comment on that?

Jim Shannon: I brought the case up in Westminster Hall. Jimmy Lai was denied the Eucharist when it is his right to practise his religious belief. When there is that attack on someone's religious belief, along with persecution, human rights abuses and the denial of that very right, we thank God that Jimmy Lai has that relationship with God in heaven. He may not have the Eucharist, but he has a greater faith, which hopefully will strengthen him. However, when someone wants to outwardly express themselves and is denied that—that is what the right

[Jim Shannon]

hon. Gentleman is referring to—that is totally wrong. The Chinese Government, particularly those in Hong Kong, should be criticised for the way that they have denied Jimmy Lai his rights.

Furthermore, we must act to ensure that the international community does not normalise the repression of freedoms in Hong Kong. The cases of Mr Johal and Mr Lai are not isolated. They reflect a troubling global trend where authoritarian regimes act with impunity to silence voices of dissent. Whether they are targeting activists, journalists or those practising their faith, these regimes seek to erode the very freedoms that form the bedrock of a just society.

I am reminded of Amanda Damari, who I think is a British passport holder. Her daughter, Emily, was kidnapped by Hamas terrorists. I met Amanda just after Easter when I was on a visit to Israel. I was incredibly impressed by her courage and determination to see her daughter once again. I believe that we, in this House, have a duty to fight Amanda Damari's case for the release of her daughter.

The United Kingdom has a moral and diplomatic duty to lead by example. Words of condemnation, as important as they are, are not enough. I call on the Government to do three things: prioritise these cases in all diplomatic, bilateral and multilateral engagements; explore the application of targeted sanctions against individuals and entities involved in these human rights violations; and advocate for stronger mechanisms of accountability at forums such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth. We cannot always fight battles on our own, but we can fight them better together. I urge that we do so in a positive way.

We must also be mindful of the human stories behind these injustices. We try to express the human stories behind each one of these cases in the way that we can, but perhaps we do so without using the individual knowledge that we have. Jagtar Singh Johal is a husband, a son and a brother. Jimmy Lai is a father and a tireless advocate for freedom. Amanda Damari just wants her daughter home. Both those men are people of faith, and so too is Amanda. Their families bear the heavy burden of waiting, hoping and fighting for their return. We owe it to them and to ourselves as a nation—this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—to ensure that their sacrifices are not in vain.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I did not want to interrupt the hon. Member for Strangford, but he knows better than to refer to the Minister as “you” because it ends up meaning me in the Chair.

1.42 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this vital debate. He is an impressive champion on this issue, as I know from my time spent serving as an officer with him on the all-party parliamentary group on Magnitsky sanctions and reparation.

It should be a primary function of any given state to protect its citizens. It should not matter where in the world a British national or an individual with strong ties to the UK gets into trouble; we as a nation should

be right alongside them trying to get them out. Arbitrary detention abroad and related human rights abuses, such as torture, are unacceptable. They often have profound, long-lasting physical, psychological and social impacts, not just on the individual concerned, but on their loved ones, friends and wider social network.

Many Members have spoken in depth today about individual cases of British nationals or UK-linked individuals detained abroad, so I will touch just lightly on two that I have followed mostly closely. First, as the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) has mentioned, there is the unacceptable continued detention of Dr Gubad Ibadoghlu in Azerbaijan, whose son, Ibad, I had the pleasure of meeting just last month. Ibad and his siblings are hugely impressive advocates for their father, and I know that he will be proud of the tenacity and dignity with which they have conducted their campaign for his release.

Dr Ibadoghlu has spent more than a quarter of a century advocating for a democratic Azerbaijan. He has tirelessly fought for fundamental human rights and campaigned against corruption in Azerbaijan's fossil fuel industry. He has been detained since July 2023 on clearly spurious charges, under threat of spending 17 years in prison, while contending with serious health issues. The European Court of Human Rights has demanded that he be transferred to a specialised medical institution so that he can receive the treatment that he so desperately needs. But, all the while, the Azerbaijan Government have denied this request, claiming spuriously that his health is “satisfactory”.

I wish to place on record my support for the immediate release of Dr Ibadoghlu. As a British resident and visiting fellow at the London School of Economics, the UK should be standing by him and using all available diplomatic levers to show the Azeri Government that their flagrant human rights abuses will not be tolerated.

Secondly, I wish to join the right hon. Members for Chingford and Woodford Green and for Maldon, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), in raising the case of Jimmy Lai. Jimmy has been held in solitary confinement in Hong Kong for over four years for publishing content critical of the Chinese regime. I have a significant Hong Kong community in my constituency of Bolton West, and I know from speaking to many of them that they worry that, if it is Jimmy detained today, it could be them tomorrow. Indeed, many of my constituents were effectively forced from their homes in Hong Kong due to China's disruption of Hong Kong's democratic freedoms, which we have heard about in this Chamber today. Only last week, in a debate on the status of Taiwan, we heard how Jimmy's treatment is part of a broader pattern of behaviour, which is China's consistent and blatant disregard for the international rules-based system.

In both those cases, I fear that the UK Government have not done their utmost to fulfil that very central function of protecting our nationals. I share the view of colleagues that, unfortunately, the Foreign Office lacks a clear, centralised and proactive strategy for dealing with arbitrary detention of UK nationals. Given the severity of the issue, I believe that a dedicated UK envoy in this area, in a similar vein to the US role of presidential envoy for hostage affairs, should be considered very swiftly by the Foreign Office. While in opposition, the Foreign Secretary pledged to look at that, so I hope the Minister can give me an update on how this pledge will be realised in fairly short order.

A good first step, however, would be to consider greater transparency in the Foreign Office. It could, for example, share with us information about how many British nationals are currently being arbitrarily detained. I hope the Minister will speak to that in his wind-up. At the very least, we should be able to hold statistical data on the number of victims of arbitrary detention, as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green quite rightly said.

I welcome this Government's manifesto pledge to give British citizens the legal right to consular access when they get into legal difficulties overseas. I find it extremely concerning that that is not already the case. As colleagues have already attested to, consular assistance not only comes with protection against the very worst excesses of arbitrary detention, but is sometimes the only link between the individual suffering in absolutely harrowing circumstances and the outside world. It is no exaggeration to say that it can be life-saving, and I wish to go on the record to commend the work of dedicated officials in the Foreign Office when such assistance has been provided.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to say one final word on the diplomatic levers available to us. Magnitsky sanctions are a critical tool for ensuring that there is a cost to hostage taking and arbitrary detention, and they should be deployed in a consistent manner in cases such as those mentioned in the Chamber today. In addition, we know that asset freezes can be a very effective tool, as can denying sanctioned individuals access to London's financial sector and property market. Sanctions must be used in a holistic manner against those responsible for arbitrary detention of British nationals. To deter states from engaging in arbitrary detention, we must also ensure that they bite as much as possible.

On a related point, just last month, *Financial Times* analysis found that companies registered in the British overseas territories exported \$134 million worth of goods to Russia in 2024, in an apparent breach of UK sanctions. The lack of open ownership records in our British overseas territories complicates efforts to establish who is involved in such shipments. The same principle applies to assets that we would seek to freeze. That matters for today's debate, because without fully public registers of ownership, we will never be totally comfortable that we are not unwittingly allowing individuals who are subject to sanctions to evade them.

I place on the record my thanks to the organisations campaigning on this issue, including Redress, and my deepest sympathy with the families of those who have been arbitrarily detained abroad. Their suffering, and of course the suffering of those detained, is why this debate needs to be had, and why the Government must act on the concerns raised by colleagues on both sides of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): To make the final Back-Bench contribution, which I have no doubt will be just as impactful as the others, I call Douglas McAllister.

1.50 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this Backbench Business debate on detained

British nationals abroad. I commend the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing it, and for his relentless campaigning on the important cause of arbitrarily detained British nationals at risk of human rights abuse abroad. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for supporting his application.

This House should be concerned by the number of British nationals detained abroad and at risk. I wish to raise in particular the plight of my constituent from West Dunbartonshire, Jagtar Singh Johal, who has been detained in India for over seven years. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their contributions to the debate on his behalf. Jagtar is a British citizen from Dunbarton. A campaigner himself on human rights abuses in India, he was abducted and detained in November 2017. After his arrest, he was brutally tortured, and now faces, some seven years later, nine cases against him based on evidence obtained by false confession. Countless applications for his bail have been refused. After all these years, Jagtar remains not just in prison but in solitary confinement. His suffering is unimaginable, and his daily existence almost intolerable.

I am sure that this House will be concerned about Jagtar's mental and physical wellbeing after being confined in such conditions, which is why the support that the British Government provide to their nationals in harrowing conditions, such as those that my constituent endures, is vital. Consular access and assistance is very often the only link between the individual and the outside world. That has proved to be the case for my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal. Consular access should have a legal framework, and not just be a discretionary offering. Changing the culture of the FCDO and providing families with certainty about what support their loved ones will receive as a matter of right is a necessity. We must introduce it. As far as my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal is concerned, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West stated, the UN working group on arbitrary detention concluded over two and a half years ago in May 2022 that, under international law, Jagtar's detention is arbitrary. Yet here we are, 2,589 days later. He remains in prison—unconvicted and in solitary confinement.

To add to that misery, Jagtar and his family must cope with the very real fear that he is at serious risk of a death sentence. At least two of the charges against Jagtar carry the death penalty. Former Governments' responses have been inadequate, and successive UK Foreign Secretaries have failed to seek Jagtar's release and repatriation to the UK. That is simply unacceptable and not good enough. The new Government and Foreign Secretary now have the opportunity to uphold the principled position that we took in opposition. I am encouraged by the progress and support that I have received from the Foreign Office, and the Foreign Secretary and his Ministers, who have provided me with regular updates and reports. I have also received assurances in this House, including from the Prime Minister, that Jagtar's case was raised directly with the Indian Government and Prime Minister Modi. I am encouraged that the Government are seeking Jagtar's immediate release.

Last month, around the time of seven-year anniversary of Jagtar's detention, the Foreign Secretary met with me and my constituent Gurpreet Singh Johal, the brother of Jagtar, at the Foreign Office. The Foreign Secretary

[Douglas McAllister]

was extremely generous with his time. In fact, Jagtar's brother commented in the media immediately after our meeting that he has met with five Foreign Secretaries and this is the first Foreign Secretary whom he felt had actually listened to him. I fully appreciate that other British nationals in similar circumstances across the world require a similar level of active support, and it should be consistent for all. That is why I commend the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green for securing today's debate. I thank Reprieve for its outstanding assistance for my constituent, and its guidance to me since I was elected to this House in July. I call on the Indian Government to immediately release Jagtar Singh Johal, and ask that the FCDO continues to escalate its diplomatic representations with its relevant counterparts to establish Jagtar's release and his immediate return home to my constituency of West Dunbartonshire and his family in Dunbarton. Help bring him home now.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Lib Dem spokesperson.

1.56 pm

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for leading today's important debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for supporting it. When this House considers grave matters of war and armed conflict, Ministers often intone that the first duty of the state is the protection of its citizens, and they are right. That obligation to protect the physical security of its citizens does not stop at the borders of our nation. The British passport that permits us to travel to other countries contains a message from the Foreign Secretary in the name of His Majesty that requires others

"to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary."

Yet today, Members have highlighted the cases of those to whom that request has not been granted. The Liberal Democrats stand with all British nationals who have been arbitrarily detained overseas, and with their families. We share the anger cited by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) at their detention. Our party is a steadfast supporter of the rule of law, and salutes the many brave individuals and campaigning organisations that fight tirelessly for democracy, political freedoms, freedom of expression and human rights in those countries where the regime shows no respect for those values. That is why, at the last election, our manifesto contained a commitment to enshrine in law a right for British nationals, including dual nationals, who have been politically detained or face other human rights violations abroad, to access UK consular services. We would be delighted if the Government took up that proposal, so will the Minister advise us when they will enact such a commitment?

I wish to build on the references made to a few cases by right hon. and hon. Members. Like the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara), it was my privilege to meet the family of Alaa Abd el-Fattah last week. They described the despair that Alaa feels now that his detention has extended beyond the five-year sentence that he was handed in his sham trial. His remarkable mother, Laila Soueif, is now on

the 67th day of her hunger strike to protest that Alaa has not been freed. She described to me the needs of her young grandson, Alaa's son, Khaled, who lives in Brighton. It clearly breaks Laila's heart that he has not seen his father for so long. I am sure that the whole House understands the anguish that Alaa's family feel about his continued detention.

I know that Ministers have voiced the need for action in Alaa's case. As the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) mentioned, in opposition, the Foreign Secretary said in 2022 that there should be "serious diplomatic consequences" for Egypt if Alaa was not released. He also said that the UK's £4 billion trade partnership with Egypt afforded the UK "tremendous leverage". Last week, Laila and Alaa's sisters met with the Foreign Secretary. They protested that, despite those statements in opposition, the UK-Egyptian diplomatic relationship is unchanged, and UK officials continue to negotiate further bilateral investment and trade deals with Egypt. On Saturday, Laila visited Alaa in prison. She updated him on her meeting with the Foreign Secretary, and Alaa said this to his mother:

"I had hope in David Lammy but I just can't believe nothing is happening. If he was serious and had taken the steps he promised while in Opposition I would have been free today—but instead they just ignored my release date because there was zero pressure. Now I think either I will die in here, or if my mother dies, I will hold him to account."

Three weeks ago, I met Sebastien Lai and the legal team supporting his father Jimmy Lai. As hon. and right hon. Members have set out, Jimmy is clearly a victim of politically motivated imprisonment. His staunch support of democracy and freedom of speech in Hong Kong is remarkable, yet the Chinese authorities have detained him for four years without trial, holding him in solitary confinement under the national security law. They have denied him access to consular support, placed him at health risk as a 76-year-old with a chronic condition, and denied him his right to practise religion. Last month, they restarted his trial after an 11-month hiatus. Sebastien is deeply worried that his father will die in prison.

The House also heard today from the hon. Members for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) about the detention of Jagtar Singh Johal in 2017. As they said, the findings of the UN working group on arbitrary detention in May 2022 upheld the views of his family that he had been detained without any legal basis and that his rights had been gravely violated.

Yesterday I met representatives of Amnesty International who wanted to be sure that the House would hear of the detention without trial of British citizen Mehran Raoof in Iran in October 2020. Mehran is one of many British nationals detained in Iran. In other cases, the families of those detained have asked that their relatives are not named. That is not a surprise given the reputation of the Iranian state for appalling human rights abuses in Iran and for extraterritorial threats to Iranians living overseas, including here in the UK. Tonight Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe will give the 2024 Orwell lecture. The example of her imprisonment and detention, of the courage of her family and of the actions and inaction of successive Ministers should be a sobering reminder of what Iran is prepared to do to British nationals, whom it considers pawns in hostage diplomacy.

I am a newcomer to the House, but I know many Members who spoke today have been long-standing advocates in this place of the rights of those prisoners, and I pay tribute to them for their steadfast campaigning. Sadly, despite the continuous efforts of those parliamentarians, neither the previous Conservative Government nor this new Labour Government have succeeded in advancing the cases of those I have mentioned. Alaa has now spent over five years in continuous detention. Jimmy has now spent nearly four years in solitary confinement. Jagtar was arrested over seven years ago. Mehran was imprisoned over four years ago. The family and friends of detainees are calling on the Government to do more, and they are right to ask why more is not being done.

The Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary may be raising the cases of those detainees, but the truth is that the countries holding them do not appear to be listening. I do appreciate the Government's dilemma—after the previous Conservative Government did so much to erode the UK's standing in the world, this Government have a weak starting point. I therefore understand the temptation to soft-pedal on awkward issues, but, as Members have said, that is the wrong strategy. I agree with the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) that we need a more self-confident and consistent strategy to guide the Government's approach when British nationals are arbitrarily detained overseas.

Let me set out five further steps that the Government can and should take. First, the Government should call for the immediate release of any detained British national or dual national who is arbitrarily detained. Secondly, the Government should insist on consular access to any British national and that UK officials attend trials. Thirdly, the Government should commit to raising the case in every ministerial interaction with that Government as part of a joined-up approach that does not treat human rights as one silo in the bilateral relationship. Fourthly, the Government should name the consequences of ignoring their requests for action and, following a suitable period to allow the detaining Government to act, should enforce those consequences against Governments and individuals, as Members have raised. Fifthly, the Government should implement the recommendations of the Foreign Affairs Committee and appoint an envoy or director for arbitrary detention, who would have the role of pursuing those cases and providing regular updates to the families of detainees on the steps the Government are taking to secure their release.

As the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire said, it is not enough for ambassadors and Ministers to increase the adjectives of disappointment as each month passes and as each polite request is ignored. Will the Minister commit today to taking those steps in every case of arbitrary detention? Diplomacy rests upon both parties having a clear understanding of the interests and needs of the other. As the Prime Minister said after meeting President Xi recently and briefly raising Jimmy Lai's case, the UK should challenge China while being a "pragmatic and predictable partner".

To take two specific examples, will the Government indicate to the Chinese Government that the Chancellor's proposed trade and investment visit to Beijing will not go ahead until Jimmy Lai is released? Will the Government tell the Egyptian Government that unless consular access is granted to Alaa Abd el-Fattah, the FCDO's travel

advice will be altered to warn UK travellers to Egypt that it does not always recognise British nationals and therefore consular support cannot be guaranteed?

To travel under the protection of a UK passport must have meaning. It cannot be a polite request. Instead, the Government must put in place a strategy that restores what every passport states: that countries are required to assure UK citizens of free passage and necessary protection.

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

2.5 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this important and impactful debate. He speaks with such knowledge on the matter. I thank all other hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions.

Supporting British nationals abroad should rightly be a priority for the FCDO. Looking after the welfare of detainees in particular is a cornerstone of the excellent work done by our consular teams here and overseas. It is crucial that Ministers back our Foreign Office staff, detainees and families by providing leadership at the highest level and supporting them wherever possible. I witnessed some of that during my time as a Foreign Office Minister and, like many Members, I experienced it at a constituency level, seeing how the FCDO has helped with the return of a number of consular cases.

In our last full year in government in 2023, the consular team at the Foreign Office supported 21,000 British nationals around the world, including victims of crime and those who had been detained or hospitalised. We are clear that our citizens abroad must get access to the help they need when they need it.

I note that the Foreign Secretary confirmed last week that he hopes to announce an envoy who will deal with more complex detention cases. I gently say to the Government and the Minister that this must not become an excuse for outsourcing something that is the responsibility of Ministers. Detained British nationals will rightly expect Ministers to grip those issues and provide the political leadership that they and their families deserve. The Government also promised to introduce a new right to consular assistance in cases of human rights violations, which, disappointingly, was not forthcoming in the King's Speech. I would be grateful if the Minister could update the House on the Government's plans to bring forward that commitment.

There are a number of high-profile consular cases, some of which we have heard about today, that parliamentarians rightly continue to take a keen interest in seeing resolved. They include, among others, the cases of Jagtar Singh Johal, Alaa Abd el-Fattah, Ryan Cornelius and Jimmy Lai. We raised our concerns about Jagtar Singh Johal's case, including his allegations of torture, with the Government of India on over 110 occasions. As Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton personally met Mr Johal's brother in Glasgow. We constantly raised Alaa Abd el-Fattah's case with the highest levels of the Egyptian Government and pressed hard for urgent consular access. We remain deeply concerned about his case and are absolutely clear that he needs to be released.

[Wendy Morton]

When in government, we also regularly raised consular matters with the United Arab Emirates authorities, including Ryan Cornelius's case, at an official and ministerial level, and consular staff were in regular contact with Mr Cornelius and his family to provide him with ongoing support.

We called strongly for the release of Jimmy Lai, for an end to his politically motivated trial, and for consular access. We raised that consistently at the very highest levels, and pressed for the repeal of Hong Kong's national security legislation. The shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), recently met Mr Lai's son, Sebastien. We will continue to call for Mr Lai's release. In the light of the deep concern shared across the House, some of which we have heard today, I would be grateful if the Minister provided an update on the Government's work with international counterparts to progress those cases, and on his recent engagement with those individuals' families.

In respect of Jimmy Lai's case in particular, I return to a theme that I have raised from the Dispatch Box before: the Government's pursuit of closer relations with Beijing. There is no shying away from the fact that the charge laid against Mr Lai arose because of the national security law that China introduced in Hong Kong. When he was Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton was unequivocal that that law is a clear breach of the Sino-British joint declaration, and we continue to call for its repeal. The Foreign Secretary has said that there are disagreements between his Government and the Chinese on that matter, so I hope that the Minister will assure the House that the Government will articulate those differences in opinion loud and clear by making an explicit call for that law to be repealed. The Foreign Secretary wants to avoid surprises with Beijing, but we cannot afford for any reset of relations to be all give and no take just for the sake of avoiding difficult conversations.

More broadly, we must be clear-eyed that the autocratic world uses dual-nationals as pawns to achieve its objectives and obtain leverage. Indeed, we have seen a disturbing pattern of British nationals being imprisoned by autocracies in recent years. We saw that in Russia with the appalling treatment of Vladimir Kara-Murza, and in Iran with the callous and cowardly execution of Alireza Akbari. Does the Minister have a strategy for countering that pattern of cynical exploitation of British nationals?

I put on record our thanks to the consular teams in the UK, and in British embassies, high commissions and consulates around the world, for the work that they undertake around the clock, often in extremely difficult circumstances, to support thousands of British nationals every year. Many cases may not be as high profile as those that I and other right hon. and hon. Members have set out, but they are all equally important when it comes to safeguarding our interests and looking after our citizens. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined how he is backing our consular teams to ensure that they are properly resourced and can keep up their excellent work. We have a duty to British nationals at home and abroad, especially those who are denied access to vital support. It is right that we give consular services our full backing in delivering that support. To support that work, and to ensure that the UK upholds

its duties to its citizens, the Government must provide political leadership by continuing to raise cases at the highest levels.

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

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): I start by paying tribute to the families who are in the Gallery and to those who are not. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said, I have some personal experience in these matters, and I know just how painful it is to have a loved one detained overseas, often for long periods and with great uncertainty about next steps. I have met many of those who are in the Public Gallery. They are a tribute to their families, and I am endlessly in awe of the bravery, commitment and determination that they show.

As the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, many of these cases have been going on for some time. I will start by providing context on the general situation. Several Members have made comments about trend lines; I will offer data on the Foreign Office's response, as has been requested. I will set out Labour's position, and then I will turn briefly to some of the cases that have been raised. However, as was said by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), many families do not wish to have their case named in this House, and many of them are not represented in the Public Gallery. That does not make them any less of a priority for me, the rest of the ministerial team, or the Foreign Office.

I join the shadow Minister—the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—and many other right hon. and hon. Members in paying tribute to consular teams for their work. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said that many Foreign Office staff are the best and brightest, and that is certainly true for consular teams, who I am very happy to represent as the consular Minister, and to visit everywhere I go. The week before last, I was in Pakistan, where our staff deal with some of the most complex consular cases, as the House will know. They work 24/7 to ensure that people have what is often their only contact with the outside world once they have been detained, as many Members have said.

I would not claim to be one of the best or brightest, but I am what the right hon. Member for New Forest East would probably call a specialist unit, given that during my time in the Foreign Office, I dealt with many such cases. Indeed, I worked with other nations, as many Members have encouraged the Government to do. It is of course desirable to look at other countries' systems. My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) mentioned the SPEHA system, with which I worked extensively. I can assure her that I talk to my American counterparts, including the special envoy, who I will see this weekend.

Members seek consistency in our response to consular cases. They will recognise that what governs our ability to provide consular assistance is the Vienna convention, which mandates that we cannot interfere in foreign legal systems; we can only ensure that proper consular assistance is offered. Many Members have rightly highlighted the

difficulties in identifying whether British nationals have had proper recourse to due process and their full rights. The Foreign Office remains focused on that question.

We are assisting 1,400 British nationals detained overseas. Some of those cases are more straightforward; some are considerably more complex. We provide assistance, both directly and through a partnership with Prisoners Abroad—a highly valued charity with which many Members will be familiar. It works to ensure not only that British nationals overseas are visited by the Foreign Office, but that they have access to essentials such as food and medication. Prisoners Abroad also supports the families of those detained abroad, a vital service that we will continue to support. We have long-running partnerships with non-governmental organisations such as Reprieve and the Death Penalty Project, which provide expertise in complex cases.

I know that right hon. and hon. Members are familiar with the Foreign Office arrangements, so I will not dwell on them too much, but let me be clear about what a Labour Government will do differently and why. We will introduce a special envoy for complex consular cases, in part because we have heard from families, including those in the Public Gallery, about their experience of seeking Foreign Office support. We will introduce that envoy so that there is, as many Members have requested, a part of the Foreign Office with a particular focus on complex consular cases. We will also introduce a new right to consular assistance. I hope to return to the House shortly to set out more details on both provisions.

The right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) rightly highlighted that we should be uneasy about the increasing global trend of trying to use British and other foreign nationals as diplomatic leverage. It is important to repeat that we will never accept British nationals being used as pawns or diplomatic leverage. We take a strong position on that, and will continue to do so. We will not haggle for British nationals, but will ensure that they have their proper rights, in accordance with the Vienna convention, and will do everything we can to support their family.

I turn briefly to some of the cases that have been raised. I reiterate that I will not mention every case. There are many names that are burned into my mind, as Members would expect, and cases that we work on regularly that I will not mention now, but I will address those on which I have been particularly pressed for answers. I begin with the cases of Mr Cornelius and Mr Ridley. The family are above me in the Gallery. We will continue to provide support to them, but I reassure the House that I have now raised with the ruler of Dubai the request for clemency, and outlined the British Government's support for Mr Cornelius' pardon application. The previous Foreign Secretary did so, as was alluded to by the shadow Minister; I thought it was important to provide clarification on that. I recognise that there has been unwelcome news in this case; I will not go into further detail about that in this place, but we will continue to work on the case. I met Mr Cornelius's family recently, and I reassure the House that I have committed to continuing to meet them for as long as the two cases remain ongoing.

Mr Lai's case, which was also raised, remains a priority for the British Government. We are closely monitoring his trial, and I can reassure the House that diplomats from our consulate general will continue to attend his court proceedings. As this House is aware, the Prime

Minister raised the matter of Mr Lai with President Xi at the G20 summit, and the Foreign Secretary has raised it with his equivalent. The Minister for the Indo-Pacific has also raised this case with both the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities. We continue to call on the Hong Kong authorities to end their politically motivated prosecution and immediately release Mr Lai.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), and for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister), for raising the case of Mr Johal. We continue to press the Government of India for faster progress to resolve this matter. I recognise the diligent efforts of his brother, who I understand is in the Gallery, and the deep and profound frustration about this case. It must be resolved, and that resolution must include an investigation into Mr Johal's allegations of torture.

I will return to this House later today to talk further about Mr el-Fattah's case. That case remains at the front of my mind and that of the Foreign Secretary. He met the family, who I understand are behind me in the Gallery, last week. The Prime Minister has raised the case with President Sisi; the Foreign Secretary and I have both raised it with the Egyptian Foreign Minister; and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Development raised it just this week, again with the Egyptian Foreign Minister. Mr el-Fattah's case is tragic. I am very mindful of the hunger strike of his mother, who I have met, and whose efforts have been mentioned by many hon. Members. We will continue to focus on Mr el-Fattah, and I look forward to returning to the House this afternoon to discuss his case further.

On Emily Damari, a hostage held by Hamas and a British national, she and all the other UK nationals and people with UK links held by Hamas are very much on our mind. We continue to press for their immediate release, for humanitarian access to them, and for the medical assistance that we are sure they will require. I met their families this week, and they will remain a steadfast focus. I would also like to comment briefly on the case of Dr Ibadoghlu; we have indeed raised this case with the authorities, including recently at the end of October.

