

Thursday
23 January 2025

Volume 760
No. 80



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 23 January 2025

House of Commons

Thursday 23 January 2025

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—

Plan for Change

1. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the Government's plan for change. [902327]

9. **Michelle Welsh** (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the Government's plan for change. [902336]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Since we launched the plan for change last month, we have published the elective reform plan to get NHS waiting lists down and the AI opportunities plan so that the UK is a great home for AI investment and the Government make the most of this technology. The aim of the plan for change is to increase living standards, cut NHS waiting lists, boost energy security, give children the best start in life, make our streets safer, and build the houses that the country needs for the future. Just today, we have announced measures to stop repeated judicial review attempts from holding up major investment projects that are in the national interest.

Warinder Juss: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Does he agree that the Government's plan for change provides my constituents in Wolverhampton West with clear, measurable metrics against which they can hold the Government to account? This will help to restore faith in politics and politicians, and enable my constituents to see shorter hospital waiting lists, better living standards, safer streets, better and more housing and a better start for our children in school.

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour for his question. I know his constituents well in Wolverhampton and he is right that