As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green suggested, these are not easy cases. Many of them have been going on for some time, and the appointment of an envoy is important, but I reassure this House that I am the Minister responsible for consular affairs. It is not for officials to own these cases; as the shadow Minister has made clear, that is for Ministers. That is very much the view that I and the Foreign Secretary take. I look forward to returning to the House to discuss some of these cases in more detail, and to tell Members about the measures that we will take. I regret that in our few months in Government, we have not yet seen positive progress on all these cases, and I note that many Members have referred to the negative trend in some of these areas. I reassure the House that we will continue to focus on this issue above all. As was said by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock, the first duty of Government is to look after their people. There is no higher responsibility for me than serving British nationals, whatever corner of the world they are in.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Before the Minister concludes, there is something that many Members have called for that he has not touched on. We passed an Act on

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

Magnitsky sanctions some time ago. Should those sanctions not be part of our attack on hostage-taking and on people being detained abroad for no reason? Why are those involved not being threatened with sanctions, and not having sanctions applied to them? Why are the Government—all Governments—so reluctant to use this tool?

Hamish Falconer: I am afraid that, as the right hon. Gentleman might expect, I will not provide a detailed commentary on whether we are considering sanctions in any of these cases. Our position has been that we do not like to discuss sanctions in the House before we implement them, but I recognise the thrust of what he says. I think he is asking me to ensure that there is no diplomatic lever that we would not consider pulling to ensure the safety of our nationals, and I can confirm that.

Emily Thornberry: I thank my hon. Friend for being so clear, but can he say whether the criteria for deciding whether a British national has been arbitrarily detained will be published?

Hamish Falconer: I recognise the work of my right hon. Friend and her Committee, the detailed report on this subject that the Foreign Affairs Committee published during the previous Parliament, as well as the work of the APPG on these matters. As she said about the American experience, it is important for an envoy to be appropriately focused, and to have a limited number of cases. We are keen to engage with the House on how to ensure that the envoy is focused on a limited number of cases, and on what criteria are most appropriate. My view is that the process will continue to require ministerial discretion, as the shadow Minister said, but I look forward to talking to both my right hon. Friend's Committee and the House again in more detail once we are in a position to bring forward more concrete proposals.

Unless any other Members wish to intervene on me, I will conclude. These are some of the most difficult issues that the Government and Members of the House face. I pay tribute not only to the families in the Gallery and beyond, but to right hon. and hon. Members. During this debate, there have been allusions to the historical preference of the British Government for not discussing consular cases in public in any great detail. In some cases, as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson said, that is for reasons of safety or judgment, the Foreign Office having assessed what is most likely to assist the British national in question. However, I recognise that as hon. Members have said, this issue is of real importance to many Members of the House, and I will make myself available to all Members who have complex consular cases that they wish to discuss with me.

2.28 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: This debate was long overdue, and we have used the time well. We should have regular debates on this issue; the Government should set aside time for Back Benchers to debate what is happening to constituents who have been arbitrarily arrested and, more widely, to British citizens who are unlawfully detained. That should be a regular occurrence, and there should be regular reports. In my opening remarks,

I called for a regular report from the Government on the status of those individuals. I hope that the Minister will take that request away, and that Ministers will initiate debate on this issue, rather than waiting for Back Benchers to do so. That would give us a real sense of the concerns, and the direct action that is being taken.

A number of issues were raised by colleagues from across the House. First, there was a call for a regular envoy who would be directly involved in these cases, so that the families always feel informed, and so that there is a go-to individual who everybody knows, and who possesses knowledge and understanding, including of the policy that the Government have initiated. It would be helpful if the Government made it clear that that is what they want to do.

The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee spoke about making sure that we link this issue with trade, and that is very viable. We have different Departments; I was a Secretary of State once and we deal in separate little silos, and no one quite knows what the other is doing. It is clear from the debate that everybody shares the view that it is time for there to be a concentration of effort so that all powers are brought to bear on foreign Governments and every angle is used: trade, investments and, ultimately, sanctions.

We have Magnitsky sanctions legislation. We know now from what has happened around the world that what really concerns individuals is the idea that they will be sanctioned—sanctioned by Governments in the democratic world who will refuse them access to their financial institutions and all the other pleasures they may derive from being in places like the UK, Europe or the United States. This is a very efficient tool, but it is not used much by the UK Government and it should be used more.

In Hong Kong, China has trashed the Sino-British agreement and has arrested a number of people. It has just incarcerated 45 democracy campaigners in ghastly fashion, having held them for three years before eventually giving them their sentence. Jimmy Lai, in appalling treatment, languishes in isolation from others. And we, the UK, who set the agreement with China, have sanctioned not one single person responsible for any of the many abuses. America has sanctioned at least 12 of the highest officials. This shows—this is the main issue that arose from the debate—why people in Britain believe that British Governments of all hues, through the Foreign Office, do not do as much as they should. That has to be countered; whether it is correct or not, it needs to be answered. That was the final point of the debate.

Finally, I want to stress on every given occasion that our British passport, given to those who are British citizens whether or not they are dual nationals, has on its inside page a demand, not a request, and sometimes we in this House wonder about that. As one Foreign Minister after another, whether Conservative or Labour, arrives on the Front Bench, none ever makes that statement. British citizens require and demand that right of access to the consulate—one of the Minister's responsibilities—so that they can have their issues dealt with. We need to know that that has been demanded, not requested nor negotiated—demanded, as that is a right that we have. I hope the Minister will take away with him the sense that there is genuine concern here about the behaviour of successive Governments in this matter.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is concerned by the number of arbitrarily detained British nationals at risk of human rights abuses abroad and the apparent lack of active support for those detained; and calls on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to provide regular reports on when it last raised the cases of those people with its international counterparts.

Improving Public Transport

2.33 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of improving public transport.

I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling this important and timely debate. The Government have recognised the need for a modal shift away from cars to public transport, but we are still a long way from achieving this aspiration. The Government aim to change the way the railways and bus services operate in the UK, so we stand at a crossroads, making it increasingly important that we head in the right direction.

As Members will know, transport is a key contributor to climate change and the release of greenhouse gases. The transport sector is responsible for more than a quarter of total UK emissions and is the single most polluting domestic sector, but all public transport combined—buses, trams, shared mobility—accounts for only 9% of these emissions, with that number falling every year.

Improved public transport plays a huge role in delivering growth to local and regional communities, but all too often public transport is a barrier to economic inclusion in rural areas. We know that better local integrated transport systems deliver growth and opportunity—two of the Government's five missions. Data from the Local Government Association found that a 1% improvement in public transport journey times could support a nearly 1% reduction in employment deprivation. The Government's own return on investment tool shows that helping someone back into work provides a £3,500 boost to their income while the national Government benefits by £11,400 and wider society by £23,000.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the single biggest reason that people fail to access work in rural areas is public transport? The figures that she has given are not just numbers; it benefits somebody's whole way of life if they can access work because they can catch the bus there.

Sarah Dyke: I entirely agree, and I will address that point in my speech.

Poor public transport compounds social ills, while the unreliability, inaccessibility and lack of integration in rural Britain prevent people from trusting that it can get them where they need to go when they need to go there and, crucially, that they can get home again. Somerset has the worst bus services in the country, forcing communities into isolation or locking them into expensive and polluting car usage. My constituents from areas that are currently served by the railways are concerned about the impact of building Old Oak Common and how it will disrupt travel to London. Many residents who travel from Castle Cary to London face up to a decade of disruption as a result of those works. I would welcome it if the Minister commented on how that will be mitigated.

I would also like to mention the future of South Western Railway, after the decision was made recently to renationalise the company in May 2025. It will be the largest train operating company ever to be nationalised in the UK, and that will happen before Great British

[Sarah Dyke]

Railways, the body that will oversee the public operator, is operational. In just a few months, the Department will, in effect, take responsibility for hundreds of millions of extra journeys, and my constituents travelling on the Exeter St David's to Waterloo line from Templecombe or nearby stations are anxious about the future of the trains that they rely on. I would welcome it if the Minister commented on that, too.

I have spoken many times in this place about the reintroduction of a station in the Somerton and Langport area, and I thank the Langport Transport Group for its hard work and tenacity in trying to bring a railway station to the area after it lost its stations during the Beeching cuts of the 1960s. The Somerton and Langport area has the longest stretch of rail between London and Cornwall that is not served by a railway station. The Langport Transport Group prepared a proposal to the restoring your railway fund and won £50,000 to develop a strategic outline case alongside Somerset council, which they submitted in February 2022. Despite this huge effort, they have never heard back, even after I pressed both the former Prime Minister and the Transport Secretary in the last Parliament for an answer. Now that that scheme has been cancelled by the Chancellor, local residents feel that they are in limbo.

Having a railway station in the Somerton and Langport area makes so much sense. It would serve the 50,000 people who live nearby who currently are not served by the railway line that runs right through their community. Nearby stations such as Castle Cary, Taunton, Bridgwater and Yeovil Junction are all at least 12 to 15 miles away. There is no direct bus to Castle Cary or Taunton, where it is then a hike to the nearest station. That is hardly an incentive to travel, and it illustrates the lack of integrated public transport in Somerset—a topic I will speak on later.

A railway station in the area would do more than connect residents to the rail line. It could also boost the local economy, bringing in more visitors. We have seen nearby passenger numbers at Castle Cary—the official railway station for the Glastonbury festival—jump massively in recent years, from 152,000 in 2002-03 to 251,000 in 2017-18. I may have a slight bias, but there are so many reasons for people to stop and visit the area, if only there were a train station. For example, there is the River Parrett trail, a scenic 50-mile walk that is home to some of lowland England's most beautiful and unchanged landscapes.

As I mentioned, the proposal was cast into doubt after the Government announced the cancellation of the restoring your railway fund in the summer. We are still waiting for an update on what will happen to the project. I would welcome the Minister's comments regarding the Somerton and Langport railway.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for raising such an important topic for us all, and in particular for my constituents in Bicester and Woodstock. After the Conservative-led administration cut all direct bus funding in our area in 2016, I am proud that Liberal Democrats have reinstated community bus services. Does she agree that it is incredibly important that the Government's new plans for public transport not only focus on metropolitan areas but provide adequate

funding so that these dislocated areas can access community bus transport, using new technology for demand-led and cost-effective services for our residents?

Sarah Dyke: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. That is vital for rural areas. I have excellent community transport providers in Glastonbury and Somerton: there is Wincanton community transport, and across Somerset we have the Slinky bus that provides on-demand services. They are crucial for people who need to get to surgery appointments and even their jobs, as well as for getting people out and about, and breaking down that rural isolation.

Moving on to integrated transport, if we must wait longer for a station in the Langport and Somerton area, it is crucial that in the meantime the area receives an integrated public transport system to nearby railway stations in the form of rail-bus links. The former Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh), on the day before her departure, set out a vision for more integrated public transport systems. I hope that the new Secretary of State will keep those aims alive, as that is desperately needed in Somerset.

Fragmented transport leaves a traveller trying to get from Wincanton to Castle Cary having to take a bus journey and then walk half a mile to the station to catch a train, with no integration between the bus timetable and the train times. In nearby Devon, local bus operators, the council and Great Western Railway have worked together to launch rail-bus links with improved timetables that correspond with mainline train services, alongside improved service brand visibility. That serves as an example of how integrated rail-bus links can work in rural areas and service communities that do not have a train station.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. In my constituency, GWR has been working with the borough and county councils on a new cycle link. Network Rail, unfortunately, is singularly blocking the development. That strategic cycle link will probably not be completed unless Network Rail, which owns the land, gets out the way. Does she agree that different arms of government need to be working together much more strongly and that cultural change in Network Rail is required if we are to solve these problems in public transport and active travel?

Sarah Dyke: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Integration between public transport and active travel is vital. He and I live in a beautiful part of the world, which frankly more people should get out and enjoy on two wheels or on two feet.

There are huge opportunities to improve bus services around the country, and especially in Somerset, where they are almost endless—mind you, the starting point is quite low. In 2022, Somerset county council's bus service improvement plan bid acknowledged that Somerset had the worst-rated bus service in the country at the time, and that was after 13 years of lack of investment under a Conservative-led administration. Bus provision is poor and unreliable.

For example, the 54 bus route, which runs through Glastonbury and Somerton connecting Taunton to Yeovil, lacks an evening or Saturday service. That leaves people

who might work unpredictable or unsociable hours unable to trust the bus service and reliant on a private car. Cherie in Glastonbury told me that she has to wait for an hour for her bus home from work, so despite finishing at 5 pm she does not get home until nearly half-past 7. If she were to drive, it would take her 10 minutes.

The unreliability of buses combined with the poor state of bus stops and public information provides a major hurdle for bus users. I thank Somerset bus partnership for its unrelenting work to improve that, having held more than 100 bus stalls to inform local people about their nearest services, filling an information gap that has sadly been left by the service providers. Most bus stops do not have a printed sign timetable or real-time information, and often poor mobile connectivity in rural areas makes it difficult for people to access information online. That was confirmed recently by Iain, who told me that the printed bus timetable in Glastonbury is barely legible. That is so disappointing. Even small interventions could create vastly important changes that would support bus services.

A Campaign for Better Transport survey has found that 52% of people would use more buses if they had better information at bus stops, but the onus on providing that information is sadly lacking. Unlike rail, where there are national standards that mandate that a certain level of information is provided at stations, there is no equivalent for bus stops. Every rail station in Britain has provision for real-time information, but we are a million miles away from achieving similar provision for our bus network. Bus users need certainty, but the availability of up-to-date, co-ordinated information on the bus network is lacking at the best of times and non-existent at the worst of times. That must change.

One of the major barriers preventing simple things like clear information is the fractured nature of bus funding. The previous Government's competitive strategy turned funding into a postcode lottery, with only 40% of eligible local authorities receiving any of the £1.2 billion of BSIP funding announced in 2021. The Liberal Democrats have been calling for a simplified system of bus funding that could deliver routes where there is local need. Funding is unequal and fractured. Somerset Council receives around £25 per head of funding for buses, yet 12 local authorities across the country get double that amount.

The former Transport Secretary recently announced a big increase in bus funding, with Somerset council receiving £6.5 million. The increase is very welcome, but it will not go far enough to fix the gaping holes in our bus provision. Somerset council also awaits guidance from the Government on what the money can be used for, so that it can prioritise where the need is greatest. The previous Transport Secretary was keen for local authorities to decide where the money is most needed, and I hope that that remains the case.

The Government's vision for the future of buses appears to be based around franchising and delivering London-style buses around the country. As I stated, better buses are key to achieving a modal shift, hitting net zero targets and delivering opportunity and growth. But with the local authority landscape as it is, franchising simply is not an option in rural areas. If there is not significant funding, franchising is no more than a pipe dream for rural authorities. Somerset council has only three officers to deal with public transport, which is not enough people power to run such an operation. That is

not an anomaly, but a local authority standard. If the current situation does not work for rural areas, what is the vision?

I hope that the recent removal of the £2 bus fare cap is not the start of things to come for rural areas. Given the nature of rural bus routes, journeys are longer and people travel further. If the now £3 cap were to be removed, it would be disastrous for rural areas, as prices would rise beyond affordable rates very quickly and disincentivise regular bus patronage. After the 50% fare increase, one constituent from North Cadbury wrote to me concerned about the impact it will have on the future of the No. 1 bus from Yeovil to Shepton Mallet, and the No. 58 in Wincanton, which are both facing cancellation. Those routes, and many like them, are vital for social and economic outcomes.

In the last Session, I introduced the Public Transport (Rural Areas) Bill, which would have created minimum service levels, ensuring that residents can access sites of employment, education and leisure. I believe that those measures are truly needed for rural areas.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady accept that the previous Government had not actually funded the £2 fare cap beyond the current period? Therefore, we have a cap on bus fares so that people do not end up with exponential fare rises in the next spending period.

Sarah Dyke: The point is that if prices go up any further, patronage on buses will go down, and in rural areas we travel further and longer. It is difficult to incentivise people to use buses in rural areas, so we need to get this right, and increasing fares will not encourage more people to get out of their cars and on to public transport.

Local authorities have a duty to outline routes that cannot run commercially but are vital to improving social outcomes or supporting economic activity, but there is no duty on them to fund those routes. After the general election, there were suggestions that the Government would create safeguards to make it harder for routes to be cut, and the better bus Bill is the perfect opportunity to deliver that. The previous Government committed to delivering guidance on the meaning and role of socially necessary services, expanding the category to include economically necessary services. But unsurprisingly, they failed to provide it, leaving much-needed bus routes in danger. I hope the Minister will take this up and provide some guidance.

Improving public transport is essential. The Government have stated their intention to improve it but so much remains unclear, especially for rural areas, which see poor services and high costs. Unfortunately, without investment and smart choices, that will continue to be the reality. The reversal of these trends is crucial, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

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

2.53 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I am delighted to be called to give my maiden speech, and I do so with a sense of trepidation and excitement,

[Alex Mayer]

which I imagine that many a new MP feels. It has struck me that maiden speeches are a little like buses: you wait ages, and then 335 of them turn up at once. I beg your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, to listen to one more as we near the end of this journey.

As hon. Members will know, the excellent House of Commons Library helpfully provides us with the maiden speeches of our last two predecessors, to give us a feel for this place and to acknowledge the work of those who came before us. Mr Selous served for a whopping 23 years, and I pay tribute to his work as an assiduous constituency representative who stood up for what he believed in. I discovered in his maiden speech that he in turn referred to his predecessor who served for 31 years, who in turn harked back to the Member who came before him—the last Labour MP for the area—who was elected back in 1966. Clearly, 1966 was a year that was rather good for teams in red, albeit followed by rather too many years of hurt.

History shows us how rarely change comes for these communities, yet change is desperately needed: on shoplifting, I have met workers who have been spat at, threatened with needles and even a gun; the lack of healthcare facilities, including in Houghton Regis and Leighton-Linslade; sewage polluting our waterways; and transport. I am delighted to be a member of the Transport Committee, and transport is the subject of the debate, which I congratulate the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing.

My constituency has a long history of transport innovation. It has Britain's oldest road, dating back to prehistoric times, the Icknield way, which runs through the constituency. It has the Grand Union canal, the freight superhighway of its day. Leighton Buzzard railway once transported sand from quarries and is now a much-loved tourism attraction, going full steam ahead. More recently, we have one of the longest guided busways in Europe, which I hope one day can be extended. That brings me neatly to the topic of buses and encouraging more people to switch on to them, which is so vital in this time of climate emergency.

I welcome the BSIP investment announced recently by the Government, and I look forward to hearing more from the Minister about plans to allow more local areas to have a smoother path to franchising. I am keen for the Minister to look carefully at transport governance. London and Greater Manchester, which have franchising already, have also historically had alignment of transport powers, resources and capacity all in one centralised place. Passenger transport executives and their equivalents can accelerate the delivery of transport plans and play a crucial role in unlocking regional economic growth. For 50 years, such structures have benefited from much higher levels of control and co-ordination of buses. They also benefit from running over a much more logical functional economic geography.

Outside such areas, transport powers are held in many different places, and they require a number of organisations to independently agree reforms to enact change. That can mean, for example, that bus stops, which are surely the window to the soul of buses, can be owned by an organisation with no say in how the bus service itself is run. In many places in the country, highways and transport powers are split. We perhaps

need more passenger transport executives, although the Urban Transport Group advises that the last passenger transport executive was established so long ago—not quite so long ago as when a Labour MP last represented Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard—that the mechanics around establishing a new one are unclear.

In any case, we need governance that is fit for the 21st century, with the right delegated functions being granted to a passenger transport executive or equivalent, and the establishment of an executive function to speed up decision making and delivery that makes the difference. It needs to be based on a geography that reflects travel patterns as well as wider social and economic geographies, and which gives a large enough base to raise farebox income.

On geography, I argue that there need to be possibilities to franchise in areas larger than local transport authorities. Given that franchising is not entirely a silver bullet, I urge the Minister to look at the geography of enhanced partnerships as well. It is only one bus, but the F70, which travels from Luton to Milton Keynes via Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard, goes through three separate enhanced partnership areas.

Finally, I thank Grant Palmer, Arriva and First, which have invited me aboard their buses recently, and Dawsongroup for bringing a double-decker bus just outside Parliament for Catch the Bus Month, which many hon. Members from across the House came to support. It is my belief, really, that every month should be Catch the Bus Month. I urge all hon. Members to get on board and back our local buses all year round.

2.59 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) on her maiden speech, which was lovely to hear. She kept on the theme of buses as well, which is very impressive.

There is a puzzle with rural bus services that needs to be solved. Local residents will all say they are desperate to save their village bus service from closure, yet the local operator will say that footfall keeps going down year on year, and there simply is not enough public subsidy to fill the gap. If everyone wants to use the bus, why are they not actually doing it? The answer is a mix of two things. It is partly the price, but, even more so, it is the service. Service frequency does not sufficiently meet the needs of residents, so they do not take the bus.

Bus services have been in decline ever since Thatcher's privatisation in the 1980s. While increased car use was always going to have an impact, bus services should have bottomed out years ago. In practice, what we have left today are mostly legacy routes designed to meet the needs of communities from decades ago. We have seen a process of death by a thousand cuts, with incremental cuts in frequency making the bus option less user friendly every year. Across many villages in my constituency of Horsham, it is just not practical any more to rely on buses to get to work. When surveyed in 2021, more than 80% of West Sussex residents said they did not use the bus due to a lack of route options or the infrequency of services.

Gradually, anyone who needs dependable public transport is forced out of rural areas to be replaced by car users, which, in turn, reduces bus usage even further—and the downward spiral continues. As a result, in

Horsham and across West Sussex, the local authority has for many years presided over a policy of managed decline, with no serious attempt to reverse or even stabilise things.

This summer, the residents of Partridge Green, a village in the south of my constituency, were surprised to discover that they were about to lose their direct link to Horsham via the No. 17 bus. They learned this with just a couple of weeks' notice. Nobody consulted them or warned them; they found it out only by studying the new bus timetable when it was issued. Public anger was mainly directed at the local bus operator, but I have to ask: what do we actually expect to happen? It is a private company that needs to make a profit, and the figures said that the cut had to be made. We cannot expect private companies to behave like social enterprises.

Partridge Green residents reacted to the news with an impressive public campaign, which is still ongoing. I attended a large public meeting that had a fair percentage of the entire village population crammed into the local church, and something I heard there really struck me: if only the residents had known the service was in danger, they would have got together to help it, either by using the bus more frequently themselves or by finding some other compromise. However, West Sussex county council gave the residents no warning, so they never had a chance.

This is the killer app we are missing out on: we need to harness the passion of communities to protect their local amenities. Loss of bus services is not the only problem these communities face. Villages are suffering from the removal of banking services, shops, pharmacies, post offices, pubs—you name it. They know they are in a battle, but they are also really motivated to help if only we actually ask them. That may be part of the answer to the long-term decline in service. We need to start by asking what kind of service residents actually want, and what they would use if it actually existed.

I welcome Government promises of increased local funding and control over public transport, but I hope the Government will be realistic in their assessment of local authority capability, when two fifths of councils are on the verge of bankruptcy. We have been fighting a long defensive battle, and, frankly, we have been losing. If we are to have any hope of reversing that, we need a mechanism to go back to the people who actually live in these villages today, and reconstruct the services from the ground up.

3.4 pm

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing the debate. When I originally signed up to speak in it, it was about the south-west. I do not know what changed, but obviously national transport is very important. I feel that the south-west does sometimes get missed in conversations, but I hope that with the appointment of my right hon. Friend the Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander) as Transport Secretary that might change a little bit. After some of the speeches we have heard today, it will come as no shock to anyone that I am going to talk about rural transport and the need for integration.

This issue is an odd one for me. My constituency has an urban area of Swindon, and then a rural area which includes Inglesham, Highworth, Blunsdon and Castle Eaton. The two areas are completely different. We have

one bus company, and in the urban area of Swindon we get it right—I do not get complaints from residents. Sometimes in Queens Drive I get a complaint about a double decker looking into a garden, but at least there is still a double decker going past. When I speak to rural residents, however, they often raise the point that they want and need to use public transport—it is good for their children and for accessing to education, hospitals and the town centre—but they simply cannot, and that is forcing them to use cars.

I will keep my speech brief, because a lot of Members want to talk, but does the House not agree that if we are to incentivise people to ditch the car and get on public transport, we need an integrated transport system that focuses on rural areas to ensure we can get access to buses when we need them?

3.5 pm

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing the debate on this important topic.

As the Member for the Guildford constituency, I could probably bore for the south-east of England when it comes to the public transport challenges we face. I recognise that in comparison with colleagues from across the House we do have very good public transport, but it still is not good enough and my residents regularly get in touch with me to tell me so. For too long, our transport networks were neglected by the previous Conservative Government, leaving transport users frustrated by delays, poor accessibility and high costs. For us to achieve the greener, fairer and more thriving future that I am sure all of us here want for our communities, high-quality public transport is essential.

In my consistency of Guildford, we have two long-proposed railway stations: Guildford West and Merrow. These stations were first suggested 10 years ago and we have had barely any progress. The main reason? Funding. Or, rather, the lack of funding. For those not in the know, building a railway station costs upwards of £25 million, with at least half of that spent on planning before a single shovel breaks the ground. That financial barrier has left residents waiting far longer than they should for essential infrastructure.

Yet even as we struggle to deliver new stations, existing ones remain inaccessible for too many. I am, of course, talking about the issue of step-free access. In my constituency, stations such as Clandon, Effingham Junction and Horsley still lack basic accessibility for my residents to be able to access the train in their rural area. Instead, they have to go to other, larger places such as Guildford and Dorking. We must support those in wheelchairs, but step-free access is also about making life easier for parents with prams, people with invisible mobility challenges and anyone who finds steps a barrier. Without doing so, we prevent people from choosing greener public transport.

That is a matter of fairness and inclusion but, just like the new stations, it comes with a significant price tag. With the news this week that South Western Railway will be moving to public ownership next year, it is my sincere hope that the urgent improvements we need will start to take place and we will see an end to accessibility deserts. But railways are just one part of the public transport puzzle. In the villages of my constituency, like many rural and semi-rural areas, buses are a lifeline for

[Zoe Franklin]

residents and businesses, yet far too often routes are being cut, services are deeply unreliable and communities are being left isolated.

From our extensive experience in local government, those of us on the Liberal Democrat Benches know that local solutions work best. That is why, personally, I would like the Government to look at empowering borough, district, town and parish councils to run their own localised bus services, not just the county level transport authorities. These councils know their communities and can deliver the targeted services that people need. I have spoken to people running some of the larger town and parish councils, and they would like at least the opportunity to consider commercial shuttle bus services. Some of them have the financial potential to do so, but cannot because it is currently illegal. It is in the gift of the Government to change that.

Along with a number of my Liberal Democrat colleagues, I have campaigned for many years for solutions to our public transport woes. My constituents completely understand the frustration shared by everyone else in the country about the delays and the difficulties that result from the inadequacy of public transport. The answer is, of course, investment. I have said this before to Conservative colleagues, and I say it again now: "Please don't be shy. Borrow our ideas, and with those ideas—for our manifesto is always fully costed—we can deliver railway stations, we can deliver step-free access, and we can deliver buses for residents, communities and businesses, so that our communities can thrive."

3.10 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for initiating the debate, and I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) for her excellent maiden speech.

Public transport, including buses, is a bit of a passion of mine. I am from Stroud, and there are many small villages in my constituency—including Dursley and Wotton-under-Edge, to name just two—so I know that public transport is about more than infrastructure. It represents a range of opportunities. It is about equality and community, and that is particularly true of rural areas, because it tends to run as a lifeline for many local residents. Under successive Conservative Governments rural bus services have been run down, and it is interesting today to observe the attention being paid to the subject of public transport on the Opposition Benches. There has been a staggering 27% reduction in bus services since 2011, and in rural areas there is a £420 million shortfall. However—to answer the hon. Lady's question—I am encouraged by the fact that we are investing £1 billion in improving bus services, including £8 million designated for Gloucestershire.

As a little aside, may I mention Stroudwater station, which was closed in the 1960s? I agree with the hon. Lady about small railway stations of that kind. They cost a great deal to develop, but when money allows and when we have got ourselves out of our current financial hole, it will be fantastic if we can invest in small stations.

The impact of nearly four decades of deregulation on our public transport system has left many communities stripped of any public transport or at the very least, of

any accessibility or affordable bus services. I am therefore delighted that this Government plan to restore power to local communities, enabling local leaders to set fares, determine routes and establish timetables, taking control away from unaccountable private operators. However, I urge the Minister to confirm that rural areas without an elected mayor will have equal opportunities to benefit from the shift towards community-controlled bus services.

Wotton-under-Edge had a lifeline of a bus service, the 84/85 going south to Bristol. The problem was that it crossed a boundary line between a combined authority area and Gloucestershire. Its cancellation has caused havoc for schoolchildren, as well as those who cannot get to work, cannot get to doctors' surgeries and cannot get to hospitals. People have written to me saying they have had to turn down job offers. That is how important rural bus services are. A key issue in this instance was the lack of co-ordination between local authorities. It seems petty, but this is a major problem. The funding for that cross-border bus service was lost because local leaders failed to reach an agreement. That is an example of the extent to which fragmentation can affect rural public transport.

Let me end by describing one of the pleasures of my week. I leave this place, take the train to Stroud and then get on to my favourite bus, the 65. I sit on the top, and I ride over Selsley common to my home. It is an utter joy, and a joy that is shared by my two-year-old granddaughter, who absolutely loves buses. So let us develop rural public transport, and take it back to what it was in the past.

3.14 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing this debate. Our public transport services have been run down for years because of the previous Conservative Government, and many rural communities across my Thornbury and Yate constituency have seen their vital bus services disappear. To rub salt into the wound, we have seen money spent on gimmicks that are aimed at delivering headlines rather than saving the services we rely on.

My constituents were looking forward to the new Government offering them hope, but one of their first actions was to hike the bus fare cap, which is so vital in rural areas, where journeys are long and fractured, and the Government have committed to the cap only for the next year. I welcome the announcement of more funding for services that are subsidised by combined and local authorities, but for it to be effective, it must be targeted at restoring our rural services, rather than being funnelled into already well served urban areas. In the west of England, funding has been prioritised for urban areas such as Bristol, where increasing the frequency of services boosts the number of passenger journeys more. As long as the focus is purely on passenger journey numbers, rather than ensuring that everyone has a basic minimum service that enables access to work, education and health services, our rural areas will miss out.

One of the half-baked solutions to the reduction in mainstream, regularly scheduled services has been to roll out an on-demand bus service called WESTlink. Although on-demand services can work, WESTlink is being used locally to do far more than any on-demand service can reasonably be expected to do, and the delivery of the service has been poor. Bad experiences have led

to people losing confidence in it, because no one wants to be stranded and to have to pay a fortune for a taxi. People have told me that they have booked the service to get from A to B, only to find that they are the only passenger on board.

The situation is even more ridiculous when we consider that some WESTlink services are filling the gap left by the axing of bus routes that children and teenagers used to get to school or college. Parents repeatedly have to call up to book what should be a consistent daily service to get young people to and from their place of learning. It is simply a waste of time and resources to manage the service in this way. To quote one parent,

“I know there is a WESTlink available to book every day, but with the WESTlink only able to have a small number of passengers—and it is never on time or takes us somewhere completely different before taking us to school—it’s leaving parents with the fear of being fined.”

I have tried in vain to raise this issue with the West of England combined authority, both in my time in this place and in my previous role as the leader of South Gloucestershire council, but each time we are met with the same answer: “There’s no funding.” That shows the core weakness of the system. Routes that are commercially sustainable are run by bus companies, which absorb the profits, and the less-used but equally important rural routes are left in the hands of local authorities. Local government has had its funding cut to the bone during more than a decade of Conservative rule in Westminster, and it simply cannot magic up extra money to keep the buses running.

When I raised the issue of using funding to provide minimum service levels for rural areas in the House a few weeks ago, the then Transport Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh), agreed with me; I hope that the Minister will echo that agreement today. I also hope that the Minister will agree that regardless of whether new franchising powers are taken up—my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton has highlighted the difficulties—local councillors should be involved in decision making. As a councillor for many years, I know how valuable their local knowledge can be in avoiding disastrous route and timetable changes that make sense to those sitting in the bus operator’s office. The Yate and District Transport Forum in my area is a good example of local representatives working with operators, but all too often councillors find out about changes at the same time as residents, when it is too late to intervene.

I agree with the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) about the need to understand that whatever boundary one chooses for transport services, some people will want to cross it—and in the case of the 84/85, it is a significant number of people. I have had similar messages about people’s inability to get to jobs, the impact on people travelling to Katharine Lady Berkeley’s school, and so forth. It is important that the Minister provides clarity on the issue of cross-boundary services.

I will finish by briefly touching on railways. We are lucky enough to have some local lines and rail services in my area, but there is no joined-up approach to ensure that people living in villages like Hawkesbury Upton who take a bus to the railway station in Yate will get there in time to catch the next scheduled train. This lack of an ecosystem holds us back. Our services operate disjointedly, which is why people simply do not feel that they can rely on public transport to get around. In addition,

we need to increase the number of rail services. I have been pushing for the reopening of stations at Charfield and Coalpit Heath as a new solution for people travelling to the growing number of jobs at Severnside, and have been pushing for the Government to guarantee funding to keep half-hourly trains running through Yate.

All in all, we need a clear and connected plan to improve our public transport network in order to fix the rot that has set in after years of Conservative cuts and neglect, and to ensure that everyone has a regular service that they can depend upon.

3.20 pm

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer), and I congratulate the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing this debate.

Public transport in Leeds South West and Morley is a lifeline for many of my constituents and me. I will focus on bus travel today, as it is the No. 1 transport issue that my constituents raise with me. I have plenty of content on the railway and the trams, but I will leave that for another time.

Without bus travel, many more rural communities, such as those in Ardsley, Robin Hood, Thorpe and Lofthouse in my constituency, simply would not have the means to access essential services, as other Members have said. In Farnley and Wortley, on the other side of my constituency, we depend on a small number of bus services, which leaves us far more exposed when those services fail. Morley, despite being the largest population centre in my constituency, is not immune to all the problems we have come to associate with bus travel.

I have relied heavily on the bus services in Churwell and Morley. The 51 and the 52 got me to school 20 years ago, and I remember being frustrated with the service even then. I swore that if I was ever in a position to do something about it, I would, which is why I am very grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, and to be part of this Labour Government.

We need a public transport system on which we can rely. We need to try something different, because the status quo obviously is not working. The Ardsley and Robin Hood council ward in my constituency has no town centre, and parts of it are very remote, so buses are essential for residents who do not have a car. We do not have reliable routes into Leeds city centre either, and despite all this, routes keep being cut, including very recently by a private provider, leaving residents isolated.

These routes include the 212 service that goes through East Ardsley, into Tingley and right through to Wakefield city centre. Fortunately, thanks to the work of local councillors and the West Yorkshire combined authority, we have managed to find a new provider for the route, starting in January. Obviously, this counts as a victory for local residents, but we cannot rely on such sticking-plaster solutions. We cannot scrabble around to find new private providers every time somebody cuts a bus route.

That is not to say that all private bus companies are bad—far from it. In my previous role as a councillor for Farnley and Wortley, I was very happy to work with First in Leeds on dealing with antisocial behaviour on the 42 route that went through my ward. I am so

[Mr Mark Swards]

grateful for the work of First and the police to end that antisocial behaviour and restore the bus route. First has always been willing to engage with me on issues affecting its bus routes, even when it has not been able to solve the problems. However, I do not want to rely on the hope that every private provider is as willing to engage with me as First has been. We all know that private providers have to cut routes that are not profitable or subsidised, or if they go bankrupt, even if those routes are essential to vulnerable communities. That is why we need a long-term solution.

West Yorkshire is very fortunate to have Mayor Tracy Brabin, who has put public transport at the heart of her mission to change how we get around our region. I welcome the news that a franchising system will be introduced in West Yorkshire in 2027. That cannot come soon enough. It will give us direct control over the bus companies and the bus routes, so that we can finally put people before profit in our public transport system. Mayor Brabin's work closely aligns with this Government's strong commitment to fix the broken bus networks across our country. The new buses Bill will end the postcode lottery of bus services and deliver the biggest overhaul to our bus system in 40 years. While that move is welcomed by my constituents in Leeds South West and Morley, it is imperative that we continue to ensure that buses remain sustainable. That is why I welcome the £1 billion of investment in bus funding recently announced by the Government, including £36 million for West Yorkshire. That has helped us to extend the £2.50 price cap for the whole of 2025, and to secure routes like the 212. I respect a lot of the points made by Liberal Democrat Members, but I point out that whereas the bus fare cap was going to be abolished next year, a new cap has been introduced because of the actions of this Government. Yes, it is higher, but it is none the less a cap that will keep exponential fare rises down.

Returning to Leeds, I predict that the next two years will be vital to our bus network. As we build towards franchising in 2027, we must sustain a good level of service until that date and use every tool in our arsenal to do so. I urge my constituents to continue to contact me with problems relating to the bus network in Leeds South West and Morley. I will work with councillors of every party and with the West Yorkshire combined authority to deal with the problems that we encounter before franchising. The Minister is one of my neighbours, and has heard me set out all the arguments to do with, and problems in, my constituency, and as well as some of the solutions. Can he tell me if there is any other tool that I can use to help my constituents in the build-up to franchising in 2027, should problems arise before that date?

To conclude, we cannot understate the significance of effective public transport. Communities in Leeds South West and Morley rely on it. I can tell them that we are genuinely getting on with the job of fixing our bus networks. It is time that my constituents had access to the public transport that they deserve.

3.27 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) on her excellent maiden speech.

When I was first elected, I thought it would be difficult to get to know my 71 Liberal Democrat colleagues, but I realise that the challenge is considerably bigger for those on the Labour Benches, so I wish her well with that.

I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to her and her colleagues on Somerset council for their work over recent years, in very difficult circumstances. The previous Government may have introduced the bus fare cap, but that did not go far enough to outweigh the decimation of public transport and bus services over decades in this country, both by central Government and Somerset county council, which cut services throughout Somerset.

For example, in 2019, shortly before the Liberal Democrats took control of Somerset, the Conservative county council proposed closing the park and ride services in Taunton. Park and ride is vital to the whole system of integrated public transport, and was an innovation of the noughties, built by a Liberal Democrat council. Although there were plans for the closure of the park and ride service, my colleagues who run the district council stepped up and saved it. They restructured fares, and the service is now once again profitable and does not require a subsidy. That shows that with a commitment to public transport and political will, such services can be made viable and can be sustained.

During these years of real challenge for local government, I give credit to Somerset council for bringing back night buses. I was delighted to meet the first night bus out of Taunton, which means we can now travel between Taunton and Wellington in my constituency until midnight every night on a weekday. I was out there with Mike driving his first night bus last year. It is a fantastic improvement.

The fare cap in Taunton meant that tickets were reduced to £1, not just £2. Shockingly, following privatisation, which was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne), the companies closed the bus station in Taunton and sold it off. I am delighted that the council is bringing forward plans to have a transport hub once again in Taunton town centre, so that people do not have to stand shivering on pavements in the county town, getting rained on, to catch buses.

I credit the Government for the £6 million in bus service improvement plan funding, which is genuinely welcome. We would obviously have liked more and it is disappointing to see the bus cap increase to £3. As the hon. Member for East Thanet rightly pointed out, no money was pledged to support that service by the last Government. I understand the challenges, but we would have taxed big banks and big energy companies more, as my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Zoe Franklin) pointed out, so that we could fund some of these things to a higher level.

Before I leave bus services, I must mention that in my constituency of Taunton and Wellington, there is one part of Somerset where young people—students—get no discount at all on their bus fare. If they want to attend college as a sixth-former in my part of Somerset, they have to pay £900 per year just to get there and back. That is a prohibitively high bus fare to pay to get to college. I am working closely with councillors on Somerset council and I hope it will be possible to bring

forward a discount scheme for students in our part of Somerset, like those that exist in other parts of Somerset and other parts of the country.

I will move on to the vital importance of rail in Taunton and Wellington and my part of Somerset. We have the fantastic West Somerset steam railway, which I invite all hon. Members to come and visit. It takes us from Bishops Lydeard, just outside Taunton, down to Minehead and the famous Butlin's—I know that all Members will want to go there, and they can enjoy the steam journey over to it. A strategic outline business case has recently been submitted by West Somerset Railway to the Department for Transport to connect that railway with Taunton station so that it would have a mainline station connection, providing both a commuter service to Bishops Lydeard on the edge of Taunton and direct access to one of the best heritage railways in the country.

Perhaps more important than any of those things is the Wellington and Cullompton stations project. I recognise that there are station opening projects across the country that Members across the House will be championing as their favourite, but I must say that my understanding of the Wellington and Cullompton stations project is that, because it is a two-station project that would deliver two stations in one, it has the best benefit-cost ratio of any railway station reopening project in the country at 3.67. I said that like I understand Treasury benefit-cost ratio numbers; I only wish that were true. I am reliably informed, however, that anything above one is a really high benefit-cost ratio.

On that ground alone, the project should qualify for funding, and it would bring £3.3 million of benefit to the local economy. After all, growth is vital to the whole country, and reopening Wellington station would unlock thousands of homes around Wellington. We have a town council that wants Wellington to thrive and grow. The project to bring that railway station was very close to getting shovels in the ground. In July, the project had reached its final business case. The detailed design was ongoing—there was just a small amount of money needed to complete it—and then the Government froze the whole programme. However, I was assured by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Budget debate that the station would go ahead.

We are still waiting to hear why the most financially beneficial station reopening project in the country has not yet got the go-ahead. I am very grateful to Lord Hendy, the Minister for Rail, for the two meetings we have had. I know that the Government are supportive and sympathetic, but we need this project to get back on track—I am sorry, but it is impossible to avoid railway puns in this debate. The station is so ready to be built. We have a lot of third-party funding coming in. The access road and the car park are funded by a third-party developer. Cullompton, in the neighbouring constituency, is putting in similar third-party funding. We urgently need that project to go ahead.

We wish to secure the economic growth that Somerset needs, but we have lost £2 billion-worth of transport projects over the past few months. The A303 and the A358 have been cancelled. We desperately need a bypass for the villages of Thornfalcon and Henlade, which that A358 project would have completed. With all these projects being taken away, surely it is time that we received the funding for the new stations project at Wellington and Cullompton, with all its excellent economic growth impacts.

3.36 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing this debate. She has created a safe space where all us tram, bus and train nerds can come together without fear of persecution, and we should be grateful for that.

It is great to share this debate with my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer). She has already proven herself to be a very diligent member of the Transport Committee. I congratulate her on her maiden speech today—well done.

This is a welcome debate. In the few years running up to the general election, the public discourse around transport felt like we were stuck in a narrative about cyclists versus drivers—as if they are not the same people a lot of the time—and also about low-traffic neighbourhoods. What we should have been speaking about was public transport. If we are serious about growing the economy, cutting congestion, reducing climate emissions and creating a more equal society, we should be talking about public transport generally, and buses specifically.

So far, the speeches today have focused on the things that are not working, so I want to talk about something that is working: the bus service in Edinburgh. Hopefully, we can draw some lessons from that. The service is not without its challenges, and it could be better, but it is, none the less, pretty good. People who arrive in London for the first time say that one of the things that defines London for them is the tube. It is the memory they take away and what they speak to people about. They buy T-shirts and all the rest of it. In Edinburgh, it is the buses that define us. I always say that our excellent bus service defines the city just as much as the castle does.

So what is this bus service like? People can travel on any route in the city as far as they like for £2—so, we have that £2 cap. The drivers are among the best paid drivers in the country. The workforce is heavily unionised. I think union membership is well over 90%. That is not a challenge, because the unions work in complete partnership with the managing director and the management team. It is a really good example. I have the Lothian Buses Longstone garage in my constituency. The staff there were key to Lothian Buses becoming the bus operator of the year in the UK. I invite the Minister to come along and visit the garage and meet the staff and the management team at his convenience.

What I always say is that if people get on the bus, they will see all of Edinburgh. There are of course the fantastic views. The castle is not quite in my constituency, but it can be seen from a bus in my constituency, so I will claim it. The people who use the bus service in Edinburgh are a complete cross-section of the population. Young, old, rich and less affluent people are all there together on the bus, which is fantastic. Not every city can claim that. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) pointed out that the views from the top deck of his buses are fantastic. I want to put it on the record that the best seat in a bus is on the top deck, right at the front, above the driver. I see that there is broad agreement. It is not very controversial, which is excellent.

The bus service in Edinburgh receives no real subsidy from the local authority or the Government, apart from for older people and younger people. It actually provides a dividend to the council, which owns the service. Last

[Dr Scott Arthur]

year, it gave a £3 million dividend back to the city. It is a fantastic service that is cheap, has well paid staff, and pays a dividend back to its owner. What is the secret to its success? I would say that it is public ownership. I do not think that all these things are a coincidence—that the service just happens to be publicly owned. Public ownership is at the heart of it.

There is an unwritten social contract between Lothian Buses and the city. It provides a network that supports the city as a whole. It does not focus, as a private operator would, just on the routes that make it lots of money and forget about the rest of the city; it provides the network, and there is a kind of cross-subsidy within it, whereby less viable routes are supported by the more well used routes. That is really important, particularly if we want to create more equal cities using transport.

Since the election, the discussion about franchising in England has been really powerful. We already have those powers in Scotland, but it has taken time for them to be fully used, and there are funding issues. Right across England, there is real excitement about the use of franchising powers. My hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard made the case for getting the balance of those powers absolutely right so that we can move these schemes forward at pace. That is really important.

It is not just about giving local authorities franchising powers, or even the funding to deliver the services quickly. The other thing that we have to think about is ensuring that our local authorities and local leaders are able to put priority measures in place on the ground for our buses to move around the city quickly. That means bus lanes and priority measures at junctions so that we can keep people moving. In Edinburgh, there is much more that we need to do. We repeatedly ask the Scottish Government for more funding to make that happen faster. In Edinburgh, around 40% of trips inside the city are on a bus, but the percentage of the road space that is allocated just to buses is absolutely tiny, and every square metre of it is hard fought for.

Franchising alone will not solve this issue; we have to support the deployment of these schemes right across the UK. When it comes to bus lanes and priority measures at junctions, we need to think about the economy, congestion and climate, and creating more equal cities. We must not be too reactionary, but think about the benefits that a better bus service can bring to us all and engage in consultation with the community on that basis.

3.43 pm

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing this important debate. It was a pleasure to hear the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer)—wonderful stuff.

As many Members have done, I massively welcome the debate. It is a hugely important topic. Public transport is vital to not only the connectivity and economic growth of our communities, but the wellbeing of our residents. For so many people who cannot afford a car, public transport is a lifeline, allowing them to get to work, to school, to see friends and family, and to visit doctors and hospitals. Without good, reliable public

transport links, our communities suffer, as so many sadly do today in my constituency of Rossendale and Darwen. It is vital that we get to grips with this issue, so I am encouraged by the work that the Government have done so far to begin the work of rebuilding our public transport links after the stark disinterest of the previous Government.

I welcome the trans-Pennine route upgrade, which will ensure that our key towns in the north are better connected, with faster and more frequent trains. With that greater connectivity and mobility, we can begin to address the constraints that have held back our northern economy for many years. Alongside that, I am pleased to see the commitment to a further £650 million for transport links outside of cities. That is much needed, with lines like those serving Darwen in my constituency crying out for improvement as they suffer constant cancellations and delays. I also hope that this will be an opportunity to address left-behind areas, such as Rossendale, where one in four of my residents commute into Manchester and yet we are the only local authority area in the north without any sort of commuter rail link. That results in 79% of journeys being by car, with all the resultant congestion and air pollution.

The City Valley rail link proposed by our borough council and county councils would be an absolute game changer. It would take half a million cars off the road and enable up to 5,000 jobs. To me, it is the definition of a no-brainer and an example of exactly the sort of connectivity issues that we need to address if we are to genuinely deliver on our growth mission.

Similarly, I was delighted to see the Government's recent commitment to £1 billion of funding to support our local bus networks, with areas in my constituency receiving millions of pounds in support. We can now begin the vital work of strengthening our bus routes, many of which have faced years of unending cuts. In my constituency, villages such as Edgeworth, Edenfield and Weir have long felt cut off, and we need to judge the value of restoring those connections for not just short-term passenger numbers, but with consideration of all the social, wellbeing and economic benefits that come from connecting remote communities with the services, training and employment opportunities they need. I recently wrote to Lancashire county council and Blackburn with Darwen council calling on the leadership to work with me to ensure the new funding is used to address the long-standing connectivity issues, and I reiterate that call now.

In Rossendale and Darwen, the bus issues are compounded by cross-border challenges, and I am pleased to see other colleagues recognising that fundamental issue. With many key services crossing between Lancashire, West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester, the local government areas have not traditionally worked well together, and we have suffered from that lack of joined-up thinking.

We cannot discuss improving transport links without discussing improvements to local authority structures. As we are seeing in Manchester with the Bee Network, an empowered mayor and an effective combined authority can turbocharge the development of efficient, reactive, joined-up and innovative transport infrastructure that serves residents and grows the economy. Yet, in counties such as Lancashire, with an out-of-date two-tier structure

and no mayor, we lack a strong voice and a coherent, joined-up transport strategy. That is why there is a pressing need, central to any efforts to tangibly improve public transport, to pursue fully fledged devolution deals for every area of the country. Only with empowered local leaders working together to quickly recognise local needs and opportunities can we have the sort of public transport system that our country and my residents in Rossendale and Darwen need.

3.47 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) on her maiden speech. It is an exciting speech to get off the list.

I am fortunate enough to be a Londoner, and not just any Londoner but one lucky enough to be from south of the river, which is the right side, but I had the good sense to marry a northerner.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Hear, hear!

Natasha Irons: There you go. As a Londoner who grew up with a well-integrated, well-run and efficient public transport system, I know when I raise issues around under-investment from the Government into our services, there will be colleagues who represent constituencies such as the one my husband grew up in who have to wait an hour for a bus to the nearest town and who will have little sympathy for this whinging Londoner.

However, fourteen years of failure from the previous Government have left public transport in every part of our country failing to keep pace with the needs of the people who rely on it. On their watch, cancelled train journeys rose to a record high; passengers have had to navigate 55 million different types of ticket options; and buses are driving 300 million fewer miles per year compared with 2010. For our corner of south London, the previous Government's mismanagement led to cancelled schemes, failed projects and accessibility for passengers being ignored.

Croydon is London's most populated borough with a projected population growth of 7.9% by 2041. In my constituency last year, East Croydon station had over 20 million journeys passing through its gates, making it the 21st most used station in Great Britain. For my constituents, using East Croydon station means dealing with congestion, antisocial behaviour and a failed footbridge project that is now known locally as "the bridge to nowhere." The project, originally designed to improve accessibility to the station, has been beset by delays and caused endless frustration for residents. After a decade of inaction and local taxpayers' money going into the project, Network Rail has now downgraded its plans and removed direct access to platforms, which has caused more frustration for passengers and more congestion at the station, adding insult to injury for my community.

Under the previous Government, the Croydon area remodelling scheme—a scheme designed to address congestion on the Brighton main line and upgrade Croydon's train stations—was shelved. As that scheme is no longer going ahead, Norwood Junction station in my constituency, which is the 79th busiest station in

Britain, will not get the investment that it desperately needs—no improvement to platforms, no improvement to services and no improvement to accessibility—and the addition of a new lift has been deemed too complicated by Network Rail without the scheme's wider improvements.

I welcome the Government's commitment to improving public transport across every part of our country, to putting passengers first, and to working with our regional mayors, not against them. Not only does that mean more regions of our country will benefit from public control of bus networks and from train services with fewer delays, but for my constituency it means a Labour Government working with a Labour mayor to finally give us the trams that we so desperately need. Yes, I am fortunate to be a Londoner who has had access to all the public transport that I could possibly need, but with a Government who invest in every region, we can do so much more.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We come to the final Back-Bench speech.

3.50 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing the debate. I am grateful in particular to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer), who showed the depth of her knowledge and understanding of this important matter. I have an observation about the Opposition Benches, however, Madam Deputy Speaker. It appears that you wait all day for a Tory MP to turn up to a debate on public transport—and none do.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Ms Billington: With the exception, of course, of the shadow Minister—who is obliged to be here.

I am also grateful that the scope of the debate was widened beyond the west country, as I represent the second easternmost constituency in the country: the far eastern corner of the Isle of Thanet. Hundreds of years ago, up to Tudor times, we were cut off from the rest of the country by the River Wantsum. I fear that the legacy of the Conservative party is that they tried their best to effectively reinstate our island status by gutting our public transport and cutting us off from the rest of the country.

Fortunately, however, when it comes to trains, there is a Labour Government legacy, thanks in particular to the support and involvement of my Labour predecessor, Stephen Ladyman—a former MP for South Thanet and Transport Minister—and, of course, of the late, great John Prescott. They made enormous progress on connectivity and public transport, salvaging the high-speed rail project from which my constituency benefits so much as it links us to London and the rest of the UK, with all the economic benefits that follow. I and others, including my constituents and colleagues from across Kent, strongly advocate for the return of international services to Ashford on the high-speed rail line, because of all the economic benefits that would deliver.

It is already on the record that Kent saw a massive reduction in bus services under the previous Government, with 20% fewer bus miles than under the previous

[*Ms Billington*]

Labour Government. The Government's announcement on bus funding is extremely welcome, especially as Kent has received the highest proportion of funding in the whole of the south-east, at £23 million. That funding, combined with the new powers for local authorities, means that Tory-run Kent county council has the ability to reverse the cut in bus miles, and I implore it to use the powers and money to do so.

There may be Members on the other side of the Chamber—it is difficult to see any—who are entirely unfamiliar with bus timetables as they all stick to their cars. However, in Broadstairs, where huge swathes of the town have no access to bus services at all, an older person would be left to walk, cycle or—much more likely—rely on lifts from friends, family or taxis. The sheer expense of relying on taxis as a primary mode of transport is enormous, unsustainable and fundamentally unfair. This has created a situation where, if someone becomes ill and is in need of NHS services, they are forced to pay for a taxi when they may not be able to afford one, or—as often happens—simply go without medical treatment.

This is particularly challenging, as a lot of NHS services in East Thanet have been moved inland. That is an all-too-common issue in coastal communities such as mine; for example, in east Kent, our orthopaedic centre is located in Canterbury. There is now no direct bus from Broadstairs or Ramsgate to Canterbury, so people with mobility issues face barriers to treatment. For some, making that extended journey means taking time off work. That has ramifications for our economy, as people who need treatment have to take time off work when they otherwise would not. That often forces people to simply go without treatment in the early stages of their illness, which can only make them sicker and place more costs on the NHS further down the line. Not only is this damaging to the sick people themselves, it stunts the economy and puts excess strain on public services.

This is not the only way in which a lack of public transport options hurts our economy; it also impacts the regeneration of our local high streets. I have many constituents who would much prefer to do their shopping in person on our local high streets, contributing to our local economy, but who now feel that they have no option but to switch to online shopping because of the lack of transport options, since they do not drive. Let me tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that when I have suggested it might be possible to have a bus connecting Ramsgate train station to Ramsgate high street, you would have thought from some people's faces that I was asking to bend the laws of physics. We have been so used to the idea that this is simply impossible. Reliable, affordable, accessible and safe transport is a matter of social and economic justice. I applaud all the actions that the Government are taking to regenerate our high streets, which is a major issue in East Thanet that the Ramsgate empty shops campaign is seeking to work with the Government on, but if people cannot get to those high streets, I fear we will not make the progress that we rightly want.

Although we have a significant new Secretary of State with responsibility for this area, we also need to think about the legacy of previous Secretaries of State—in particular, Barbara Castle. When she was first appointed

by Harold Wilson, she turned around to the Prime Minister and said, “You do know, Harold, that I can't drive?” In the late '60s, this was seen as hampering her ability to be a suitable Transport Secretary, but in his wisdom, Harold Wilson said, “Yes, Barbara—exactly.” That is the point. Think of the changes that she was able to make, not only to public transport but to road safety, giving us a strong legacy that has lasted all my lifetime and, I hope, much further beyond. Good public transport is fundamental to achieving the Government's missions, in the same way that it is fundamental to us being able to live our own lives and achieve our own ambitions: simply to get up, go to work, access the services we need, get home safely and see the people we love.

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

3.57 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I commend the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) on her excellent maiden speech, and congratulate her on having the oldest road in her constituency—and doubtless, the oldest potholes as well.

I also commend my hon. Friends the Members for Horsham (John Milne), for Guildford (Zöe Franklin), for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) and for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) and the hon. Members for Swindon North (Will Stone), for Stroud (Dr Opher), for Leeds South West and Morley (Mr Sowards), for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) and for East Thanet (Ms Billington), who spoke with one voice on the dire state of public transport in many of our rural areas. I agree with my friend, the hon. Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons): before becoming transport spokesman, I did not realise how lucky we were in London. Although our constituents have legitimate complaints at times, we do not know how lucky we are. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), and I echo her question to the Minister regarding the disruption to commuters from the south-west caused by the HS2 works on Old Oak Common. What can be done to minimise that disruption?

As we have heard from colleagues across the House, the current state of public transport simply is not good enough. Ticket prices are too high, services are too unreliable, infrastructure is too old and capacity is too meagre—and that is just for those who have access to public transport. Too many parts of our country have no meaningful access to public transport whatsoever. After years of routes being cut and timetables being foreshortened, many people no longer have access to a regular bus service despite living many miles distant from any rail network. This is hampering our economy, holding back local communities and damaging our high streets. Our public transport system should be the engine of growth and opportunity, not an impediment to them. If we are to reach the Government targets on economic growth and net zero we must take rapid and urgent steps to improve our public transport provision. We simply do not have time to tarry.

Let me be clear: my party and I have huge sympathy for the Minister, the Secretary of State and the Government. Everyone knows they inherited a mess from the previous

regime's chaos and missed opportunities. Years of under-investment, chopping, changing and rudderless leadership have left our public transport in turmoil, and I appreciate and publicly acknowledge the new Government's worthy intentions and evident desire to improve the situation.

My party consequently welcomes the Government's commitment to long overdue rail reform. I am glad to see the first green shoots of positive change. Ensuring HS2 reaches Euston in the first phase of the project is critical to achieving tangible benefits from what was in danger of becoming an expensive folly, while recent talk of an integrated national transport strategy shows that this Government appreciate that something needs to change.

We welcome the recent announcements on buses, too; as we have heard today from so many colleagues, they are critical to many areas—we know you get it. As hon. Friends so eloquently argued, despite buses being the most utilised form of public transport in the country, they are regularly not given the attention or funding they deserve, so thank you for that.

So far so good, then. However—there is always a “however”—although the Department for Transport is onside, I am not so sure that the Chancellor is, with her real-terms cuts to the Department's day-to-day and capital budgets. If she is serious about growing the economy, she needs to be serious about properly funding the transport system on which it is built, rather than cutting budgets and making up the shortfall by hiking bus fares by up to 50% and an above-inflation increase in the cost of travel by train.

Ms Billington: The hon. Gentleman was not in his place at the time, and indeed neither was I, but it is worthwhile looking at the verdict of another transport nerd, a journalist from the *Transport Times*, back in 2015, who looked at exactly what happened when the Liberal Democrats did have an opportunity to do something about rural buses:

In county after county, cuts in rural bus service support have been severe. City deals may have been welcomed, but the idea that local government might be trusted to raise its own funding and decide on priorities has slipped further into the mists of history.

I just think it is worth reminding the House of that fact.

Mr Kohler: We are talking about now, and we are talking about the fact that you have reduced the bus fare cap.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order—[Interruption.] Order. Just a quick reminder that when I am on my feet, Members should not be.

That is third time the hon. Gentleman has said “you”; perhaps he will be a bit more careful in the rest of his speech.

Mr Kohler: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We are talking about now, and we are talking about the hike in the bus fare cap to £3. It would cost only £150 million to keep it at £2 according to the House of Commons Library. I thank the Minister for writing to me this week to confirm that a full monitoring and evaluation report has been completed by his Department and will be published in due course, but why is it not being published now? If it is there, we want to see it—what does it say?

I do not doubt the battles the Minister and his colleagues are having with their colleagues in the Treasury. I know the Department for Transport recognises there are fundamental problems across our public transport system. However, there is still vanishingly little detail on which to form a judgment as to whether it has hit on the right solutions.

On the railways, for example, yesterday came the long-awaited announcement of the first three train operating companies to be brought back into public ownership. South Western Railway, which I used in my journey this morning, will come into public ownership next May. That much is known. However, what is not known is how that in itself will improve the customer experience and the service offered. As Great British Railways will still not formally exist by then, South Western Railway will, at least temporarily, be left in the hands of the Government's operator of last resort, which surely needs more than a name change as it assumes responsibility for millions of extra journeys without a clear mission or purpose, without the necessary resource or expertise, without an effective passenger watchdog and without meaningful reform of our broken fares system. Even when Great British Railways arrives at the station, we still have no understanding of how—or even if—this new behemoth will proceed smoothly along the track.

Uncertainty also shrouds many other public transport plans. Too many local authorities are waiting to know what funds and schemes will be maintained and what will be scrapped, stifling investment and leaving too many areas and communities adrift, as we can see with the lack of certainty over the northern powerhouse, the electrification of north Wales rail, levelling up and active travel. That is why we welcome talk of an integrated national transport plan, as it is clear that the current piecemeal approach is letting down communities and local economies. But the devil will be in the detail, which we need to see sooner rather than later.

Uncertainty likewise surrounds the Government's approach to rebuilding our decaying infrastructure. To improve our public transport, we need to get spades into the ground, invest money and effort into electrification and, most importantly, build new infrastructure. While there is widespread public disquiet regarding our current public transport provision, there is also deep scepticism about, and often outright opposition to, the major infrastructure projects necessary to achieve real improvement.

HS2's repeated cost overspends and missed deadlines have contributed to an environment in which the public are rightly sceptical about the UK's ability to deliver infrastructure on time and within budget. We need to get real. While Bruce Wayne might be rich enough to spend £100 million on a bat shed, the British taxpayer is not. The UK does not have the time or resource required to put every rail line in a tunnel.

Politicians across the political spectrum need to promote a more mature dialogue to improve public understanding of the trade-offs necessary to improve public transport. As we have seen with other large-scale infrastructure projects, once they are built, the public reception is overwhelmingly positive, as it was with Crossrail 1. The benefits of the Elizabeth line are already being lauded from Reading to Romford, with protests long forgotten. A host of neighbouring MPs called for its extension to their constituencies in a recent Westminster Hall debate that I attended.

[Mr Kohler]

So let us be honest about what needs to be done and what the Government have learned from these projects. Let us maintain a steady pipeline of new projects to ensure that the billions spent acquiring that knowledge, along with the supply chains and skilled workforce we have built up, are not lost.

Too much time has been wasted, and we do not have time to waste. Public transport is vital to our economy, to widening opportunity and our transition to net zero. As a Londoner, I realise that I am blessed by the public transport system that we have in the capital. Despite sometimes justified criticism of Transport for London, it stands as an exemplar of what can be achieved via a co-ordinated transport strategy and a non-ideological approach to ownership, working with both public and private providers to create an integrated transport network. As we heard from colleagues across the House, the situation is very different across much of the country. I hope that the Secretary of State and the Chancellor are both listening.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.8 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on successfully applying for the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. Public transport is an indispensable part of our national life, playing a vital role in our commercial, social and economic existence.

We have had an interesting debate this afternoon, with noteworthy contributions from the hon. Members for Glastonbury and Somerton, for Horsham (John Milne), for Guildford (Zöe Franklin), for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) and for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) as well as just now from the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) from the Liberal Democrats. From the Government Benches, the first speech was the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer). It was a thoughtful speech about bus use. I am sure that she will serve her constituents diligently in her time in this place, and I wish her well. She was followed by some capable contributions from the hon. Members for Swindon North (Will Stone), for Stroud (Dr Opher), for Leeds South West and Morley (Mr Sowards), for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae), for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) and for East Thanet (Ms Billington).

I will begin by commenting on the previous Conservative Government's time in office. It may have escaped the attention of hon. Members that between 2010 and 2024, the Conservative Government spent more than £100 billion operating and enhancing our railways. This allowed the completion of major projects including Crossrail, Thameslink and major upgrades to the east coast main line, the greater Anglia main line, the midland main line and the great western main line. We committed £36 billion to the Network North programme, which, unless the Labour Government stop it, will deliver long-term transformative transport projects that will benefit a great many people in the north of England.

The programme is under review by the Government, with no guarantee that any of it will be taken forward. Obviously, we call on the Government to honour the programme in full.

We electrified over 1,200 miles of track, compared with the mere 63 miles electrified in the 13 years of the previous Labour Government. Some 75% of rail journeys are now taken on electrified tracks. We sought schemes that would reconnect communities to our railways, providing new stations for passengers to use, such as the proposed new station at Edginswell in Torbay, which would complement the delivery of a new station at Marsh Barton near Exeter, and would particularly serve the needs of Torbay hospital. I know that Torbay council is a keen advocate for that, and I hope that the Labour Government will offer the same commitment to it that we did.

To support our bus networks, we invested an unprecedented amount of over £3.5 billion in the bus sector from March 2020 to support its recovery from the pandemic. We provided £525 million of funding to deliver 4,000 new British-built electric or hydrogen buses, and we extended the “get around for £2” scheme until the end of 2024, capping hundreds of single bus fares and helping passengers reliant on buses with the cost of travel—a scheme that we pledged to maintain for the entirety of this Parliament.

I also remind the House of some facts that were curiously missing from the speeches of some hon. Members, particularly those sitting on the Government Benches. Let us turn our gaze to Wales, where Labour has been in power for a quarter of a century. The number of journeys taken on local buses has declined by almost a quarter in the past decade, with a severe impact on those in the most rural areas. The Welsh Labour Administration have spent £40 million on rolling out 20 mph speed limits to try to force motorists on to public transport that the Labour Administration themselves have made less reliable, less regular and less affordable.

Let us look at London, which has been blighted by the leadership of Sadiq Khan for the past eight and a half years. London's mayor recently spent £6.3 million of public money on yet more virtue signalling, renaming London overground lines—something that I am sure commuters thanked him for last week when the Elizabeth line was suspended and five underground lines faced severe delays. From a man who promised to roll up his sleeves and ensure no more transport strikes, we have seen more than 130 days of strikes during his term of office.

We know what the Labour party promised the voters of this country. In its manifesto, it pledged new infrastructure, an overhaul of Britain's railways and certainty for car manufacturers. It promised a utopian system of public transport. But the methods by which the Government have set out to achieve that have been depressingly predictable. One of the Labour Government's first acts was to provide train drivers with inflation-busting pay rises, without securing any productivity improvements for passengers at all. That bribe to the unions has, entirely predictably, failed to prevent repeated threats of further strike action.

Then, as part of the Welsh Government's ongoing war against rural communities, they cut £1.3 billion-worth of road improvement schemes. The Government then increased the previous Conservative Government's £2 bus

fare cap to £3, increasing fares on hundreds of bus routes across the country. *[Interruption.]* Totally predictably, I get heckled about it not being paid for. As hon. Members will be aware once they have been in this place for a little longer, Government schemes are funded for particular periods of time, and then the funding is reviewed. The new £3 bus fare cap, costing bus users 50% more than the previous cap, is guaranteed only until the end of next year, whereas the Conservative party's manifesto commitment was to retain the cap at £2 for the whole of the Parliament.

Finally, and perhaps most notably, the Government have introduced and passed the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024. Instead of implementing the measured and sensible reforms set out in the Williams-Shapps review, the Government have passed an Act that will neither improve passenger experience nor make significant savings. Indeed, it may prove to cost the taxpayer significantly more. The Government insist that savings to the taxpayer will amount to £150 million because of the removal of fees paid to train operating companies. Even if that is correct, it will amount to a saving of a mere 0.6% of what is currently spent on the railways, and even that tiny figure is in doubt. Analysis conducted by rail partners suggested that removing the incentive to control costs could lead to annual subsidies being at least £1 billion higher by the end of this Parliament.

From whatever angle one looks at it, it is hard to see this Act as anything other than an ideological move—one that has more to do with attempting to appease the radical elements of the Labour party, hungry for old-fashioned, hard-left policies, than the good of the passenger and the taxpayer.

Ms Billington: I just wanted to give the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to confirm that the Tory Government were perfectly comfortable with public ownership of train operating companies as long as they belonged to Governments of other countries in Europe.

Gareth Bacon: The previous Government were prepared to do what works, rather than follow ideology in spite of evidence to the contrary.

I have been the shadow Transport Secretary for 31 days and I am already on my second Secretary of State. I have known the new Secretary of State for almost two decades, since our time as councillors representing our respective London boroughs on the London Councils transport and environment committee. She is not in her place today—Secretaries of State cannot be everywhere; that is why they have junior Ministers. I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), will ably deputise for her this afternoon.

I crossed paths with the new Secretary of State when I was Conservative leader on the London Assembly and she was appointed the deputy Mayor for Transport. Unfortunately, during her time at City Hall, London witnessed 28 strikes on Transport for London services, a 77% increase in complaints about TfL over three years, an extension of the hated ultra low emission zone, and, perhaps most concerning of all, a £4 billion overspend and three-year delay in the opening of the Elizabeth line. In defence of the right hon. Lady, though, the buck for all those failings does not stop with her—it

stops with the Mayor of London. The right hon. Lady is, in fact, somebody for whom I have a high personal regard, and I look forward to welcoming her to her place.

It is fair to say that the Conservatives have doubts about the start made by this Government. However, having said all that, I emphasise that His Majesty's Opposition will not oppose the Government just for the sake of it. I do not believe that a single Member of this House wants a public transport system that fails. As I said at the outset, public transport is an indispensable part of our national life, and a successful transport system is vital to both our present and our future. If the Government get things right, we will acknowledge that. Where they get them wrong, we will continue to hold them to account.

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

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for securing this important debate on improving public transport. I believe we have reached our destination, Madam Deputy Speaker, having heard the last of the Labour maiden speeches, and of course we have saved one of the best for last. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) on her fantastic contribution, and very much look forward to working with her in her capacity as a member of the Transport Committee. I also thank the other hon. Members who have spoken for their insightful points. I am pleased to respond for the Government, and will do my best to address the issues that they have raised.

I start my response by emphasising that this Government are putting the needs of passengers front and centre of our transport reforms. We fully recognise the importance of public transport to our communities in rural areas, towns and cities. Delivered well, it enables people to access work and education opportunities, and to access the shops, leisure activities and essential services that they need. It can sustain and improve economic growth and productivity, unlock housing and commercial development opportunities, and connect people to each other, to businesses and markets, and to international gateways.

However, there is lots of work to be done to improve our public transport. Many people and places suffer from poor connectivity and challenging journeys, which impact both their quality of life and their access to opportunities. That is why the Government are focusing on improving performance on the railways and driving forward rail reform; improving bus services and growing bus usage across the country; transforming infrastructure, so that it works for the whole country; promoting social mobility; and tackling regional inequalities. We have been making progress. Last week, the Government set out their plan to develop an integrated national transport strategy, which will set out how all modes of transport should be designed, built and operated to better serve all the people who use them and enable them to live a fulfilling life.

To kick-start that process, on 28 November the Department launched a public call for ideas, seeking to capture people's views and experiences of transport

[Simon Lightwood]

across England and what could be done to improve it. Delivering an effective, efficient and integrated public transport system that meets the regional and national needs of people, wherever they live and work, will play a vital role in delivering the missions of this Government.

Ms Billington: My hon. Friend is talking about the regional and national economic growth strategies. I urge him and his friends in the Department to consider whether we need a strategy for public transport in our coastal communities. They suffer from poor connectivity, which reduces our ability to grow our economy all year round.

Simon Lightwood: Having grown up in a coastal community, I understand that they have unique challenges. I will of course take that point away to the Department.

The important work to improve services has already begun. We started reforming transport on day one after the general election. Take buses, the most commonly used mode of public transport in Britain. The Government have ambitious plans to improve services and grow passenger numbers. We know how important bus services are to communities up and down the country, particularly in rural areas, where, for many, buses can be a lifeline, and the only way of getting around and accessing vital services.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Bus cuts are absolutely devastating for the woman I spoke to who could not get her weekly shop, the young man I met who had to leave for work hours early to try to get multiple buses, and the husband who could not get a bus to the care home his wife was in. Since 2008, the east midlands has suffered bus cuts of 60%—more than any other region. Does the Minister agree that regional inequality is at the heart of this debate, and that it is far past time that we saw investment in our buses?

Simon Lightwood: Absolutely, of course. We need to ensure that we have effective, efficient and affordable public transport in every single corner of the country.

In September, we took the first step in empowering local leaders by introducing a statutory instrument to expand franchising powers beyond mayoral combined authorities to all local transport authorities. We also consulted on new guidance for local leaders looking to bring services into public control. This new, simplified guidance will help to break down barriers to local control of bus services, speeding up the process and bringing down costs. Of course, the buses Bill will empower local leaders by giving them the tools that they need to address local public transport challenges, including by making further changes to simplify bus franchising and by creating locally owned bus companies. We have already seen examples of the improvements that local leaders can make to services. To take my favourite example, the Bee Network in Manchester is on course to complete the re-regulation of buses in its new network in the new year. It will become the first city region outside London to put buses fully back under public control after four decades of deregulation. This new bus network franchise has seen increases in both patronage and punctuality.

We are backing up those reforms with new funding for buses next year. In the Budget, the Government confirmed that there would be more than £1 billion to help local transport authorities and operators to deliver high-quality, reliable public services. That includes £150 million to deliver the new £3 fare cap, which will ensure that passengers have access to affordable fares and better opportunities; £712 million for local authorities to continue to support and improve their bus services; and £243 million for the bus service operators grant. That is given directly to bus operators to support and protect existing services. That funding is the next stop on our journey towards improving services. Every region in England will benefit. The money will make a real difference for people across the country, and could be used to fund more frequent services, so that people can get to more places more often; safer, better and more accessible bus stops; new electric buses; or better real-time information, so that passengers can be confident that their bus will turn up.

Of course, it is not just bus passengers who want their services to run on time. On railways, we have been clear that services have been failing passengers. Performance is inconsistent across the country, and in many areas, the service is not where it needs to be. Improving performance is a key priority, and we will continue to challenge the worst-performing train operating companies and their Network Rail counterparts to address poor performance and raise standards. Just as with buses, we have been making progress. We have resolved long-running industrial disputes over pay, ending the massive disruption and financial impact of national strikes and resetting industrial relations. That paves the way for more collaboration with the trade unions, and the delivery of a railway that works for everyone.

As well as continuing to fund the operation of the railway, we are committed to investing to deliver improvements for passengers. We are simplifying and modernising the rail fare and ticketing system, and have already made great progress. We have driven forward pay-as-you-go in the south-east through the delivery of Project Oval phase 1A. In 2025 we will see further phases of Project Oval go live, which will include Stansted. We have also completed a detailed design of pay-as-you-go schemes in the west midlands, and Greater Manchester plans to launch digital pay-as-you-go trials in 2025. We continue to progress long-distance fare reforms, with trials on London North Eastern Railway.

Looking forward, we have committed ourselves to undertaking a fare review, which is to be completed over 2025, and we will also continue to invest in infrastructure. Just last week, the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024, which received Royal Assent on 28 November, enabled us to bring passenger service operations back into public ownership, starting with South Western Railway's services in May 2025, c2c's in July and Greater Anglia's in the autumn.

Claire Young: You mentioned infrastructure—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister! The Minister!

Claire Young: What did I say? [HON. MEMBERS: "You said 'you'".] Did I? Sorry! The Minister mentioned infrastructure. We have seen significant delays on the

line from the west country in the last few weeks owing to flooding. In particular, trains are having to divert between Bristol Parkway and Swindon and having to go via Bath and Chippenham. Local residents fear that the work to try to stop flooding on that length of the line, which is very prone to flooding, may have led to their houses being flooded. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the infrastructure issues on that section of the railway?

Simon Lightwood: I will make sure that I pass that request to the Minister with responsibility for rail, who I am sure will be pleased to meet you.

Within this Parliament, all passenger service operations will have completed the transition to being managed by Great British Railways, which we will establish as the directing mind for the railway by introducing further legislation during this Session. Great British Railways will ensure the highest standards of customer service and operational performance, and will simplify the railways, bringing together the delivery of passenger services, infrastructure, and responsibility for planning and the use of the network. It will bring an end to years of fragmentation and waste. However, we are not waiting for this further legislation. We have already brought key parts of the rail industry together as Shadow Great British Railways, which is working to improve services, unblock barriers to delivery, and move the rail network towards greater financial sustainability.

Although we must and will improve the railways in the short term, we must also think about the long term. We are committed to setting out a long-term rail strategy that will provide a framework for the industry over the next 30 years. We will work with stakeholders to ensure that the strategy maximises the benefits of rail for everyone, because improvements have to benefit everyone who uses our public transport system. This Government want everyone to have access to public transport, and are committed to supporting improvements to services so that they are more inclusive and enable everyone to travel safely, confidently and with dignity.

Ms Billington: I am particularly struck by what my hon. Friend is saying about making sure that everybody has access to what they need. He will have heard what I said about accessing healthcare via public transport. As we are talking about integrating our transport strategy into other strategies that might achieve our overall Government missions, will due regard be given to where existing health services are provided when making decisions about where we will put infrastructure?

Simon Lightwood: You make a powerful point. I would encourage you to make a submission to the integrated transport—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The Minister has done it three times now. If I can tell off new Members, I can certainly tell off long-standing ones. No “yous” in the Chamber!

Simon Lightwood: I am quite flattered to be called a long-standing Member, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Improvements to the transport system have to benefit everyone. As I said, this Government want everyone to have access to public transport. The first phase of the

accessible information regulations came into force earlier this year. They require buses and coaches that have been used on local services since October 2019 to provide audible and visual route and destination announcements, helping everyone to travel with confidence. We have committed to working with disabled people to develop and publish an accessibility road map, which will set out the steps being taken to improve rail accessibility. Through the Access for All programme, we are continuing to work to provide step-free access routes to railway stations.

All these efforts are impossible without local partners. This Government recognise that decisions on how and where to intervene to improve local transport should be made locally. That is why we worked to strengthen the relationship between central Government and local leaders in the first few days after coming to power, working in partnership with them to develop and deliver their priorities.

On funding, we are committed to simplifying the local transport funding landscape for local authorities, ending inefficient competitions and allowing places more flexibility to decide the transport projects that will most benefit their area. The city region sustainable transport settlements provide the largest city regions with long-term funding, and empower mayors to deliver infrastructure projects that will have transformative effects on transport and be based on their local priorities, improving the lives of people in their great city regions. Looking ahead, we are committed to giving local government multi-year funding settlements at the forthcoming spending review to help it make long-term plans for transport in different areas, backed up by deepening regional devolution.

High-quality transport infrastructure supports growth and opportunity, and bringing decisions about transport closer to people is key to improving the transport networks on which we rely every day. We will therefore empower local leaders to take greater oversight of their local transport networks. We are committed to simplifying the local transport funding landscape for local authorities, ending the inefficient competitions to which I referred. We are using data and research to continue to build our understanding of what people need from the transport network, and we are continuing to invest in it. We are taking a long-term view to get the right mix of existing projects and new schemes in order to deliver a public transport system that is fit for the 21st century.

Reliable, affordable, safe and accessible transport that works for passengers and efficiently moves goods around the country is key to economic growth and people accessing opportunities. People travel for a purpose, whether it is to get to work or education, to access services such as hospitals and shops, or to meet family and friends.

We are working hard to ensure that our public transport networks and services are more accessible, available and affordable to those who rely on them the most, wherever they live and work. We are continuing to build stronger relationships with our devolved partners to ensure that public transport is serving the needs of local communities.

The hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton raised a number of specific transport issues in her constituency. I will, of course, be happy to address those very specific issues outside the Chamber, but I now turn to the core themes, starting with the integrated national transport strategy.

[Simon Lightwood]

The Government's manifesto committed to developing a long-term strategy for transport, and it said

"transport services have remained fragmented and inefficient with companies and sectors failing to speak to and plan with each other."

This Government want to focus on how transport can be designed, built and operated to better serve all people who use it, and to enable them to live fulfilling lives.

Rural bus services have been mentioned quite a lot in this debate. By giving local transport authorities more power to deliver the model that works best for their area, and by giving them flexibility on funding, they can deliver comprehensive bus networks, including the use of demand-responsive transport where appropriate and desired, to make bus services work for all communities, including in rural areas.

The buses Bill will put decision making in the hands of local leaders across England, including those in rural areas, to determine how best to design their local bus services so that they have control over routes and schedules. Bus franchising can be for all areas of the country, and it is not reserved for places like Manchester, which has done it so effectively. We are looking at various franchising models, which we hope to expand on during the Bill's passage.

Members have raised the need for real-time information, and I totally agree. Such information is important in empowering people to make effective decisions and in raising people's confidence, particularly women and girls, to go out and use public transport, as they know whether the bus will turn up on time or whether they should wait a little longer before going out for the bus. These little things can make a lot of difference to passenger confidence.

As part of the Budget, we confirmed more than £1 billion for the 2025-26 financial year to support bus services in England, outside London, and to keep fares affordable. The current £2 cap on single bus fares had been due to expire at the end of this year, but it will now be replaced by a £3 cap to help millions of people access better opportunities and to promote greater bus use.

I thank the hon. Members for Horsham (John Milne) and for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) and my hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) for their contributions. On accessibility, the Rail Minister has committed to working with the disabled community to develop and publish an accessibility road map ahead of GBR being set up.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher). As I mentioned a moment ago, franchising can meet the needs of communities of all shapes and sizes across the country, and I hope we can demonstrate that during the passage of the buses Bill. I also thank the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mr Sowards), who share many of the same transport challenges. I put on record my thanks and admiration for the queen of buses, the West Yorkshire Mayor, for everything she is doing to promote buses in West Yorkshire, including taking them back into public control.

Finally, I thank the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos). I am sure the Rail Minister will have heard his comments on his station projects.

Gideon Amos: The Minister is trying to comprehensively address all the comments in the debate. I realise he cannot comment on individual projects, but will he undertake to inform the Secretary of State of the need to release funding for the most important restoring your railway projects?

Simon Lightwood: I am sure the Secretary of State will have heard that message, as will the Rail Minister regarding the hon. Gentleman's individual project.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) and for Croydon East (Natasha Irons). I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East will welcome the £485 million that was delivered to Transport for London in the last Budget; as a northern MP, I can say that without any hesitation. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) for her passionate speech, which was delivered by a passionate advocate for public transport.

Turning to the comments made by the shadow Secretary of State, I will take no lectures from the Opposition on public transport. Looking at the Opposition Benches, all I will say is this: a picture paints a thousand words.

4.40 pm

Sarah Dyke: I congratulate the hon. Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) on her maiden speech. I wish I could share her frustration about three buses turning up at once; in Somerset, we would be delighted should one turn up at any time.

I thank all the hon. Members across the House—well, parts of the House—for their attendance today. The wide interests shared in their contributions highlight the importance of the debate. As I said in my opening remarks, the poor quality of rural transport, particularly bus services, has been evidenced by all the hon. Members from rural areas who have spoken.

The environmental and economic importance of public transport cannot be overstated. It is crucial to helping the Government hit two of their five missions, so they should grasp the opportunity to fix public transport in rural areas. I welcome the Minister's comments, but residents who travel from the south-west must know that construction at Old Oak Common will impact them. We need to give them assurances that the impact of the work will be mitigated as far as possible. I would welcome a conversation with the Rail Minister on behalf of my constituents.

We also desperately need more information about the renationalisation of South Western Railway. Many of my constituents rely on that operator and they must have the confidence that the service will improve.

My constituents in Somerton and Langport desperately want a train station to connect them to the railway, and they need information about that as soon as possible. The lack of correspondence across successive Governments is very disappointing. If a train station is still some time away, although I hope it is not, then the need to improve bus services and integrate them with the railway is vital. Liberal Democrat and Labour Members recognised that point, and I hope we can make progress on it. I thank the Minister for recognising it as well.

I look forward to seeing the models for franchising, as the Minister set out. We need funding to improve rural bus services and a real focus to provide rural

residents with a working public transport system. I eagerly await finding out how the Government will approach that over the coming weeks and months. Will the Minister set out guidance for social and economic outcomes? I believe the Government's better buses Bill will provide the perfect opportunity to do that.

Dr Arthur: The hon. Lady is summing up the debate well and I know that time is tight. She will know that the Transport Committee has just launched an inquiry into rural bus services that will focus on the social and economic aspect of those services, among other things. Will she encourage people in her network to respond to the call for evidence?

Sarah Dyke: Absolutely I will, and I encourage all hon. Members to do exactly that.

To summarise, I thank the Minister for his assurances. He knows that the Liberal Democrats will hold him to account.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of improving public transport.

Detention of Alaa Abd el-Fattah

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

4.44 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the word “you” will not pass my lips during this debate.

I have called this Adjournment debate to raise the urgent matter of the ongoing detention of Alaa Abd el-Fattah. That name was raised in the earlier debate and I am grateful for the number of Members who highlighted the case, but this debate gives us the opportunity to go into his position in slightly more depth.

Alaa is a celebrated British-Egyptian writer and co-recipient of this year's PEN Pinter prize, but he has spent the past decade imprisoned in Egypt. Alaa has been imprisoned for his writings on human rights and technology and in support of democracy. He is an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, and over those 10 years, tragically, Alaa has been denied the right to be with his young son, who lives and attends school in Brighton. I welcome members of his family who are in the Gallery today.

Alaa's current detention should have ended on 29 September, when his most recent five-year sentence ended. His appalling imprisonment was for the crime of “spreading false news”, because he shared a Facebook post detailing acts of torture against another inmate. The date of his sentences ended, but the Egyptian Government refused to release him, arguing that his two years spent languishing in pre-trial detention did not count towards his sentence. That is in complete violation of international legal norms, as well as Egypt's own domestic law.

Let me briefly offer a list of who has called for Alaa's release, because the scale of support for him internationally is extraordinary. Our last four UK Prime Ministers have demanded his release. Also on the list are the President of France, the Chancellor of Germany, the White House, the editorial boards of some of the most significant newspapers from across the globe, including *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and 14 Nobel laureates for literature—and that is just a few.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): My right hon. Friend rightly lists figures of national and international significance who are backing the campaign for Alaa's release. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in constituencies across the country—including my constituency in Leeds—more and more people, when they hear this heartbreaking story, are feeling that this is a huge injustice and that we want our Government to do everything they can and strain every sinew to get Alaa released and reunited with his family?

John McDonnell: Alaa's case is becoming a cause célèbre, not just in this country but across the globe, as demonstrated by the number of significant figures and also by the number of constituents who are now contacting us about the case.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this forward. I have spoken to him. In today's debate, which I hope the right

[Jim Shannon]

hon. Member watched on TV, he would have seen the Minister come forward with some ideas on how to take this matter forward. It has been mentioned that Alaa Abd el-Fattah is a British citizen. Carrying a British passport has to mean more than just being a British citizen; it gives us rights. Where are those rights? Does the right hon. Member agree that his continued detention should raise red flags with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office? Further, does he not believe that this deserves a greater push for Alaa Abd el-Fattah's release? I hope that the Minister's reply will outline some of the things that I believe the Government will do in a positive fashion.

John McDonnell: I will come on to some of those issues later in my speech, but this was a running theme in the debate that took place earlier as well.

To follow on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) said with regard to Alaa's case and the show of support, last year, more than 100 Parliaments echoed the call for his release in a letter to the then Foreign Secretary. In this new Parliament, Alaa has found support across the Benches. Today's debate on the protection of British nationals arbitrarily detained abroad has demonstrated the breadth of that support. We also have a new all-party parliamentary group taking up the case.

Following the decision by the Egyptian authorities to effectively ignore the end of Alaa's sentence, his mother, Laila Soueif, a professor of mathematics at Cairo university, whom a number of hon. Members have met, resorted to the only method that she thought she had left—a hunger strike. Today is the 67th day of that hunger strike. Since 30 September, she has consumed no calories, surviving solely on salts, black coffee and herbal tea. She has lost 22% of her body weight, and, as anyone who has experience of hunger strikes knows—unfortunately, in this country, we have known them in the past—she is now entering an extremely urgent and dangerous phase. Laila, who was born in London, felt compelled to take this extreme action because she believed that she was not being listened to by either of her Governments—both in Egypt and, unfortunately, in the UK.

Alaa has been repeatedly targeted by the Egyptian Government. He was first arrested in 2006 for protesting for the independence of the judiciary. In October 2011, he was arrested after writing a newspaper article detailing the Egyptian military's killing of mostly Egyptian Christian protesters, known in Egypt as the Maspero massacre. The original demonstration was against the demolition of a church.

In 2013, Alaa was arrested again, falsely accused of organising a protest in violation of Egypt's draconian protest law. He was released from prison in March 2019 after serving his five-year sentence. But the terms of his release were draconian. He was required to sleep inside a police station every night, so from 6pm until 6am he was effectively imprisoned again. During this period, Alaa continued to document the ways in which prisoners were treated in Egyptian prisons, publishing articles in the online newspaper, *Mada Masr*. While sleeping in the police station, he was visited in the middle of the night by security agents who threatened him and told him to stop writing. He courageously refused to do so. Among

the many things that he wrote and shared was a story on Facebook about a man who had died in prison, allegedly after being tortured.

After six months, Alaa was re-arrested. In September 2019, he was arrested while inside the police station where he was required to sleep and taken to an undisclosed state security facility. His lawyer, Mohamed el-Baqer, found him and was himself arrested while representing Alaa. The lawyer is now serving four years in prison.

Alaa was held in inhumane conditions at Tora prison. In a cell with no sunlight, he was denied access to books, exercise, a radio, a mattress or bedding, or any time out of his cell. He was not even allowed a clock to be aware of the time of the day, so days would pass without him realising. Worst of all, he was placed under the custody of the very same officer who was accused of torturing a man to death. Alaa was held in this nightmare of a place for two years. At that time, he told his family that he was having suicidal thoughts, which was understandable.

Then, in December 2021, his application for his British passport—his right under the British Nationality Act 1981—came through. A one-time use emergency passport was handed to his family who then went to the prison. They were not allowed to take even letters to Alaa, and the family insisted that a blank postcard of the Queen be delivered to him. The prison guards, perhaps confused, took the postcard and gave it to Alaa. For months thereafter, that postcard of the Queen was the only thing in his cell. This was how his family finally let him know that he had become a British citizen. Alaa and his family thought that things would now change, but weeks passed and no consular official arrived. Requests by the British embassy for consular access to their citizen were denied. Desperate, in April 2022 Alaa declared himself on hunger strike until the Egyptian authorities would allow the British consular services to access him. That failed. To this day, he has still never received a consular visit.

Many of us will remember the scenes in the run-up to and during COP27, which was held in Egypt. With still no movement after months on a Gandhi-style strike of 100 calories a day, Alaa escalated to a full water strike. There were scenes of global solidarity with Alaa from those in the climate movement, Nobel laureates and world leaders, including Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Emmanuel Macron. Our former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak wrote to Alaa's family before travelling to—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The right hon. Gentleman just referred to the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton by name. He really should know better than to do that.

John McDonnell: You got me on that one, Madam Deputy Speaker. Hands up. I will hand myself in later. Our former Prime Minister the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) wrote to Alaa's family before travelling to Egypt. He said that "the government is deeply committed to doing everything we can to resolve Alaa's case as soon as possible".

Despite that commitment, two years on from COP, Alaa's family have nothing to show for the UK Government's efforts to secure his release. If this new arbitrary extension of Alaa's sentence is allowed to pass without intervention from the British authorities, his family fear, as many of us do, that he will never be released. They have cause to believe that as the Egyptian Government have repeatedly

engaged in a practice they call “case recycling”, which is when new cases are brought against prisoners approaching the end of their sentence. According to human rights organisations such as the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, in 2023 at least 251 defendants were rotated to new cases. In 2022, another 620 defendants were treated in the same way.

Alaa’s family began to lose faith in the previous Government, with Ministers seemingly unwilling to take any action on his case beyond simply raising it with their Egyptian counterparts. While that was going on, we witnessed the Government seeking ever-closer economic ties with the Egyptian Government. The election of a Labour Government gave Alaa’s family a renewed sense of hope. The Foreign Secretary has been a supporter of the campaign. He was alongside Alaa’s sisters during their sit-in outside the Foreign Office and publicly described Alaa as a

“courageous voice for democracy in Egypt”.

As shadow Foreign Secretary, he outlined a series of practical suggestions for getting Alaa back to the UK, which included leveraging our substantive trade relations with Egypt, restricting the access of the Egyptian ambassador and pausing new strategic partnerships with the Egyptian Government until Alaa’s case was resolved.

The only relevant detail that has changed since the Foreign Secretary made those remarks as shadow Foreign Secretary is that Alaa’s sentence has now ended, but he remains in prison. Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I call upon the Foreign Secretary to stay true to his words and to see through some of the actions that he outlined in 2022. He knew then, as is evident, that a strategy based solely on raising the case in meetings will not secure Alaa’s release. Ahead of 29 September, when Alaa was supposed to be released, multiple Members of this House wrote to the Foreign Secretary, alerting him to the end of Alaa’s sentence and asking him to ensure that appropriate action was taken. Just days before the 29th, the Foreign Secretary was pictured smiling with his Egyptian counterpart. On 21 November, our Prime Minister was photographed shaking hands with President Sisi. On 25 November, I tabled a question on whether the Prime Minister had raised Alaa’s case with the President on that occasion. I have not yet received a response. To be brutally frank, it is not clear that any serious steps have been taken to alert the Egyptian Government to the fact that Britain was expecting Alaa to be released on that date. It is still unclear whether the Government have changed their approach to the case since the date passed—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

John McDonnell: We expected a significant change of approach from the last Government because the previous methods failed, so I would welcome an update from the Minister to the House on whether their approach has changed.

There are a series of steps the Government could take that would see Alaa reunited with his family, and especially with his son. The Minister should change the travel advice for Egypt on the Foreign Office’s website to reflect the reality of the moment: that if a person is arrested in

Egypt, the Government cannot guarantee even consular access. The United States provides that advice to its citizens—why do we not? Last year saw a record number of British holidaymakers go to Egypt, a country where tourism is a significant part of the economy. Changing the travel advice to reflect the reality of the situation would demonstrate to the Egyptians that our Government are taking Alaa’s detention seriously. We know the Egyptian Government are seeking an increase in British investment into Egypt. We should be clear and announce a moratorium on any new trade agreements with Egypt until Alaa is free.

Last month, 15 non-governmental organisations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists, FairSquare and the Global Magnitsky Justice Campaign asked the British Government to put on hold any new Government assistance or promotion of new foreign direct investments into Egypt until Alaa was free. In recent days, we have also seen new research from the Campaign Against Arms Trade, exposing the fact that Britain has sold more than £200 million of arms licences to Egypt while Alaa remains in prison. That included the largest ever single arms licence on record from Britain to Egypt, worth nearly £80 million, for military radars in December 2023. That is further evidence of the depth of the relationship between the UK and Egypt that can and should be leveraged. It goes without saying that no such deals of that kind must be pursued by the new Government while a British citizen is imprisoned.

As the Foreign Secretary previously suggested, there should be diplomatic consequences for the Egyptian ambassador. How is it right that he continues to be allowed access to the highest levels of our Government while refusing to allow British officials in Cairo to do their job under the Vienna convention on consular relations? I wrote to the Egyptian ambassador—I hope he received my email—in the hope that we would receive some positive message from him before the debate, and we could break the good news that the Egyptian Government had decided to release Alaa. I have received no response whatsoever.

I have outlined some of the measures that the Government could take to make it clear to Egypt that the refusal to recognise Alaa’s British nationality and the failure to recognise and respect its own laws on time served will have serious consequences for the bilateral relationship. I hope the Government will grasp the urgency and seriousness of the situation, especially in the context of a 68-year-old woman on hunger strike whose life is at risk, and take the action necessary to see Alaa released hopefully in time to spend Christmas with his son in Brighton.

I would like to end by sending a message from this House to Alaa, echoing his own words back to him from the title of his book: “You have not yet been defeated”. I say to Alaa: you have not been, and we will not let you be, defeated. We will secure your release.

5.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): I acknowledge Alaa’s family, who are in the Public Gallery. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for securing this debate, and I pay tribute to him for his

[*Hamish Falconer*]

tireless support for Mr el-Fattah and his family. I am also grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions in this and the earlier debate.

I re-emphasise, both to Alaa's family and to the House, that his release remains a priority for the UK Government. I recognise the profound impact that his imprisonment has had on him and his family. The Government, and I as the Minister responsible, are doing all we can to find a resolution. Our priority remains to reunite him with his family, and until that happens, we are working to ensure that he is allowed consular access and support. As I said earlier, supporting British nationals overseas is at the heart of our work at the Foreign Office. That includes dual nationals and more recent British nationals such as Alaa.

I have met Mr el-Fattah's family on a number of occasions, including his incredibly impressive mother, Laila, who was in the Chamber last week and whom I also saw in Cairo. I share my the concern of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington about her wellbeing, as she is deep into a hunger strike. As he rightly said, the health implications of that are obviously serious. I am sure that the whole House shares the Government's concern about her welfare. We will continue to be in regular contact with Mr el-Fattah's family to discuss his case. The Foreign Secretary recently met the family, including Laila, last week. I met her last month during my visit to Cairo and when she was in the House more recently.

Our consular officials and our ambassador in Cairo work around the clock on this case. At the same time, we know from listening to the family that they feel that more support is required. That feeling is shared in other cases, and as I said to the House earlier, that is why we are looking to strengthen our approach through the appointment of a special envoy to work with families on the most complex detention cases, of which Mr el-Fattah's case is clearly one.

Let me turn to the question of Mr el-Fattah's nationality, which is contested. The UK has consistently and unambiguously maintained that he is a British national, and that remains the position of the new Labour Government. He became a British citizen in December 2021, while he was in detention but shortly before being sentenced. I stress that the timing of his citizenship, in the same month as his sentencing, was in no way connected to the UK Government's position on his case. As the Foreign Secretary said in the House last week, there is no conspiracy behind this. We have always been clear with Egypt that Mr el-Fattah was granted nationality in the normal way. He is a British national, and is therefore entitled to consular access under the Vienna convention. We disagree with the Egyptian view that he is an Egyptian mono-national and that the process for conferring nationality was in any way irregular. We continue to urge the Egyptians to grant us consular access under the Vienna convention on consular relations, as they have done in other cases of detained dual nationals.

In response to my right hon. Friend's comments, let me say a little about how we have been engaging with Egypt. Across all our engagements, we have been clear that this case will be resolved only by Mr el-Fattah's release. That was the message that I delivered when I saw Foreign Minister Abdelatty and the Egyptian ambassador on what was the first visit by a Minister of

the new Government to Egypt. The Foreign Secretary has also raised this case directly with the Foreign Minister, as has the Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), just this week. I can also confirm to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington that the Prime Minister did discuss the case with President Sisi in August. I would like to reassure Alaa's family and this House that we will continue to press the Egyptians until Mr el-Fattah is free and reunited with his family.

I am aware, of course, of the understandable frustration that Members feel at Alaa's situation, and the desire that the UK Government roll back our relationship with Egypt or drop all economic support. However, our partnership with Egypt is crucial to alleviating suffering in the region and for our push for wider peace and security in the region. While I was in Egypt, I announced further assistance for the Egyptian healthcare system in order to support Palestinians who have crossed from Gaza and are in need of urgent medical care. I also signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at boosting the Egyptians' efforts on food security.

I know that my right hon. Friend and many other Members of the House are aware of the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza, the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and the many pressures on Egypt, where poverty is also very high. As such, while Mr el-Fattah remains at the forefront of my mind, the Foreign Secretary's mind and the minds of the whole Government, we will continue to try to ensure that our relationship with Egypt is positive and productive where those efforts are necessary to protect other British nationals and try to deal with questions of international peace and security.

John McDonnell: I want to make it explicit that nobody who has raised this case wants to prevent the UK Government from providing aid and assistance, particularly given the issues that are happening to the Palestinians in Gaza—we are certainly not asking for that. What we are asking for relates to the relationship on trade and on arms sales. I believe there is potential leverage in those areas to enable us to secure Alaa's release. In addition, the relationship with the Egyptian ambassador also gives us the opportunity to exercise some leverage. Those are the activities that we would like the Government to pursue.

Hamish Falconer: I will come back to those points in a little while, if I may.

At the heart of our general approach is the firm belief that through continued engagement, we can encourage the Egyptians to improve their human rights record, and that a stronger relationship than the one we inherited would allow us to have frank and open discussions with key decision makers—as my colleagues and I have recently done—so that we can see improvements, both in Alaa's case and in relation to the wider human rights and social situation in Egypt. I reassure my right hon. Friend that in my engagements with both the Egyptian ambassador and Egyptian Ministers, we are clear at all times about the importance of this case, including its importance to the very many international observers whom my right hon. Friend ran through so articulately. This case is important to Egypt's international reputation, and it will of course shape the views of investors and others when they think about their engagements.

In conclusion, the UK remains firmly committed to securing Mr el-Fattah's release and reuniting him with his family. We will continue to push Egypt towards a resolution, making clear that the only way to resolve this case is by releasing him.

John McDonnell: The Minister is coming to a conclusion. Can we have an assurance that we will receive a report to the House in the coming month about the effectiveness of the actions the Government have taken in securing Alaa's release?

Hamish Falconer: Having been pressed on this case twice in a day, I am more than happy to commit to return to the House within a month to give a further update.

We will continue to push Egypt for a resolution and I thank my right hon. Friend for his interest in the case, and many others in this House for their interest. I have no doubt that I will be regularly coming to the House to update Members on our efforts in relation to Mr el-Fattah, and I know that the whole House is thinking of his mother and the rest of his family during this incredibly difficult time.

Question put and agreed to.

5.14 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 5 December 2024

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

Cumberlege Review: Pelvic Mesh

1.30 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pelvic mesh and the Cumberlege Review.

Thank you, Mr Stringer, for your chairmanship. I sincerely thank all Members who have come to contribute to this debate. I thank the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne), and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), for attending. I also particularly thank Baroness Cumberlege for coming along to the debate.

In my first MP constituency surgery I met Debbie—I am delighted that Debbie and her husband Ian are here today. Debbie was active. She was into keeping fit and socialising with friends and family but, following her operation to have pelvic mesh inserted, she was forced to give up work. She now suffers from chronic pain in her hips, pelvis, groin and legs. She often suffers from fatigue. She is unable to exercise. She suffers from incontinence, post-traumatic stress disorder, severe depression and autoimmune disease. She later found out that the operation to have the mesh inserted was not even necessary.

When Debbie had her first operation to have the mesh removed, she was told that it was removed completely, but later found out that was not in fact true. She was forced to have a second operation, where, again, not all the mesh was removed.

Despite winning subsequent court proceedings, she has received no compensation, in part due to the surgeon not being covered by insurance. Debbie's case shows the barriers for victims of medical negligence. It took seven years for Debbie's case to get to court. Part of her concern is that the surgeons operating to remove the mesh are the same doctors who did the initial operation to insert it.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): This is such an important debate, and many of us in this room have been working on this issue for a very long time. I point the hon. Gentleman to the Government's review of the NHS. We only have nine centres. We have to emphasise how important it is that the review addresses the need for more surgeons in these areas. The issues that he is outlining are so common, yet we only have nine centres.

Chris Vince: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that useful intervention. Following my meeting with Debbie, two further Harlow residents have come forward who have also been part of this scandal. I have spoken to Members across the House who have constituents with the same issue. More than 600 women came forward

to be part of the Cumberlege review and the subsequent Hughes review. This is a huge issue that affects many people.

As many Members will be aware, on 21 February 2018, the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), called for an inquiry. The independent medicines and medical devices safety review, chaired by Baroness Julia Cumberlege, who I am delighted to see here today and whose support I am delighted to have, published the "First Do No Harm" report in July 2020. The report considered two medications and one medical device, but I will focus on pelvic mesh implants, which were used in the surgical repair of pelvic organ prolapse and to manage stress urinary incontinence. It was hugely emotional to hear Debbie's story—to hear at first hand the huge impact that this issue has had on her life.

In her report, Baroness Cumberlege described the accounts of women who had been affected by this issue as "harrowing". I think we can all agree that that is absolutely the case. I will not go through the whole review, because that would take too long, but I will just highlight a couple of things said by women who came forward and spoke about the impact that the procedure had had on them.

The women said that there was a

"lack of awareness of who to complain to and how to report adverse events"

and reported

"breakdown of family life; loss of jobs, financial support and sometimes housing".

However, the situation is even worse than that. The women also spoke about a

"loss of identity and self-worth".

Sometimes, we fail to recognise the massive connection between physical health, including a physical procedure such as this one, and people's mental health and wellbeing. The women also reported

"a persistent feeling of guilt".

Nobody who is a victim of medical negligence should feel guilty about that fact.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I think that often the reason people feel guilt is because they feel that they were not given the necessary information at the beginning and they did not ask for it, but if they had only known, they would not have touched this debatable and deplorable procedure with a bargepole.

Chris Vince: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I could not agree more. In the case of Debbie, who I have spoken about, she did not even need the procedure in the first place, but clearly that information was not provided correctly to her. Many women absolutely would not have gone through with the procedure if they had known about the dangers—and, as I say, in Debbie's case she did not need to go through with it.

The Cumberlege review made a number of recommendations. First, it recommended establishing a separate redress scheme to meet the cost of care and support for people who have experienced avoidable harm caused by the pelvic mesh. It also recommended:

"Networks of specialist centres should be set up to provide comprehensive treatment, care and advice for those affected by implanted mesh",

[Chris Vince]

and that a database should be created of all patients who received an implant of medical devices, including the pelvic mesh.

The previous Government published their response to those recommendations in July 2021. They did not accept the report's recommendations about redress. However, in December 2022 they announced that they had asked the Patient Safety Commissioner to explore options for redress, and that project began in the summer of 2023.

On 7 February 2024, the Hughes report was published, setting out recommendations for redress for those harmed by sodium valproate—a medicine used to treat epilepsy—and pelvic mesh. The report calls for the establishment of an independent, two-stage redress scheme to provide both financial and non-financial redress for affected patients.

I realise that I have been talking for quite a long time, Mr Stringer, but I think you appreciate the importance of this subject. I will quickly go through the recommendations of the Hughes report, so the Minister is aware of them. There are quite a few recommendations and they are as follows:

“The government has a responsibility to create an ex-gratia redress scheme providing financial and non-financial redress for those harmed by...pelvic mesh. This scheme should be based on the principles of restorative practice and be co-designed with harmed patients.”

We have seen that throughout this process patients have not had a voice and it is hugely important that they have a voice in finding the solution.

The Hughes report's recommendations also said:

“Redress should provide all those harmed by pelvic mesh or valproate”—

the other medicine I mentioned—

“with access to non-financial redress. To deliver this, the government should work with other government departments, the healthcare system and local authorities to measurably improve harmed patients' access to, and experience of, public services.”

Another recommendation was:

“The government should create a two-stage financial redress scheme comprising an Interim Scheme and a Main Scheme... The Interim Scheme should award directly harmed patients a fixed sum by way of financial redress... The Interim Scheme should be followed by a Main Scheme. This would offer more bespoke financial support to directly harmed patients based on their individual circumstances and...those indirectly harmed”.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. The NHS has a clinical negligence scheme and it spends a lot of money on lawyers. Does my hon. Friend agree that victims of this particular scandal should, like many others, get no-fault compensation? And does he think the NHS should look at its clinical negligence scheme and move towards no-fault in order to reduce the spend on lawyers?

Chris Vince: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. I broadly agree with her. Over the last year we have seen some terrible scandals, the Post Office scandal and the infected blood scandal. When we have debates on those in this House, we recognise that things should have been done much more quickly and that we should have been

much more open to providing financial support to the people affected. We should look at this case in those terms.

To continue the recommendations, the report states:

“Patients who received relevant treatment through either the NHS or independent sector should be eligible for the Interim Scheme and Main Scheme...”

and adds that patients should find the application process for both schemes “straightforward”. Again, that speaks about accessibility and making the process non-adversarial, which is really important. It comes across in both reports that victims of the pelvic mesh scandal were made to feel guilty and that it was their fault, which is absolutely not the case.

The report states that both schemes

“should be administered by an independent body which commands the confidence of patients.”

We want those patients to feel confidence in the scheme. Both schemes

“should effectively signpost harmed patients to services which can provide them with free emotional support.”

I reiterate the importance of that emotional support. Finally, the report states:

“The government must ensure that the launch of the Interim Scheme and the Main Scheme is accompanied”—

this goes back to the point made by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis)—

“by an awareness raising campaign to ensure that all potentially eligible patients are made aware of it.”

As I mentioned earlier, 617 people directly harmed by the pelvic mesh implants contributed to the Cumberlege report, and 471 people directly harmed by the pelvic mesh implants provided evidence to the Hughes report. That shows the huge number of women affected by the scandal. I am delighted to see how many Members from across the House have been contacted, as I was by Debbie, by constituents who have been impacted by this. In August this year more than 100 women who experienced pain and complications from transvaginal mesh implants received payouts from three manufacturers of the product, but there was no admission of liability.

I thank the Minister for his time and for giving consideration to the recommendations. I truly thank everybody from across the House for contributing to this debate and I look forward to hearing from them. I finish with a quote from the Hughes report, from a patient harmed by pelvic mesh:

“It always comes back to we innocently trusted that we were having something that was going to fix our embarrassing health condition and then from that we have had our lives shattered. This is not our fault.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): It looks as though hon. Members do not need reminding that if they wish to catch my eye they should bob, even if they have put in to speak. I call Sir Alec Shelbrooke.

1.43 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince); it is encouraging that new-intake MPs are already raising this issue. As he said in his opening

remarks, constituents have been to see their Members of Parliament because of the pain, suffering and injustice that they have gone through, and they are still not getting anywhere. I am not sure who the lady is, but it is very nice to see her in the Gallery because it is an exceptionally important issue for women.

Can we get back to one very important fact about this? We are dealing with people who have had their lives destroyed in the prime of life because of something they were recommended by the NHS. In all honesty, if we were at, say, the dentist's and they said, "We need to do this to your tooth", we would say, "Okay." We would not say, "Can I come back tomorrow?" and then google for any issues. We trust the clinicians and listen to what they say.

Let us flip that coin and give the other side: at the time, a lot of those clinicians genuinely thought that vaginal mesh was, for want of a better description, a bit of a miracle cure. As time has gone on, it has become apparent that it was one of the worst procedures that could ever have taken place, and it is the time lag that has created the problem.

I have spoken about this topic many times. I have described some of the things that have happened to some of my constituents, including people who were once extremely active now not being able to stand up. When my constituent came to see me, she had to do the entire surgery stood up and leant over the table because she could not sit. She was younger than I am now. She eventually managed to take out private loans and have the mesh removed. There lies one of the big injustices: this was something done by the NHS, and the NHS has run away from its responsibility to solve the problem.

I accept that it is difficult for someone who has had the procedure to accept that the surgeon who put the mesh in might be the person who will remove it. But we do not have enough experts in this area, which goes back to the intervention I made on the hon. Member for Harlow: as the review of the NHS comes forward, resourcing must be considered. I have said it before and I will say it again: I believe the NHS to be a misogynistic and sexist institution that was too quick to pat women on the head and say, "Oh well, it's just what women go through," in so many aspects of gynaecological health, as well as other things.

I have known the Minister for a long time. I consider him to be a friend, and I know that he is in the job because he fundamentally believes in people's rights. He has a hard task ahead of him. That hard task is not because of what the Minister wants to drive into place; it is because of the pushback that he is going to get from the NHS and the Treasury, which will say that it cannot be done. He is going to have a tough time, but we can already see that this is not a party political issue in the House. Many of us on the Conservative side criticised our own Government in debates on this subject, because they were getting the pushback from the Department of Health and Social Care and the Treasury—and we said that it was not good enough.

Removing mesh is like taking hair out of chewing gum. It is not a simple operation. It is not just that it breaks up and starts to infect other organs in the body, which is what can cause the incontinence, as it makes its way into the gut; it has now been shown that there are low-level infections within the mesh.

My constituent who finally had mesh removed had a period for the first time in 10 years. Think about that for a moment—being told, "Well, we're not quite sure what is wrong," and then, when the mesh is removed, suddenly having periods again after a decade. That shows how much the issue has not been taken as seriously as it should have been. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), and I were speaking only last week about a constituent who has a similar issue. Where could she find the mesh centres? There are nine mesh centres, but the issue affects the entire country.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) mentioned the NHS compensation scheme. We moved on from that because it simply was not working. People were not getting the compensation from the scheme because it was not really accessible, and it was confrontational. That comes back to the point of the NHS doing something but not wanting to take responsibility for it. I am afraid that the Minister will be under pressure from people saying, "You must defend the NHS. That is your job. You represent the NHS. When people criticise the NHS, they are criticising you and the Government." But that is not true: the Minister will have our full support for pushing back in that way.

This is the Thalidomide situation again—it is as controversial and, frankly, as scandalous as Thalidomide. We are talking about the "miracle drug" that women took in pregnancy to stop them from getting morning sickness, and it took years before it was banned; in some countries, it was used for several years after that. We pay compensation to victims of Thalidomide for the rest of their lives. I am proud to have been the Member of Parliament who in 2012 got the health grant extended for another 10 years. It is now a lifetime health grant. I am proud of that; it is something we did in this House. People turn around and say, "Redress is something we have to assess because there are so many people," but why is that? There are so many people because the procedure was done willy-nilly and now those involved do not want to take responsibility.

Many other Members want to speak, and I will let them have their say. The Minister has my full support and, I am sure, the full support of many Members here—and he is going to need it. I ask him to stay strong, to keep in mind why we are doing this and to remember the victims who have had their lives destroyed in every single aspect. They must have the redress and the ability through the NHS to have the situation rectified so that they are not borrowing £25,000 to go privately to the same surgeon they would see on the NHS.

1.51 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) on securing this important debate and highlighting the trauma caused to many women, such as his constituent Debbie, by the pelvic mesh scandal.

Before entering Parliament I spent 20 years in the health and care sector, including at the Department of Health and Social Care as a senior civil servant. Patient safety and quality were part of my responsibilities. I was involved with some of the inquiries into tragedies of maternal and infant deaths, such as at Morecambe Bay;

[Anna Dixon]

with the Government response to the Francis inquiry into the tragic deaths at Stafford hospital; and with subsequent reviews by Sir Bruce Keogh. That is more than a decade ago.

As my hon. Friend was saying, the NHS is fantastic at its best; it is there to heal and cure. But it is a tragedy that there continue to be patients who suffer harm as a result of medical care and treatment. The pelvic mesh scandal, I am afraid, follows a long line of other scandals—not least the infected blood scandal. I am obviously pleased that the Government have recognised the harm caused by that scandal and are committed to a full and fair compensation scheme. Obviously, here we are seeking redress for the women who have been harmed. It is important that we learn from the past as well as prevent scandals such as this from happening again in future.

As has been the case with many other Members, a constituent approached me about this issue. I am pleased with the male allyship on show today. The voices of women are often not heard; there are power issues when it comes to surgeons, who are often male. This follows other scandals involving unnecessary hysterectomies, for example. We need to remember some of the horrific consequences for women such as Julie, who lives in Baidon in my constituency. Her story is similar to some of those that have already been shared. The details are pretty harrowing. Her life has been torn apart as a result of both the mental and physical consequences. I will not go into the details of her case, which are similar to those already mentioned. We must look for redress for the unnecessary suffering and seek to put the issue right.

Like other Members, I pay tribute to Baroness Cumberlege for her work on the review. I have admired her from afar for a long time; in the 1990s, she was Health Minister when I was early in my health career and she did fantastic work on maternity services in 2015. That resulted in recommendations and the setting-up of networks; we have seen progress on that as well as care and advice, and obviously I welcome that. For women who had mesh inserted, particularly for urinary incontinence and vaginal prolapse, it is vital that such services are accessible in every region, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow said.

More needs to be done. In particular, under the Consumer Rights Act 2015 the statute of limitation for faulty medical devices is just 10 years. That is obviously too short a timeframe for pelvic mesh, because it can easily take longer than 10 years for the most serious negative effects to come to light. I have written to the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, seeking an amendment to that Act to increase the statute of limitation to 20 years for faulty medical devices and products. I am pleased to say that a review is under way. Will the Minister follow up on that and ensure that the representations made are followed through on behalf of people affected in the future and seek justice?

Drawing on my professional background, I want to address the points made about the products. There are significant clinical trials for drugs and pharmaceuticals, but we do not gather sufficient evidence before products such as mesh go into widespread use. I again urge the Minister and others, including the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the National Institute for Health and Care Research, to ensure that all devices

and products—particularly implants—go through a proper clinical trial process before they are licensed. That relates to the point about device licensing. Drug licensing is very strict and takes place over many years, but do we have sufficient device regulation for these sorts of implants?

On professional regulation, we obviously give the surgeons the benefit of the doubt and hope that they were using best practice at the time, but we have to recognise that in some cases surgeons and doctors do not operate in the best interests of the patient, and that full informed consent may not be given. We have seen examples of that, even after the problems with pelvic mesh came to light. I urge the Government to look at whether the professional regulation is strong enough.

Since my early work in this area, I have maintained an interest in patient safety. As the newly elected vice-chair for the all-party parliamentary group on patient safety, I look forward to continuing to work with the chair, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt); I worked with him when he was Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Hopefully, we will work with other Members across the House to improve safety in the NHS and address the pelvic mesh scandal and other issues. I hope that no one suffers in the way that women such as Debbie and my constituent Julie have in the past. We must protect patients for the future.

1.58 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for securing this important debate and for the opportunity to speak about the devastating impact of pelvic mesh impacts and the systemic failures surrounding their use.

Among those affected is my constituent Rachel. In 2014, she was assured that a pelvic mesh implant was the best solution to her incontinence, but instead it led to years of unrelenting pain, infections and a diminished quality of life. Repeatedly dismissed by medical professionals, she was left self-catheterising and enduring ever-worsening symptoms. She eventually had to borrow £12,000 for private surgery to remove the mesh, only to find that her pain and nerve damage persisted. Today, she is in debt, relies on strong pain medication, and struggles daily with the physical and emotional toll of her ordeal.

Equally distressing is the experience of Suzi, the daughter of two of my constituents. After her initial surgery to relieve mild stress incontinence, she experienced severe complications, including debilitating pain and a hole in her urethra caused by the mesh. Over the years, she underwent multiple surgeries to remove it. Each time she was told that the problem had been resolved, but each time fragments of the mesh remained, prolonging her suffering and leading to permanent damage. Her pain was dismissed as psychological. Today, Suzi lives with chronic pain, relies on a wheelchair and battles PTSD. Her life, once full of independence, activity and joy, has been irreversibly changed.

Thousands of women have suffered avoidable harm as a result of pelvic mesh implants. The Cumberlege review described the health system that allowed this to happen as

“disjointed, siloed, unresponsive and defensive”,

and recommended a comprehensive response, including the establishment of dedicated redress schemes. The recommendations have not been fully implemented, and there is still no redress scheme. Victims have been failed.

The Government must act now to implement the Cumberlege review in full. That includes accepting the call for a moratorium on pelvic mesh implants, ensuring appropriate care and psychological support, and urgently addressing the lack of redress for victims. The absence of a formal compensation scheme is a glaring failure. Even though the Patient Safety Commissioner reiterated the need for action earlier this year, no meaningful progress has been made.

We know the scale of harm is vast. At least 10,000 women in England have been affected, although campaigners suggest that the true figure may be closer to 40,000. These women trusted the healthcare system and were let down at every turn. They were misled, gaslit and left to suffer alone. They were promised a risk-free procedure, only to endure life-altering complications. When they sought help, they were ignored or dismissed and told that their symptoms were imagined. Women's health must be taken seriously.

There has been a financial settlement for some women, but it came with no admission of liability. That is not justice. The Government must provide clarity on their plans and not leave my constituents, their families and women across the country in limbo any longer.

2.1 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for raising this important issue. As he did with his constituent Debbie, I recently met with my constituent Paula, who shared her experience of the impact of having pelvic mesh fitted.

In 2015, Paula had her mesh fitted to resolve urinary incontinence, but her experience with pelvic mesh has been painful and inconvenient. Between 2020 and 2023, she had various painful bladder stones that attached to the mesh, and in July 2023 she was informed that the mesh had eroded into her bladder. I understand that the mesh is now cutting into Paula's urethra, causing her terrible pain and incontinence. Paula will now need to undergo three major operations to remove the mesh, and she has told me of the toll that it has taken on her. In her own words, her life has

"gone from working full time, holidaying, socialising and running, my big passion covering 5k around three times a week, to losing my job,"

not being able to run and feeling "isolated and very depressed".

Paula now plans her life around the availability of toilet facilities. She is unable to take long journeys and lives in fear of the issues that incontinence causes her. As we have heard, this is an issue that affects many women who, like Paula, say that they did not have the risks and potential harms of surgical mesh properly communicated to them.

It is not mandatory for individuals to report the side effects of surgical mesh to the NHS, so many women like Paula were not properly informed of the potential long-term effects on their health and wellbeing. Requiring

side effects to be reported would ensure better regulation and allow patients to fully understand the implications of medical procedures, so I will welcome the Minister's comments on the points raised by Members and the need to implement in full the recommendations of the Cumberlege review.

2.3 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Listening to the heartfelt contributions of so many new colleagues, I get the impression that most if not all of them had, like me, never heard of this problem until a constituent walked into their surgery and told them of the terrible experience that they had had.

I have a practical suggestion: at the end of this debate, which will no doubt follow in the footsteps of several previous debates that were equally well informed, passionate and horrifying, we should perhaps put our names to a joint letter to a man called Nick Wallis. He is a freelance journalist who did a wonderful thing: he researched the Post Office Horizon system disaster and wrote a book called "The Great Post Office Scandal". If I remember correctly, it was serialised for a week on Radio 4, and subsequently he was the consultant to the remarkable production, "Mr Bates vs. The Post Office". We can have these debates regularly, as we have been doing, and we can upset and horrify each other by recounting our constituents' pain and the appalling negligence that led to these terrible outcomes, but until the issue grasps the public imagination, I do not think people will get anywhere.

Interestingly, one point that has not been mentioned is the possible responsibility and liability of the large pharmaceutical company that manufactured the mesh in the first place. What research did it undertake? What responsibility does it have? What help can the Government give people who have been irreparably harmed to go after that company for compensation?

There has been one great positive development, which has been referred to several times, and that is the magnificent work of Baroness Cumberlege, who certainly did the whole community of damaged women the best possible service in conducting that excellent review. The question is to what extent will her recommendations be implemented?

I pay tribute in particular to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), who spoke earlier, and the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), from whom we are about to hear, for their exemplary leadership of the all-party parliamentary group on this terrible disaster and for keeping the flame burning all these years. I say "all these years" because it has been a long time. Looking back on my own website to check my contributions, I see that this is now the fourth full-scale debate in which my colleagues and I have gone over the same ground. If anybody is interested, the dates of the previous three debates, which were packed with testimony and interesting information, were 19 April 2018—slightly longer ago from now than the entire duration of the second world war—8 July 2021 and 3 February 2022. It would not be appropriate for me to go over in detail what has been said previously, as it is all there on the record, but it is important to recognise that we are

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

talking about thousands and thousands of damaged women—10,000 at the very least, and as we have heard, some estimates put the number as high as 40,000.

Treatment centres have been mentioned, but there is a particular question about who has the skill to practise in the treatment centres. Who will put themselves forward as being appropriately skilled? It will be the very people who inserted the mesh in the first place.

In one of the earlier debates, I cited a constituent who was 35 when she was given what was described to her as “routine surgery”, 16 years before the debate in question took place. I said then:

“She was initially told that it was her fault that her body was rejecting the two mesh implants. She then went through a cycle of implants, the removal of protrusions and eroded segments and seven bouts of surgery. Three TVTs—trans-vaginal tapes—are still inside her, she suffers chronic pain from orbital nerve damage, constantly needs painkillers and has had constant side effects, indifferent treatment and a refusal to admit fault or to refer her to an out-of-area specialist in mesh removal.”—[*Official Report*, 19 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 508.]

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: My right hon. Friend has just made an important point. He spoke about the removal of protrusions and seven surgeries. That almost puts a gloss on what has happened. We have all heard from women who have had the surgery and the experience of many of them is that they have been butchered. It is important to make that clear in this debate, especially for new Members, because we have discussed this in Parliament before: when we think of surgery, we think of any other normal surgery, but this surgery leaves huge amounts of scar tissue and has butchered women in ways that I will not go into now. That must be recognised when we describe some of the remedials that have happened, mainly because those carrying them out do not really know what they are doing at this stage.

Sir Julian Lewis: Exactly right. That is why my constituent said at the time, “I do not want anyone from the hospital coming near me ever again. I have lost complete faith in them. I have been lied to and told repeatedly that it was my body rejecting the mesh. But unbelievably they kept putting more in.”

Over this period of six or more years I have probably tabled about 12 or 15 questions for written answer, obviously to a previous Government. I will quote three, which were all in the aftermath of the Cumberlege report. In June 2021—for the benefit of *Hansard* it was question 16777—I asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

“what checks his Department carried out to ensure that surgeons awarded NHS contracts for the removal of failed vaginal mesh implants had not previously been responsible for (a) originally implanting them, and subsequently (b) denying that anything had gone wrong with them; and whether any personnel awarded NHS contracts to work at mesh remediation specialist centres are known by his Department to be currently facing legal proceedings for implanting mesh which injured women who are now seeking its removal at such centres.”

The answer, which came from the then Minister of State, read:

“It is the responsibility of the employing organisations”—presumably the NHS—

“to ensure that the staff undertaking mesh implantation and/or dealing with mesh complications are qualified and competent to do so. NHS England’s procurement process to identify the specialist centres to deal with the complications of mesh considered a range of clinical and service quality issues. No assessment was undertaken regarding National Health Service contracts or staff facing legal proceedings.”

Somebody in the process of suing a surgeon but still needing ongoing care may have no other option but to go to a mesh centre headed up by—guess who?—the surgeon who she is suing because he damaged her in the first place.

The second written question I will refer to was in July 2021—question No. 31274—which read:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, with reference to the debate on the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review on 8 July 2021...what steps he plans to take to research new and improved techniques for removal of eroded surgical mesh implants.”

As we have heard, it is intolerably difficult to remove this stuff. One would think that the very least the NHS could do would be to make a dedicated effort to develop new techniques for doing it. The description of it being like removing hair from chewing gum is vivid. I have sometimes speculated—I am not in any way qualified to do so—that maybe the answer to this might be to develop some sort of technique that could harmlessly dissolve the material and let it be gradually flushed away, rather than physically trying to disentangle it with the risk of doing more damage. That may be completely and utterly impracticable, but my point is that we do not know because no proper national effort is being made to find a way in which this disaster can be, to some extent, effectively rectified without harming the victims further.

Anna Dixon: I think the right hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point. Obviously, from my professional background, I see myself as fairly well-informed, but the scale of the damage done by this particular implant—the pelvic mesh—is also a shock to me. It is really timely that new Members are made aware of this issue. Hopefully, we can support any efforts to continue to raise it, and I commend Members who have been in this place for longer on their work to date.

I hope that the Minister will reflect on the specific point about research. As someone with a research background, I absolutely agree with you—I am sorry, Mr Stringer; I meant the right hon. Gentleman—that more effort needs to be put into research, not only on how we might treat such cases in future, but on the remedial effect.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Lady for correcting herself and acknowledging that “you” refers to the Chair. I also remind all hon. Members that interventions should be brief and to the point.

Sir Julian Lewis: That being said, Mr Stringer, I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Lady made that intervention. When someone of her expertise and experience says that even she had not realised the scale of this issue, it shows the magnitude of the task that faces us. This is every bit as bad as we heard in the excellent introduction from the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince)—I apologise for not paying tribute to him earlier. He has done us all a great service by bringing this debate to

Westminster Hall. This is on a level with the infected blood disaster, and it deserves the same level of treatment and remediation in so far as that is possible.

Reverting to the written question I asked, the Minister of the State at the time answered:

“There are no current studies specifically relating to new and improved techniques for the removal of eroded surgical mesh. However, there are five studies ongoing on surgical mesh implants and the National Institute for Health Research welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including on the removal or implantation of vaginal mesh. There are currently no plans to establish a unit in order to train mesh removal specialists.”

I want to quote a third and final written question of those 15. Question 124936, from February 2022, stated:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what recent progress has been made in establishing the South East Regional specialist centre for the treatment of women damaged by mesh implants; and whether checks will be carried out to ensure that such women, when seeking remedial treatment from that specialist centre, are not placed in the hands of surgeons who were responsible for (a) implanting the mesh originally, (b) denying that anything had gone wrong with the implants and (c) claiming that women reporting extreme physical pain from the implants were imagining it.”

After a fairly long paragraph in reply, the answer concluded:

“Patients can discuss their choice of surgeon with the multi-disciplinary team if they have concerns regarding a specific clinician and can also discuss a referral to a surgeon in another specialist mesh centre.”

Think of the conversation that would require. A patient would have to explain to the person who had—to quote my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold—“butchered” them that, because they did not want to have his or her ministrations any further, they wanted to be referred to somebody else a long way away. Good luck with all that.

I will briefly touch on some points raised by people in the community of damaged women. I have been told about difficulties regarding personal independence payment applications. It has been suggested that staff managing PIP applications and renewals need better training and understanding of mesh injury. There has been some progress, apparently, in the gradual acceptance that many women had not given informed consent at the beginning, and this is perhaps beginning to make itself felt in relation to the legal actions that some people are undertaking. Just imagine being in constant pain and having the burden of undertaking those legal actions.

There is concern that mesh removal centres do not seem to have the same approach across the board for treatment or surgery. There are also very lengthy waiting lists if someone opts for a second opinion, for the reason I have already explained or any other reason. Mental health support and counselling is not readily available, which is another gap. We have already heard an excellent contribution by the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) noting that the 10-year limitation for legal action on medical devices needs to be reviewed, because by the time some women have confirmation that the mesh is the problem, the 10 years could well have passed.

I have already mentioned that the Government ought to be looking to assist the legal cases against the pharmaceutical company or companies. It would be interesting to know whether the Government are making

any progress on the subject of interim payments, which I believe the Cumberlege report recommended prior to any more bespoke payments based on individual circumstances. Will the Government encourage the yellow card Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency reporting to be made mandatory? If people are not reporting in when these things go wrong, how can we be sure of the scale of the problem? Finally, it is noted that there is a clear need for transparency for the public to be aware of exactly what payments medical professionals in the health sector receive from the pharmaceutical industry when they recommend these “routine procedures” that so often go wrong.

I conclude with a case that I have deliberately anonymised. Nothing should be drawn from where I happen to represent as to which surgeon in which mesh centre I might be referring to. This is what one victim has said about someone I will call surgeon X. He

“operated on me in 2009 to insert the mesh, which was described as a simple procedure that would solve my problems. Mesh was eroding through the vaginal wall immediately, and I had seven further ‘repair’ surgeries, which did not solve the erosion problem. In 2016, he advised me he could remove the mesh, so I paid privately for the surgery. During the surgery, nerves were damaged, causing severe pain and limitations, and the mesh was not all removed. I am left with the pain and limitations permanently, and have been told by another surgeon that full removal is now not possible. This surgeon is the clinical lead of the mesh centre”

local to her. She concludes:

“No surgeon should ever be allowed to cause damage to multiple patients, yet not only continue to perform the same surgeries, but to be head of the very centre which should be helping women. I feel sick at the thought of passing him in the street, let alone needing to see him as a health professional. I am sure we all feel the same.”

2.24 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): Do you want to give some guidance on how long is left, Mr Stringer, so I can cut my speech accordingly?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I intend to call the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats at 2.30 pm.

Mrs Hodgson: In the short time I have available, I will try to make some important points. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for first do no harm—along with Baroness Cumberlege, who it is a pleasure to see in the Public Gallery—it is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I also point out how many officers of the all-party group are here in the Chamber, on a Thursday and on a one-line Whip. That speaks for itself as to how important the issue is to the House and to all of us. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for securing this important debate to shed further light on this still under-discussed scandal.

Members present, campaigners watching at home, and especially patients, will all be aware of the extent of the injustice. I have had the privilege of working with wonderful campaigners over many years, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Kath Sansom from Sling the Mesh, who is a key campaigner for mesh victims and has been a great support to me and to colleagues over the years. I am glad that she is in the Public Gallery

[Mrs Hodgson]

to watch the debate, alongside Debbie, who is the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, and who brought this scandal to his attention.

My first contribution in this House on surgical mesh was in 2017, during my time as shadow Minister for Public Health, and I am glad to see the actual Minister for Public Health and Prevention in his place to hear this debate. I have continued to campaign tirelessly on the issue through debates and my work with the all-party group ever since.

The issue is not only of political importance to me; it matters to me on a profoundly personal level. As I am sure some in the Chamber will know, among the thousands of women affected by mesh complications is my mam, who was one of the 617 mesh-damaged women who met, or made submissions to, Baroness Cumberlege for her review. I took my mam along to an evidence session in Gateshead, and she was able to meet Baroness Cumberlege and tell her story personally. She still talks about that to this day—she is very grateful.

After suffering mild stress incontinence, as we have heard from a number of people who went through the procedure, my mam had SUI surgery to have some tension-free vaginal tape inserted, which was a quick and common treatment offered to women for incontinence. However, had she known the life-limiting complications she was about to suffer as a result, dealing with slight stress incontinence would not have seemed very bad at all.

Two to three years post-surgery, my mam had one health complication after another. She suffered all sorts of autoimmune reactions, recurrent urinary tract infections, and was in constant pain in her groin, arms and legs. She became a shadow of her former self, and it took us quite a few years to work out what was causing the symptoms and pain. It was only through my research for that debate back in 2017 as the shadow Minister that I was able to join the dots together, and from that moment on we both wished constantly that she had never had the operation.

My mam will be 80 in January, and she would say that she is one of the lucky ones. Since I first spoke on the topic, she has been able to get the mesh surgically removed. It was a long delicate operation, thankfully carried out by the amazing Suzy Elneil, which she had to undertake in London in order to avoid the surgeon who put it in her in the first place—something that the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and others have spoken about. That is something that many mesh-damaged women will understand. With the removal of the mesh, many of her health complications vanished immediately. The road to recovery is far from smooth for many mesh-damage victims, however, and my mam is no exception. She is still recovering to this day and, in her words,

“will never be the same again.”

I sat next to my mam at her local hospital and watched her be gaslit and undermined by her original surgeon when she first sought help with her pain and symptoms. Our doctors, surgeons and healthcare providers are meant to protect us, not harm us. Hence, “first do no harm”—an unwritten contract between patients and healthcare providers that rightly makes us feel that

when we seek medical help, we trust that we will be made better, not worse. Surely the least we can expect in cases where harm does happen is accountability and for wrongs to be righted. Instead, we see a culture of defensiveness and a lack of accountability. It is therefore shocking that the surgeons responsible for the implantation of this life-shattering mesh are the very same people tasked with removing it.

I was going to talk about Baroness Cumberlege’s recommendations—which we have had success with and which we have not—but sadly the right hon. Member for New Forest East used up all the time, so I cannot.

2.30 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) for securing today’s debate. We are here because four years after being published, the Cumberlege review has not been implemented and there is still no redress scheme. I will turn in more detail to the progress made on those recommendations, but first I pay tribute to the many individuals who have campaigned so hard for so long to be heard, for their experiences to be taken seriously, to receive some sort of justice, and to know that the same harm will not be done to others. Some of them are in the Public Gallery today and I thank them for their tireless campaigning.

I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), when he was Health and Social Care Secretary, and to the former Member for Maidenhead, when she was Prime Minister, for commissioning the review in the first place in February 2018. Baroness Cumberlege has never stopped giving voice to those she encountered during the two years she led that review. She has gone to great lengths to keep this issue on the agenda. She is due to retire shortly and we will miss her. I would like to say how grateful I am, as I know others will be, not just for her advocacy on this issue but for her encouragement and support of hon. Members in this place to do the same. If I may be so bold, Baroness Cumberlege has played her part. It is now up to us in this place to hold this new Government to account and to ensure that her recommendations are implemented in full.

Let us not forget that the Cumberlege review was called “First Do No Harm”, because at its centre are people who suffered avoidable harm—harm done to them by our health system. I was first introduced to this issue by my constituent Carol. I have shared her story before and remain in awe of her dignity and desire to help others despite having experienced the most devastating medical trauma. She needed her MP to help her get a visa for the United States for urgent medical treatment during the pandemic because of the travel restrictions that hon. Members will remember. She had undergone a hysterectomy and a rectopexy using surgical mesh.

Instead of resolving Carol’s pelvic organ prolapse, the procedures left her with a serious autoimmune disease, struggling to walk and unable to continue her normal daily life. She had to take long-term sick leave from her job as a doctor and could not remember a day without pain. When she contacted me for help with her visa, she was seriously unwell and had been told that she urgently needed her mesh removed or her prognosis

was not good. We managed to get her the visa she needed. She is now mesh-free following a successful removal, and she is the first person in England to have undergone successful rectal mesh removal. She is still suffering, but is no longer in the same danger that she was. She is clear that she was able to look outside the NHS and the UK only because her medical training and personal resources enabled her to find Dr Veronikis, who treated her successfully. I should say at this point that there needs to be more awareness of rectopexy mesh, which affects men, women and children.

Carol and others like her were given hope when the Cumberlege review was initiated, and again when it was published in July 2020 with its nine recommendations. I am sorry that to say that not enough progress has been made on those recommendations since. The reality is that only two of the nine recommendations have been implemented in full. The first was an apology, which was given as soon as the report was published. The second was to establish the office of the Patient Safety Commissioner.

Beyond that, things have stalled. Recommendations 3 and 4 called for an independent redress agency, and for redress schemes to be established for all three interventions. After originally rejecting those two recommendations, the Health Minister at the time asked the Patient Safety Commissioner in late 2022 to look at the options for providing redress for those who had been harmed by mesh and valproate. The commissioner's report—the Hughes report—was published in February. I was present at its launch, and it really felt like a milestone; it felt as though progress had been made. Surely the Department would not commission that work if it had no intention of following through on a redress scheme.

That was in February this year. By the summer, when the election was called, the previous Government were still saying that they would respond to the report, so they never gave a formal response. To date, there has been no official response from the new Government to the Hughes report. In the words of the Patient Safety Commissioner: "it is now urgent for the government to give those families some clarity. Many of them live with pressing financial hardship, as well as physical pain and disability...we must not compound the physical and mental harms experienced by these families by setting and raising false expectations if there is no intention to deliver on redress."

Mrs Hodgson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for covering the recommendations, which I was not able to do. That has relieved me somewhat. We have at last seen some compensation for the victims of Windrush, the infected blood scandal and the Horizon scandal. Does she agree that it is incumbent on the Government to treat this scandal with the same seriousness, fully accept recommendation 4 and put the redress scheme in place?

Sarah Green: I could not agree more. This is where I must pick up Carol's story again. She tried to pursue her claim against her original surgeons through the courts, and she hit on an unexpected problem. She approached multiple legal firms who would not take her case because one or both of the surgeons were advising them on other cases and, as such, it would have been a conflict of interest. Indeed, the same surgeon who caused Carol life-changing injuries acted as an expert witness in an unrelated surgical mesh negligence case. The judge in that case said:

"he had cherry-picked those parts of the evidence which were supportive of the Defendant's case and did not comment on those

parts which were consistent to the Claimant's. That is not the correct approach to be taken by an independent expert, whose duty is to the court. His evidence lacked balance and was unpersuasive."

On this occasion, the judge called it out, but that is not the only instance of the medical profession closing ranks—it is not a unique occurrence. Such clear bias and conflicts of interest are a huge barrier to justice for mesh victims around the country.

The point of recommendation 3 in the Cumberlege review was to establish a non-adversarial avenue for redress after someone has been harmed in a healthcare setting. Both the Hughes report and, more recently, the Darzi report found that the current clinical negligence system is difficult for patients to navigate and prevents the healthcare system from learning from its mistakes. It is also eye-wateringly expensive for the taxpayer. If it is the dead hand of the Treasury blocking a redress scheme, Ministers would do well to reflect on that. As the Patient Safety Commissioner points out, the clinical negligence system is behind only nuclear disarmament and pensions on the list of liabilities on the Government's balance sheet. I must ask the Minister when the Department will respond to the options outlined in the Hughes report, and when families can expect to see redress schemes up and running.

Recommendation 5 relates to the establishment of mesh centres around the country, and while such centres have been established, they get mixed reports from patients. My question on the mesh centres is about their outcomes. How is the Department ensuring a consistent service across them all, and how are outcomes being measured? With so many people reporting dissatisfaction with the centres, it is not enough that they exist; they need to be working well for the patients they are there to serve. Recommendation 6 relates to the MHRA, and it is clear that we still need the yellow card reporting system to improve. I would also welcome the Minister's thoughts on progress against recommendation 7, which is about creating a central patient-identifiable database. To my understanding, it is still a work in progress.

The previous Government's decision not to take forward the eighth recommendation, which is for a mandatory register, is disappointing. The recommendation called for

"Transparency of payments made to clinicians"

and

"mandatory reporting for pharmaceutical and medical device industries of payments made to teaching hospitals, research institutions and individual clinicians."

I fail to understand why more progress has not been made on that. I know that campaigners have written to the Department asking it to consider a sunset Act that speaks to that recommendation, and I urge the Minister to chase a response to them.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. The 10-minute time allocation is up. I now move to the official Opposition.

2.40 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) on securing this important debate. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the register of interests,

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

as I am a practising NHS consultant, although in paediatrics rather than in any form of gynaecological surgery.

I begin by expressing my heartfelt sympathies to the women affected by injuries from pelvic mesh and, indeed, mesh in other sites, as we have heard about. Mesh is a surgical material and technically, therefore, a medical device, which was implanted in thousands of women to treat organ prolapse and urinary incontinence. However, in many cases, as we have heard today, it has caused serious long-term effects, including chronic pain, infections, organ perforation and, in some cases, permanent disability, which continues even after the mesh has been removed.

The exact number of affected women is still not known. Some have estimated the number to be 10,000, and today we have heard an estimate of 40,000. However, it is clear that it is a very large number of women. I echo the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) in thanking Baroness Cumberlege, the Conservative peer who published the independent medicines and medical devices safety review in 2020. The review panel spoke to more than 700 women and their families from across the country. The document is exceptionally comprehensive, and it puts patients' and families' views at the heart of the review. Their experiences make for harrowing reading. The women speak of lives damaged, families put under immense strain, relationships destroyed, careers broken, financial ruin and chronic pain.

Last week, I spoke to a woman who is suffering after having had such mesh put in. Following the surgery, the skin never healed because of a low-level infection. That lady faces awful difficulties. The mesh is visible through the skin, from the surface. It is incredibly difficult to remove. Indeed, she has not been able to find a surgeon who is willing to even try to remove it, so she suffers in the house, unable to go out and experiencing infection after infection, an increasing number of which are resistant to some antibiotics. She knows that without the mesh removal, her prognosis is poor. It is an awful situation to be in, as I am sure the Minister will agree. I know he will be doing his best to try to help. Our healthcare system has to learn from those it has failed, such as that lady, and ensure that patients are put at the front and centre of healthcare so that this cannot happen again.

The Minister needs to focus on two things: how we help those affected by the mesh scandal, and how we prevent similar incidents with medical devices that we do not yet know the harms of, or that may not yet have been invented. People should not have to pay privately for treatment to rectify things that the NHS has done wrong. When someone has had a mesh put in and the mesh needs removing, the NHS should pay for that care. If the NHS cannot provide it, the NHS and the Minister must find a way of funding that care, provided by whoever can provide it, so that women are not financially out of pocket to the tune of tens of thousands of pounds for something that is not their fault.

The nine centres have been set up, and that is a good thing; they have been set up with a full multidisciplinary approach, which is also good. However, as we have heard, the outcomes are not 100% good in all cases. Surely it is intuitive that women should not have to see the same surgeon again. They should not be forced to

make that explicit. It should be automatic, unless they want to see the same surgeon; it should be an opt-in system.

I urge the Minister to look at what the centres do. They provide help for women who have had pelvic mesh repair, but there are people suffering with mesh problems who have had mesh put into other places, for example near the rectum or in the abdominal wall. That may be women, but it may also be men, and they may suffer quite significant problems as a result. They need a centre, or several centres, of people who can support them and ensure that their mesh is removed, or their treatment needs are met, to stop the suffering they are experiencing.

We need a balance between ensuring that a similar scandal does not happen again and that long-term effects are picked up, and not restricting people's access to new and innovative good treatments. In this place, we often have debates on treatments that are widely available, but not necessarily available here yet. We want to make good treatments available here quickly, but we need a robust system to identify problems as quickly as possible.

Part of that system includes the Medical Devices (Post-market Surveillance Requirements) (Amendment) (Great Britain) Regulations 2024, on which the hon. Member for Harlow, the Minister and others were recently involved in debate. When that statutory instrument was discussed in the Lords, the noble Lord Cryer said that the Government intended to introduce implant cards, and that the SI was part of a wider review of the regulation of medical devices that would be carried out in due course. Will the Minister give us some information on what that will entail? What are his thoughts on the process, and when will it happen? People need these things quickly.

I recognise the work that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) has done over a long time on many topics affecting women's health, including the menopause and other concerns, and I congratulate him on that work. He represents female constituents very effectively. He talked about the fact that when surgeons inserted pelvic mesh, they often thought that it was the right thing to do. Only over time did it turn out not to be the panacea that it had been thought to be.

I remember in my medical training being told that a good surgeon is not just a surgeon who can operate well; the best surgeons are those who know when they should not be operating. It is very sad to hear that for many of the women, treatments that did not involve surgery could have been done instead, and that would have meant that those women did not suffer in the way they have done.

I highlight the point made by the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) on the importance of research. When we are trying to resolve the problems caused by the mesh, we need to know that we are doing that in the most effective way. We need someone to look at the clinical outcomes and ask what we are doing, whether we are doing it in the best way and what other options might be available. This problem is not limited to the United Kingdom. What is being done elsewhere? Are there international comparators that do this better, and can we emulate what they are doing?

What we need from the Minister is rapid action to address the problems faced by women who have had this mesh put in. We need him to assure us that he is doing what he can to introduce proportionate regulations that will ensure that any other devices in use and in circulation across the United Kingdom do what they are supposed to do, and do not do any harm.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I remind the Minister to leave two minutes at the end for the Member who secured the debate to reply.

2.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) on securing such an important debate on pelvic mesh and the independent medicines and medical devices safety review, also referred to as the Cumberlege review. We are all privileged to see the noble Lady Baroness Cumberlege in the Public Gallery. We thank her sincerely for the work that she has done over a number of years on women's health, and on this issue in particular. I also thank my hon. Friend for the opportunity to contribute to this vital debate.

I am responding today on behalf of Baroness Merron, who leads on women's health and patient safety in the Department of Health and Social Care. I will try to address as many as I can of the issues that right hon. and hon. Members have raised in this debate. If for any reason I do not get round to addressing something, I will ensure that Baroness Merron, as the Minister responsible, writes to Members.

This debate came about because of a meeting between my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow and one of his constituents, Debbie. As we have heard, Debbie described undergoing a failed procedure to remove vaginal mesh, which has caused her severe pain. She has remained in constant pain since the operation, and I express my deepest sympathy to her for her ongoing experience. It should never have happened.

My predecessor as a Minister, Nadine Dorries, placed on the record in 2020 the previous Government's apology. We are a new Government, so I take this opportunity to make the same apology today on behalf of His Majesty's Government elected on 4 July. This should not have happened, and I say to every single person it has happened to that we are sorry and we have a duty to put things right. That is what this Government will seek to do, and at pace.

This Government will build a system that listens, hears and acts with speed, compassion and proportionality. Complications from vaginal mesh can be devastating and have included severe and chronic pain, recurrent infections, reduced mobility, sexual difficulties and psychological impacts. It can be hard to imagine the avoidable suffering that many women have endured and the damage that has been inflicted on their lives. It is unacceptable that concerns raised by women were not listened to and that women were left to suffer alone. It is vital that we acknowledge those failures and ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

I assure the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) that the 10-year health plan that the Government are consulting on will ensure

a better health service for everyone, regardless of their condition or service area. A core part of the development of the 10-year plan, including its approach to women's health, will be an extensive engagement exercise with the public, NHS staff and stakeholders.

We have heard about the nine specialist mesh centres that NHS England has established across England. The intention behind them is that every woman, in every region, who experiences mesh-related complications receives the appropriate support.

I hear the message of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) that more needs to be done on accessibility, outcomes and listening to women. I agree, and I will take that message back to Baroness Merron.

I share the concerns of the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold—I thank him for his support on this—about the battles and challenges that lie ahead to get the system right. The Government will consider how we build on existing provision in a sensitive way that meets the needs of the women. At the heart of all we do to try to put things right is addressing the needs of the women involved, and their families, who have been so dramatically affected by what went so tragically wrong.

Each mesh centre is led by a multidisciplinary team that comprises urology, gynaecology and colorectal consultants, in addition to nurses who specialise in a range of things that I am unable to pronounce, and in urology and incontinence, which I can pronounce. Patients also have access to other healthcare professionals, including psychologists, occupational therapists and pelvic floor specialists, to help with pain management.

I recognise the trauma that women have experienced and the vital need to exercise patient choice. That is especially true for women who are rightly concerned about being treated by a surgeon who previously operated on them. I hope that things have moved on since the answer that the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) received, but I will ensure that what Members have said, with the sincerity and the strength of feeling, is communicated back to Baroness Merron. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the process set out in that written ministerial answer is not acceptable. Yes, women have the right to choose treatment from another surgeon, but I actually agree with the shadow Minister that there should be an automatic assumption that their treatment should be done by somebody who did not operate on them previously, unless that woman does not mind. That is a stress and a trauma for many women, and we have to think about their rights.

I also recognise that there is a need to support GPs' knowledge and understanding of pelvic mesh so that they can identify the symptoms of mesh complications and refer patients on to the appropriate services. I do not want any woman to be in the position of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), or any other woman who has had her body tampered with in the most inappropriate way, when the procedure was not even necessary, and has suffered lifelong complications as a result. We have to move on at pace.

Following Baroness Cumberlege's recommendations in 2018, the national pause on mesh remains in place for the use of vaginally inserted mesh to treat prolapse and the use of retropubic suburethral mesh sling to treat

[Andrew Gwynne]

stress urinary incontinence. That means that mesh can be used only in exceptional cases where clinicians are of the opinion that there is a clinical urgency and no suitable alternative exists. NHS England continues to monitor progress on the conditions associated with the national pause and will only make changes to it linked to clinical advice and following consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including patients, professional bodies and NHS organisations.

The Cumberlege review made nine recommendations, and the then Government accepted seven. Of those seven, four have been delivered, including the appointment of Dr Henrietta Hughes as the first Patient Safety Commissioner in England, the establishment of nine specialist mesh centres across England and the establishment of a patient reference group. Through our ongoing work, the Government are committed to delivering on the remaining three recommendations.

On redress, I will mention briefly the recommendation set out in the Hughes report, which was published in February. I first thank the Patient Safety Commissioner, Dr Henrietta Hughes, for her commitment to improving patient safety. Although the Government are not yet in a position to comment on the recommendations, I assure Members that we are considering the wide range of work set out in the report. I agree with the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) that the previous Government were too slow on that. It is a priority for this Government. We are working at pace, and we remain focused on making meaningful progress. This is a complex area of work, involving several Departments, but we are committed to providing an update at the earliest opportunity. I have heard the desire for urgency today, and I hope that we can make the progress that Members want to see.

I am afraid that I have left my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow 30 seconds to sum up, but I hope we have made some progress.

2.59 pm

Chris Vince: I thank everyone who has spoken about this vital issue. At its heart, it is about women who have been let down and made to feel guilty because they are the victims. That is just not right.

I thank everyone who has taken part in this debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis)—today, we are all hon. Friends—rightly said that we have had this debate time and again. My ask is for the next debate to be after a ministerial statement—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Higher Education: Financial Sustainability

[VALERIE VAZ *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the financial sustainability of higher education.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. Our universities are integral to a thriving United Kingdom. They drive economic growth, ensure that the workforce has the skills necessary for the jobs of tomorrow and boost the UK's global standing. They are engines of social and economic progress, but behind those important functions lies an equally important reality: the financial sustainability of this vital sector and our economy.

For almost a decade, universities have faced declining investment, despite recognition of our world-leading higher education and research system. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary university group, vice-chancellors from a range of institutions have told me that the pressure to deliver world-class teaching and research with less is becoming more acute. The Government's announcement on 4 November 2024 of an inflationary increase in tuition fees in England cannot have been an easy decision, but it was necessary. Prior to that announcement, tuition fees had risen only once, by £250, since the introduction of £9,000 fees in 2012. Inflation has cut their value to just £5,924 in 2012-13 prices, while Government grants for teaching have declined by 78% over a decade in England.

The financial picture across the UK is equally challenging. Welsh universities had their fees capped at a lower level than English institutions until 2024, and over the past decade, funding per student in Scotland has declined by over £2,500. In Northern Ireland, funding per student has lagged behind England by over £1,000 a year. The Office for Students estimates that by 2025-26, there will be a net reduction in income for the sector of £3.4 billion and, without significant mitigating actions, a sector-level deficit of £1.6 billion, with up to 72% of providers being in deficit and 40% having low liquidity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is a really important debate, but it does pose a question, and I want to ask the hon. Gentleman for his thoughts on it. He referred to the cost of living pressures that every family has, wherever they may be in this United Kingdom. I suspect that those, combined with the increase in higher education fees, will mean that we are in danger of going back to a state where only well-off families can afford to have their children in university, while the rest will have to go to work to provide the moneys just to live. Does he share my concern about that?

Adam Thompson: The hon. Member raises an excellent point, and it is important that we bear that in mind. This is a danger that we need to contend with. The conversation that I hope to start with this debate is about how we might address those issues going forward, and I will touch of some of those points in my speech.

I know from conversations with vice-chancellors that while the causes of the funding challenges vary significantly between institutions, they all feel the pressure to deliver more for less. An inflationary rise in fees is important,

because it prevents further erosion of university funding for teaching undergraduates, but it does not reverse the real-terms decline in the value of the tuition fee. That is why there needs to be a concerted and strategic effort by universities and the Government to secure the long-term financial sustainability of our universities—that touches on the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

What are the main financial risks that universities face? Analysis from PwC shows that a significant number of universities are vulnerable to reductions in international student numbers, increased expenditure and reduction in the growth rate of domestic undergraduate students. The risks identified by PwC's analysis are not just hypothetical. In many cases, we are already starting to see their impact, especially in terms of international student recruitment. After almost a decade of stagnation, the UK experienced a period of significant growth in international student numbers between 2019 and 2022, driven by a combination of Government policy and the openness of the UK immediately following the covid-19 pandemic.

However, the numbers of international students choosing to study in the UK has since declined, as both political and market factors have changed, and the attractiveness of the UK as a study destination has fallen. According to data released by the Home Office on 28 November, 392,969 visas were issued to international students between October 2023 and September 2024. That is 19% fewer than were issued in the previous year.

Universities understand that growth in international student numbers must be sustainable and that the experience for those choosing to study here should be truly world-class. However, policy changes under the previous Government, such as restrictions on dependant visas, increased visa and immigration costs, and threats to the future of the UK's post-work study offer, have had a significant impact on the attractiveness of the UK as a study destination, as well as the perception of the UK as an open and welcoming country.

A key finding from IDP's "Emerging Futures 6" report was that the biggest influence on study destination choice for prospective students was post-work study opportunities, and indeed work opportunities. I commend the Secretary of State for Education for reaffirming the Government's commitment to supporting and valuing international students. Will the Government back that up by committing to maintaining the graduate route on its current terms for the duration of this Parliament?

Another significant financial risk is membership of the teachers' pension scheme, which affects a lot of universities. Universities that are statutorily obliged to be members of the TPS—primarily modern post-1992 universities—are now required to pay pension contributions of around 29% for 58,000 members of staff compared with 16.4% in 2019, which is a very significant increase. That is one of the highest employer contributions of any pension across the whole country. Universities cannot exit the TPS or take actions to reduce the employer contribution, and they have not been granted the same additional funding as schools and colleges to meet the cost of the scheme. Will Ministers in the Department for Education commit to working with Ministers in His Majesty's Treasury to explore how universities can be provided with flexibility to allow consideration of alternative pension pots?

I will turn to the structural issues in university research funding, and in my background as a research scientist, that was something I faced daily prior to my election to this place. Research funding risks seeing the UK's world-class capabilities and competitive advantages being eroded. Despite recent increases in investment, the current system relies on disproportionate and growing cross-subsidy from universities to make research viable, which, given the current financial challenges faced by universities, has produced a huge gap in funding.

To cite the VCs that I have spoken to recently, research operates at a loss, which is a significant issue that they face. It is estimated that for every pound of public money invested in university research and innovation, the country gets back £10 a year—a huge return on investment. But in 2022-23, UK universities incurred a £5.3 billion deficit in research activities. In short, the system is structurally unsustainable. Although the Budget recently highlighted how serious the Government are about funding university research, we urgently need an ambitious and long-term approach from the Government to funding university research. I would welcome the Minister's views on that point.

Why does all this matter? The UK's performance in HE and research is exceptional, in my opinion and life experience, and it surpasses significantly our international counterparts. UK universities deliver the highest degree completion rates across the OECD. They are recognised as world-class and generate £25.6 billion of export earnings, while broadening the UK's soft power and strengthening global relationships. The UK has the third largest share of the world's academic publications at about 6.3%—that is what I spent much of the last decade of my life producing—behind only China and the United States, with an even larger share of the world's most highly cited publications at 13.4%, which is a great achievement and shows how good our universities are.

The latest figures show that the UK higher education sector's teaching, research and innovation activities had an economic impact of £265 billion, so we are talking about a huge sector here. This impact is felt across the country, including in the east midlands, which I represent, where universities contributed £6.3 billion in gross output and £4.2 billion in gross value added to the UK economy. These figures include contributions from my former employer, the University of Nottingham, and a range of other excellent institutions across my region, all with unique and valuable offerings to their communities and beyond.

Underfunding will restrict universities' ability to drive inclusive economic growth and the UK's global competitiveness, and to provide opportunities to current students that are comparable to previous years. Sustained funding that ensures a high-quality student experience and enhances the UK's ability to deliver world-leading research and innovation will rapidly accelerate the positive contributions of our universities.

The current funding system in England affects students' ability to meet living costs, which touches on points made by the hon. Member for Strangford, and it is hard to make the most of the range of experiences and activities that make up university life. Frozen household income thresholds and a failure to adequately uprate the maintenance package with inflation mean that the average student's maintenance loan is estimated to fall £504 short of covering their living costs each month.

[Adam Thompson]

That particularly affects disadvantaged students, who are forced to take on higher levels of debt and find paid employment, which limits their ability to study. I commend the Government for last month announcing an inflationary increase to maintenance support for students in England, but will they commit to reintroducing maintenance grants for students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds? Can they indicate a timeframe of when that might be possible, if it is indeed possible?

Greater effectiveness and efficiency are necessary for our universities to thrive in the coming decade. They must reform and do things differently, and prioritise some things while deprioritising others. Operating models need to evolve to become more effective and efficient. I know from conversations with vice-chancellors that universities in all four nations in the UK are already making significant changes to adjust to these pressures, including in some cases through significant restructuring and transformation programmes. Indeed, around the time of the election, as I was leaving my former employment, my own university was going through a significant redundancy package.

Without a small change to the overall context, many universities will be forced to make cuts that are in the interests of their institution but not the national interest. Such cuts will jeopardise the crucial role that all types of universities play in their local communities. Some have a profoundly local mission of educating the public sector workforce for their local areas, while others attract amounts of investment. They all play a part throughout the country.

Many of our universities are currently making difficult decisions, which colleagues will know, I am sure. This means closing degree courses that may have low student demand but are of national strategic importance, such as modern foreign languages and arts and humanities courses. We are losing a lot of those courses. There is a real risk that certain courses will be available in a limited number of institutions only, meaning that they will slowly recede out of the reach of students who cannot travel to study or cannot meet highly competitive entry requirements.

Diminished financial stability for universities clearly has potentially harmful repercussions for students, staff and our wider national economy. Therefore, it is essential that change is not just about doing more with less. Universities' underlying operating models need to evolve to become more efficient and as effective as possible. They must be supported by the Government to do so at the national level.

My understanding is that Universities UK, the collective voice of 141 UK universities, is committed to establishing a cross-sector transformation and efficiency taskforce to seek savings through greater collaboration. The task force is one of the main recommendations from Universities UK's recent report "Opportunity, growth and partnership: a blueprint for change", which I strongly encourage colleagues to have a good read of. The taskforce will be established by the end of 2024 and will report for the first time in summer 2025.

The taskforce will take a three-step approach. First, it will evaluate progress and lessons learned since the last major review into sector efficiency, identifying what has been achieved in the past decade while looking forward

to the next and making recommendations to unlock opportunities that lie ahead. Secondly, it will identify opportunities for savings through greater collaboration between universities.

There are already some great examples of collaboration. The UCAS system is effectively a shared service, with the university sector's IT network run by Jisc. Individual universities have found creative ways of working together to share resources, such as the shared out-of-hours IT service set up by Northumbria University, which is now used by a third of universities around the country.

Finally, the taskforce will bring university leaders together to look at structural changes, creating regional groupings of universities, or even mergers and acquisitions where appropriate, which could deliver savings in the long term. I strongly encourage the Government to engage with the sector as deeply as possible as it embarks on the creation of the taskforce.

I will now turn to the steps necessary to support our universities so that they can in turn support our nation's renewal. Universities UK's recent blueprint report recommends a two-phase approach for universities and Government. Phase 1 requires some immediate steps, including

"increasing funding for teaching to meet the real costs through a combination of index-linking fees to inflation"

each year and restoring the teaching grant to previous levels. The Exchequer now only contributes 16% of the cost of funding a student through higher education, with the other 84% picked up by the graduate in England. The balance needs redressing through increased Government investment.

Other parts of the first phase outlined in the report include

"ensuring policy stability in relation to international students in order to achieve sustainable, managed growth"

and

"working with the sector to establish a sustainable solution for universities in relation to the significant increase in contributions to the teachers' pension scheme".

Finally, Government and the sector should have

"a clear plan to implement should an English university find itself in severe financial distress."

That is a very real possibility at the moment, although alleviated by the Government's recent efforts.

The report also recommends:

"Plans to manage the immediate situation and to protect the reputation of the higher education sector should be in place, with the support of independent experts, to guide the institution" in financial difficulty

"in finding a viable way forward. There are different possible models for such an intervention, but it is crucial to protect students and others who depend on the university, including local public services."

To summarise, the second phase of the taskforce effort will involve some longer-term steps, which will probably include developing a contract

"with the university sector to deliver sustainable, managed growth in international student recruitment",

changes to the way that VAT is charged so that it is easier for universities to share services and, finally,

"introducing a transformation fund to enable and accelerate changes to universities' operating and business models in order to achieve greater efficiency."

3.17 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) on securing this important debate today, and making such a comprehensive speech with some very important points, many of which have been made to me locally as the MP for Luton South and South Bedfordshire.

Great universities are one of our success stories here in the UK, with rankings showing that Britain boasts more top-ranking institutions than across the entirety of the EU, and the UK having long been an attractive destination for students and academics from around the globe. The University of Bedfordshire, in my constituency, is no exception. I declare an interest both as a former employee and a former masters student.

With an education heritage going back more than 100 years, first as a technical college, subsequently a college of higher education and now a university, it is an internationally recognised, award-winning institution that plays an important role in Luton and the surrounding area. It gives young people from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, who are often the first in their family to go to university, the opportunity to open doors through study.

The university also acts as a major employer and community stakeholder in Luton, engaging with our diverse community and supporting key regeneration projects in the town. The make-up of the student population is perhaps what sets it apart from others. Around 70% of students are mature returners to education, 50% are from ethnically diverse backgrounds and more than 4,000 annually are international students. That is testament to the thriving and welcoming culture for people of all ages and backgrounds to learn.

As we have heard, however, unfortunately the higher education sector is currently in crisis. Universities are facing severe financial challenges after years of neglect by the Conservatives, leaving students and taxpayers to bear the brunt. Many universities are trying to find ways to reduce their budgets to combat these challenges, but that comes at a cost—losing staff via redundancy schemes, cuts to specific departments or courses, or sadly going bust altogether.

While the recent tuition fee cap increase, announced by the Education Secretary, allows breathing room for some universities—a difficult decision though it was—the University of Bedfordshire is experiencing significant issues due to changes introduced by the previous Government. The impact of the policy restricting those on student visas bringing dependants has resulted in approximately a 16% decline in applications across the country this year, and for institutions such as the University of Bedfordshire, that policy has been detrimental. Every level of leadership—from the vice-chancellor through to the student union representatives from Beds SU, including representatives of the Unison trade union—has raised that matter with me, emphasising the worry it is causing. The university has previously been held afloat by international admissions, but with ever-declining numbers that is not sustainable. I should be grateful if the Minister would confirm whether her Department has done any impact assessment to establish whether that policy change has been positive for higher education settings.

Fundamentally, none of us want to see our higher education settings close their doors, and I am proud that this Labour Government are committed to fixing the foundations and delivering change for students, as well as undertaking a major package of reform to deliver value for money for taxpayers and students, ending the cycle of students being asked to pay more while getting less. The University of Bedfordshire does so much to raise the status of our town and bring investment, enterprise and employment. So, as we fix the foundations of now, it is vital that we support it to deliver the high-class, transformative education that students expect and deserve, to break down those barriers to opportunity, as it produces the future leaders of tomorrow from all backgrounds and all socioeconomic circumstances.

3.21 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) on securing this important debate. University funding is undoubtedly in crisis. We have heard mentions of universities around the country, and there is a very similar story at mine, which I will tell later.

The previous Government broke the sector's finances. That left the country with a system that is unfair to students, while pushing many institutions to the brink. We should not forget, in among that, the lecturers who work so hard in our universities too, as well as all the support staff. On the other side, we have students who increasingly feel burdened by the cost of living crisis and the long-term repayment of loans. When I speak to students today in my constituency of Cheltenham, it is a very different picture from the one that existed when I went to university in the early noughties in terms of how much they pay for rent, food and energy bills.

The previous Government made the tuition fee system unfair. The Liberal Democrats, however, cannot support simply raising fees at this stage without substantial reforms. At this stage, the right thing to do would be to undertake a full review of finance in the sector to consider ways to improve access to, and participation in, degrees, as well as the quality of courses, because value for money for students remains extremely important.

While the sector is struggling, we must absolutely not lose sight of the key challenge—removing barriers to entry for new students. That is why the Liberal Democrats believe that the reintroduction of maintenance grants is a vital first step, and I was heartened to hear the hon. Member for Erewash raise that in his opening remarks. Maintenance grants were scrapped by the Conservatives in 2016, which makes it so much harder for young people from less well-off backgrounds even to get to university in the first place. It is regrettable that the new Government are not yet committing to the full restoration of maintenance grants, and we urge Ministers to consider them as a way of bringing fairness back into the system. Scrapping maintenance grants was not the only way in which the Conservatives made the system less fair for students, lecturers, universities and everyone else. They stretched the repayment period so far into the future that some of today's students will be paying back their loans until 2066. They also lowered the repayment threshold, leaving students paying back an extra £206 a year.

[Max Wilkinson]

The earlier mentions of foreign students by the hon. Members for Erewash and for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) were pertinent, and I will now move on to that issue. The combination of the visa crackdowns and the rhetoric about foreign-born students placed further stress on the sector. The upshot is that the Office for Students suggests that about 40% of universities are likely to run a deficit this year. Locally, the University of Gloucestershire—based in my constituency and those of the hon. Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre) and my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas)—tells me that, of a turnover of £85 million, £65 million is from tuition fees, and around £20 million of that is from foreign students, but this year it has reductions in foreign students for both the January and autumn intakes. As I said, this is not just about the visa issue; it is also about rhetoric. The university tells me that its agents who recruit students from abroad say that the feedback from those students is that they are perhaps not quite so wanted in the UK as they once were, so they are selecting degree courses in Australia, America, Canada—elsewhere, where they feel more welcome.

The result is a £4 million hit to the University of Gloucestershire's tuition fee revenue. That is significant. As a result, the university is closing some courses and consolidating others, reducing student choice. Some courses combining multiple humanities are the first to close; fashion is likely to go as well. That said, the university is doing what the Liberal Democrats have suggested too—cutting non-teaching costs and innovating.

The university is also taking advantage of Cheltenham's cyber-security future. It recently opened a new £5.8 million cyber and digital centre, which will help cement Cheltenham's position as the cyber capital of the UK. That places the university in the same sphere as CyNam, the local industry group, and alongside high-performing small and medium-sized enterprises that drive the local economy.

That kind of innovation has to be at the centre of what universities do in the future. However, the university warns that the benefit of the £300 tuition fee increase the Government offered this year is likely to be wiped out by the changes to national insurance for employers. I would like the Minister to respond to that point later.

The challenge for the new Government is to put things right, change the rhetoric and reinstate as much fairness in the system as they possibly can. We know that that is not going to be easy—we have all had challenges in the past, haven't we—but the Liberal Democrats cannot support an increase in fees at this stage. Reports now suggest that fees are to break the £10,000 barrier fairly soon and rise to £10,500 over the next five years. Before we could support that, more work is needed to undo the failures of the previous Government and restore fairness to the system.

3.27 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and to have listened to some excellent speeches this afternoon from the hon. Members for Erewash (Adam Thompson), for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) and for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson). I took different things from all of them.

I am going to concentrate on the teaching side of universities. However, I will note at the start that the previous Government put a huge amount more money into research, growing Government spending on it from £9.8 billion in 2011 to £16.1 billion, and increasing research and development as a share of the economy. I was part of that, and I am proud of what we did on that front.

Turning to the teaching side, which is perhaps the most topical part of this discussion, it is absolutely the case that a number of institutions—of course, I will not be naming them today—are financially stressed and thinking hard about their future and how they operate. I know people working in some of those institutions, and it is not easy, but I want to take a step back and examine the context before we talk about those pressures.

Working together with the Liberal Democrats, we brought in fees that did not necessarily work out politically for the Liberal Democrats at the time. However, it is good that we once again find ourselves in agreement that it is not sensible to simply increase fees without reform. As has been noted, the financial benefit to universities of the fee increase is wiped out by the increase in the national insurance contribution. One broken promise not to increase taxes is paying for another broken promise not to increase fees—it is a real connoisseur's policy decision. In real terms, universities are left with less as a result. The pressures alluded to by the hon. Members for Erewash and for Luton South and South Bedfordshire are now made worse by the Government's decisions.

The successes of the system, which we should note, are that it has hugely increased participation rates, causing participation in England to grow dramatically faster than in the devolved authorities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In particular, it has dramatically increased the participation of the poorest people in our society. We can measure that in three different ways. We can look at free school meals: the proportion of those on FSM going to university has doubled, while the proportion of non-FSM kids going to university has gone up by about a third. We can look at the participation of local areas metric, which is the sector's own measure of localities from which not many people go to university. We can see that, in both absolute and relative terms, the disadvantage gap has shrunk.

We can also use, as Universities Wales does, the index of multiple deprivation. Looking at the bottom fifth of the index—the fifth-poorest areas in each of the nations—we can see that although Labour-run Wales and England had similar numbers of people going to university back in 2006, at about 13% or 14%, the participation of poorer students has grown much more rapidly in England; it is up to 33%, compared with just 20% in Wales. That is because we made some difficult decisions, from which there have been benefits.

Much of the growth of higher education is a good thing. My generation was the first in my family to go to university. It was wonderful; it was a great experience, and it is generally a very good experience for most people who go. Universities are a wonderful thing because of not just the research and wonderful teaching that goes on in them, but the wider benefits to the community and the impact on their local society. I remember going to the University of Huddersfield as a teenager; if somebody looked nonchalant and like a student, they could just wander in and read all these wonderful books. That is just one of benefits they bring to lots of our country.

However, not all is perfect in the garden, because a university education is not cheap. We have put in a lot of resources, and while the decision to hold down the resources in recent years in order to hold down the costs for students has reduced the funding per student in real terms, it is still above the level it was at when I went to university; it is still higher in real terms than it was in 1997. But university really is not cheap for the students. The Government have just raised tuition fees to £9,535 a year. A maintenance loan for people who are not at home is £10,227, or £13,348 for those in London. After a typical three-year degree, a student is paying back £59,000, or £68,000 in London. That is a lot of money.

The Government have already increased fees once in this Parliament. Having promised to reduce the cost for graduates, they increased fees instead. There must be a decent chance that fees will continue to go up from now on—unless the Minister wants to contradict me on that. Yet, over the last decade, we have worried a lot about the financial plight of younger people. Ever since David Willetts's amazing book "The Pinch", we have been thinking about how we can make it easier for younger people to get on in life. Having these huge amounts to repay—and, in some cases, rather high marginal rates—makes it much more difficult for them.

We can see that, as has been alluded to, the point at which somebody starts repaying their loan to make the system financially sustainable for taxpayers has reduced over time. In 2005, a person had to be earning about 30% more than someone working full time on the minimum wage to start repaying. As of next April, a person can earn 2% less than someone working full time on the minimum wage and still be repaying. This has become more like a graduate tax. It is not quite like a tax—people do not repay it if they are not earning—but it is high.

If somebody is a postgraduate on top of that, or has a couple of kids and ends up being hit by the high-income child benefit charge, they face extraordinary marginal rates, even on middling incomes. In the £50,000 to £60,000 range, if a person has one postgraduate loan or two kids, they can end up paying a 70% marginal tax rate as a young person. That is insane. The Government have made the decision not to reform the high-income child benefit charge, so the problem will go on and get worse.

All of that context is by way of saying that, yes, there are pressures in higher education, but there are also pressures on young people; it is not easy. So before we increase charges further, increase tuition fees even more and tip in more money, we absolutely must think about reforms. Advocates of higher education, including me, say, "Look, there is a lot of higher education that is brilliant for people's earnings and a good economic investment." However, we know, because of the decision taken by the last Government to create the longitudinal educational outcomes database, that not everybody benefits from going into higher education, at least not economically. The seminal report on this issue by the Institute for Fiscal Studies stated that

"seen over the whole lifetime, we estimate that total returns"—combining the perspective of both the taxpayer and the student—

"will be negative for around 30% of both men and women."

For about 30% of people, at least in economic terms, this is not working out.

Now, economics is not the only thing in life, and it will always be worth us funding some things simply for their own sake—if they are beautiful and good and we think they are nice—but let us not forget that a lot of things that are economically beneficial are also beautiful, true, interesting and worthy in their own right. For example, it is cool to know that the word "Lent" comes from the Old English word for "lengthen", because plants grow in the spring, which is when Lent is. That is the origin of the word, and it is cool to know things like that. It is also cool to know how to build an ion drive, how monoclonal antibodies work or innumerable other things in the hard sciences and other subjects as well.

We will always want to spend on some things that are just worth it in their own right, but the question is how much. If we are spending £20 billion a year on student loans, and let us say, hypothetically, that the IFS is about right, and that about 30% of that is not worth it, that is £6 billion. That is about 10 times what we spend on the Arts Council. How much do we want to spend on higher education that is not economically beneficial? Should thinking about some of those courses not be the first port of call before just increasing taxes on young people?

We could potentially do things to reform the system, as the last Government were starting to do, which would be of benefit to both the young person and the wider economy. We are not doing a young person a favour if we put them on, for example, some creative arts course and say, "This will be great for you. You are going to be the next Jony Ive. You are going to design the next iPad. You are going to have great outcomes. This degree is going to take you where you want to go", when that is not true. Some people have fantastically low earnings. They feel like they have been lied to; they feel like they have been mis-sold something. Thankfully, that is not the median experience of students, but it is the experience of quite a lot of students. We have to worry about that.

I am totally sympathetic to those who say, "Let's find more resources for the best of HE," but we also need to have the conversation about HE that is of lower economic value—if I can call it that—before we just start increasing taxes even further on young people who are so hard pressed already. There are many questions about how exactly we would do that, and lots of technicalities, but in principle that should be our first port of call. Finding those resources would either let us do more in high-value higher education or let us help the perpetual Cinderella sector that is further education, or we could take the burden off of young people a bit more.

It is not for me in this debate to set out our entire vision of how we would reform HE, so I have a couple of questions for the Minister. In particular, I want to encourage her to talk about a decision taken this week by the Office for Students to stop accrediting new institutions. That has numerous consequences that are bad. First, it is a block to brilliant new entrants such as the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering in Hereford, Dyson and other places that have come in and been brilliant additions to the higher education sector. It also potentially locks very large numbers of young people out of student support. What estimate has the Minister made of the number of young people who will now not be able to access student support as a result of that decision by the OfS this week? Secondly,

[Neil O'Brien]

how long will this “pause” go on for? I saw Ministers defending this decision, and it was initially presented as a pause. I hope it is not a permanent end to any new entrants coming into the sector. Will the Minister tell us a little about when she plans to end this pause?

We have been playing a game of cat and mouse across Parliament about the national insurance increase. Bizarrely, one Department—Defence—has answered the question of how much the national insurance increase will cost it. Defence can answer it, but seemingly no other Department can. The questions I asked the Department for Education a month ago about how much this is costing schools, universities and so on have somehow not been answered. The same is true across about 50 domains in Government. We cannot have a meaningful Parliament and we cannot have meaningful discussions in this building if the Government are not prepared to answer basic questions about the consequences of their own policies.

The Government want to say, “We are giving you this wonderful increase in spending” in whatever field it might—maybe it is childcare or schools or something outside education—but that actually turns out not to be true. The university sector has worked that out for itself. We know exactly how much the Government are putting in, because of the fees increase, and we can see that that seeming gift is completely wiped out by the national insurance increase. The Government are giving with one hand and taking away with the other. In other sectors, they are just refusing to answer the question. That is really poor.

When the Minister stands up today, can she promise me that she will finally answer the question I asked a month ago, not just for higher education, but for childcare and schools, and tell us the most basic information that taxpayers and voters deserve to know? How much is the national insurance increase going to cost our public services? Why do the Government think they cannot answer this question? It is genuinely disgraceful.

I have every sympathy with those who are under financial pressure in higher education institutions. In some cases there has been misadventure, where people have taken out ridiculous loans that are now rolling over, or they have become very exposed to one type of overseas student. I was intrigued to hear the contributions from the hon. Members for Erewash and for Luton South and South Bedfordshire, encouraging the Government to allow more students' dependants as a way of selling higher education. I remember a speech in this House—I think it was yesterday—where one hon. Member stood up and condemned the open borders experiment of the last Government. I thought, “This is a wonderful, road-to-Damascus moment from the Labour party. They finally agree with people like me and do not want to endlessly increase immigration in an attempt to prop up high education.”

Rachel Hopkins: Will the hon. Member give way?

Neil O'Brien: I will give way. The hon. Lady mentioned that she thought it was good that the Government are increasing fees to allow more resources for universities. Will she confirm that she shares my understanding that overall resources are going down in real terms because of the national insurance increase?

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. The shadow Minister has gone over his time.

Rachel Hopkins: Would the hon. Member mind clarifying his memory of what I actually asked? I asked whether an impact assessment had been done on that decision, rather than giving an opinion on it one way or another.

Neil O'Brien: Sorry. I misunderstood the hon. Lady; I thought she was pressing the Minister to reverse that decision and allow more overseas dependants as a way of encouraging overseas students to prop up higher education. I totally misunderstood—I thought she was pressing for something that she clearly was not.

I will conclude, because I am over time. I hope the Minister will answer some of those questions. I actually sympathise with her: there is a difficult challenge here and it is a knotty policy question. I will be behind her when she makes sensible decisions, and I wish her all the best in her endeavours to tackle some of those problems, not just for our universities, but for our young people.

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) on securing this important debate. As he eloquently expressed, he has a keen interest in the financial stability of the higher education sector and many other areas, and so do this Government. I agree with him how great our universities are and I will attempt to respond to many points that he has raised.

I join the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) in acknowledging our fantastic lecturers, as well as some of the excellent work of our universities up and down the country. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) for her many contributions, including around international students.

I will respond to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien). However, I find it difficult to hear the many things he said about the pressures on young people when the last Government had 14 years to take our universities out of the dire situation they now find themselves in. I find it quite astonishing that the previous Government and the shadow Minister have taken no responsibility, offered no apology and shown no acceptance of the disadvantaged situation our universities are in.

Neil O'Brien: Will the Minister give way?

Janet Daby: I am going to make some progress and respond to the many points that have been raised—unless he would like to make an apology.

Neil O'Brien: The Minister is complaining about the lack of resources in real terms for universities. Can she confirm that because of the national insurance increase resources in real terms are going to go down, wiping out the impact of the tuition fee increase, with the price of everything going up?

Janet Daby: Indeed: no apology, no recognition of what I just said, and no recognition of having been in Government for 14 years previously.

There are many questions to respond to, and I will focus first and foremost on my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash, who secured the debate. The Government recognise that our world-leading higher education sector makes a vital contribution, as both education and research institutions, to our economy, to society, to industry and to innovation. They contribute to productivity and growth, and play a crucial civic role in their communities. However, the sector needs a secure financial footing to face the challenges of the next decade. We recognise that the financial position of the sector is under pressure, and the Government have already acted to address that.

In July, Sir David Behan was appointed as interim chair of the Office for Students, the independent regulator of higher education in England. Sir David is overseeing the important work of refocusing the role of the Office for Students to concentrate on key priorities including the sector's financial stability. In recognition of the pressures facing the sector, on 2 December the Office for Students announced temporary changes to its operations to allow greater focus on financial sustainability. To protect the interests of the students, the OfS will work more closely with providers that are under significant pressure. The OfS has rightly stated that an increasing number of providers will need to take bold action to address the impact of these challenges. All providers must continue to adapt to uncertainties and financial risk.

While the OfS has statutory duties in relation to the financial sustainability of the higher education sector, the Government have a clear interest in understanding the sector's level of risk. My Department continues to work closely with the OfS, higher education representative groups such as Universities UK, and other Government Departments such as the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. That helps us to understand the financial sustainability in the sector. If a provider was at risk of unplanned closure or found itself in the process of exiting the sector, my Department would work with the OfS, the provider and other Government Departments to ensure that students' best interests were protected.

Of course, higher education providers are autonomous bodies. As such, they are ultimately responsible for the decisions they make about their operating model, day-by-day management and sustainability. However, the Government very much recognise the need to put—and sustain—our world-leading higher education sector on a secure footing to ensure that all students have the confidence that they will receive the world-class higher education experience they deserve.

After seven years of frozen fee caps under the previous Government, on 4 November the Secretary of State for Education announced that maximum fees for undergraduates will increase in line with inflation. In the 2025-26 academic year, fees will increase by 3.1%, from £9,250 to £9,535 for a standard full-time course, from £11,100 to £11,440 for a full-time accelerated course and from £6,935 to £7,145 for a part-time course. I am aware that yesterday the Welsh Labour Government also announced that tuition fees will rise from £9,250 to £9,535 for standard full-time courses. While this was a difficult decision, I believe the right decision has been made for UK higher education. I want to be clear, however, that in return for the increased investment that we are asking students to make, we expect our providers to deliver the very best outcomes for students, their areas and the country.

The Government also recognise the impact that recent inflation has had on students. That is why, in addition to increasing tuition fees to support our higher education providers, the Secretary of State announced that maximum loans for living costs for undergraduate students will also increase in line with forecast inflation. In the 2025-26 academic year, maximum loans for living costs will increase by 3.1%, from £10,227 to £10,544, for an undergraduate student living away from home and studying outside London. That will ensure that the most support is targeted at students from the lowest-income families, while keeping the student finance system financially sustainable.

As part of the Secretary of State's announcements on 4 November, she set out our five priorities for reform of the higher education system. We will expect our providers to play a stronger role in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students; to make a stronger contribution to economic growth; to play a greater civic role in their communities—many already do excellent work in this area—and to raise the bar further on teaching standards to maintain and improve our world-leading reputation and drive out poor practice. I am very sure that that is also their ambition. Underpinning all that, the sector must undertake a sustained efficiency and reform programme. We will publish our plan for higher education reform by summer 2025 and will work with the sector and the OfS to ensure that the system delivers those priorities.

I take this opportunity to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash and reaffirm the Government's commitment to a United Kingdom that is outward looking and welcomes international students, as commented on by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire. For too long, international students have been treated as political footballs and not valued guests. This Government will take a different approach and will speak clearly. Be in no doubt: international students are welcome in the UK. That is why we offer international students who successfully complete their studies the opportunity to remain in the UK to work, live and contribute to our national life. I know there have been other questions on that issue, and I will endeavour to get back to Members on them.

I am aware that there have been calls to bring back maintenance grants. The Government continue to provide means-tested, non-repayable grants to low-income students with children and/or adults who are financially dependent on them. Students undertaking nursing, midwifery and allied health professional courses qualify for non-repayable grant support through the NHS learning support fund. As we know, this is a space where much more needs to be done. We need to rebuild our NHS and put it back on a secure footing.

These are just some of the ways in which this Government are trying to mend the failures of the past. However, we recognise there is much more to be done to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and we are determined to reverse the decline in participation rates for disadvantaged students. We expect the higher education sector to do more to support students by working with the Government and the OfS and by making the most of the lifelong learning entitlement. We will be setting out our longer-term plans for the sector next year.

I understand that there have been some concerns regarding the recent OfS announcement that it is enacting temporary changes to its operation to allow a greater

[Janet Daby]

focus on financial sustainability. As the Minister for Skills explained in the House of Lords yesterday, this decision by the OfS reflects the Government's determination to move our providers towards a firmer financial footing. The refocusing of the OfS on the issue of financial sustainability and our decision to increase tuition fees demonstrate our ambition to create a secure future for our world-leading higher education sector.

Before I close, I will briefly set out the Government's position on research funding, which is the responsibility of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. We committed to record funding for research and development in the recent Budget. We are increasing core research funding to more than £6.1 billion to offer real-terms protection to the UK's world-leading research base and to support UK Research and Innovation in delivering on the UK's key research priorities. This Government are determined to work with the sector to help it to transition to sustainable research funding models, including increasing research grant cost recovery.

I again thank everybody who has contributed significantly to this debate—

Neil O'Brien: I just wanted to rephrase my question. Do this Government think it is okay not to answer basic questions about how much the national insurance increase is costing education providers—be they nurseries, schools or universities? Can the Minister confirm that she will answer those questions?

Janet Daby: I understand that there are some concerns regarding how the sector will contend with increases to employers' national insurance contributions. As the Chancellor set out in the Budget, raising the revenue necessary to fund public services and restore economic stability requires difficult decisions on tax, which is why the Government are asking employers to contribute more. We strongly believe that this is the fairest choice to help to fund the NHS and wider national priorities, which were failed by the previous Government and strongly need a greater focus on building up public services and public provision.

As set out in the November update on the financial sustainability of the sector, the OfS estimates that the fee uplift will represent up to an additional £371 million of annual fee income. The national insurance contribution changes for employers will result in additional costs for the sector of £133 million in 2024-25 and of £430 million in each year from 2025-26. The Department plans to publish its own estimates shortly, as part of its assessment of the impact of the planned tuition fee and student finance changes.

We are committed to creating a secure future for our world-leading higher education sector so that it can deliver for students, taxpayers, workers and the economy.

Although the Government have already taken action to help to move the sector towards a more sustainable and stable financial footing, we recognise that a real change of approach is needed, both from the Government and from the sector itself, to support our broader plans for higher education. For that reason, we look forward to working in partnership with the sector, the Office for Students, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and UK Research and Innovation to shape the changes to Government policy.

3.57 pm

Adam Thompson: It remains a great privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz.

I thank hon. Members, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), and the Minister for their participation today; they have all made fantastic points in this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) talked about the importance of supporting diverse communities and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. She spoke particularly about the University of Bedfordshire, but I know that many of our post-1992 institutions do an excellent job in that regard, so I thank her for raising that issue.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) talked about maintenance grants and international students, and the importance of supporting both as we move forward; I agree with him on that. I thank the shadow Minister for his contribution. He made many important points that are salient for us as we move forward.

I very much thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her response to the debate. I associate myself with her comments about the importance of our universities and how fantastic our lecturers are, and I welcome her points about the OfS's new focus on financial stability, funding for research and ensuring that the best interests of students are protected throughout the sector as we move forward.

I also very much welcome the Secretary of State's priorities on the Government's commitments for the sector. There is a fantastic opportunity for us to work cross-party on this issue, because it is a very difficult and complex problem that affects many of our universities across the country, and it is not going away. I am very grateful to have started this conversation and to all the Members who have come to Westminster Hall today. Thank you again for your chairship, Ms Vaz.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the financial sustainability of higher education.

3.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 5 December 2024

CABINET OFFICE

House of Lords Appointments

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): From today, political parties will be required to provide citations when making nominations for appointment to the House of Lords, summarising why an individual has been put forward.

It is for party leaders to consider who is best placed to represent their party in the House of Lords when nominating individuals for appointment to the upper House. From today political parties will need to provide a citation for each of their nominees, which will be published on gov.uk on successful appointment.

The House of Lords Appointments Commission will collate these citations, and will maintain its existing role in vetting all nominations for appointment as life peers, including those nominated by the political parties, to ensure the highest standards of propriety.

The Government will keep the appointments system under review as we progress wider reforms to the House of Lords.

[HCWS284]

PRIME MINISTER

Plan for Change: Milestones for Mission-led Government

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): This Government were elected to deliver change—to strengthen our country, in an increasingly volatile world, with a decade of national renewal. This begins with the strong foundations of economic stability, secure borders and national security. In dangerous times, strengthening these foundations is ever more vital to the daily task of securing the national interest. The Government have begun this work, with a Budget that stabilised the economy, the creation of a new border security command and increased investment in defence.

Building on these foundations, the Government have five national missions to deliver a decade of national renewal. These missions are our mandate, the priorities of working people:

- Kickstart economic growth.
- Build an NHS fit for the future.
- Safer streets.
- Break down the barriers to opportunity.
- Make Britain a clean energy superpower.

To deliver change requires relentless focus and prioritisation, as well as tough decisions. This Government have already made such decisions to restore economic stability, including reforming agricultural property relief and means-testing the winter fuel allowance.

But change has begun, even though we have inherited the unprecedented twin challenges of crumbling public services and crippled public finances. We have made headway on our first steps, establishing border security command; setting up Great British Energy; cracking down on antisocial behaviour; and beginning the work of recruiting 6,500 teachers in key subjects, paid for by ending tax breaks for private schools.

Our missions represent a long-term plan for the country, an end to the sticking-plaster policies of the past. They capture the basic hope that Britain can get better. This Government have also been clear that they will do things differently. That includes being open and honest about what we will deliver. That is why, today, I am pleased to lay before this House our plan for change.

Guided by our missions, this plan for change shows the path towards a decade of national renewal. To drive us forward in this Parliament, it sets clear milestones for tracking our progress and allowing the British people to hold us to account. These are our milestones for change:

Raising living standards in every part of the United Kingdom, so working people have more money in their pocket, as we aim to deliver the highest sustained growth in the G7.

Rebuilding Britain with 1.5 million homes in England and fast-tracking planning decisions on at least 150 major economic infrastructure projects.

Ending hospital backlogs to meet the NHS standard of 92% of patients in England waiting no longer than 18 weeks for elective treatment.

Putting police back on the beat, with a named officer for every neighbourhood, and 13,000 additional officers, police community support officers and special constables in neighbourhood roles in England and Wales. Today, the Government have also announced £100 million of funding in 2025-26 to support the initial delivery of 13,000 additional police officers, PCSOs and special constables in neighbourhood policing roles.

Giving children the best start in life, with a record 75% of five-year-olds in England ready to learn when they start school.

Securing home-grown energy, protecting bill payers, and putting us on track for at least 95% clean power by 2030, while accelerating the UK to net zero.

These milestones for change are ambitious. Indeed, given the appalling economic situation and state of public services we inherited, meeting these milestones in this Parliament represents a huge challenge. Together, they represent the most ambitious and honest programme for Government in a generation, but they are achievable, and for the next five years, they will give our country the stabilising certainty of a clear destination.

The plan for change is not just about Government; these are milestones for the entire country—a partnership between public and private sectors, national and local government, business and unions, alongside the whole of civil society. And so I am pleased today, with the publication of our plan for change, to invite Parliament, and the people of the United Kingdom, to join us in this mission of national renewal.

[HCWS285]

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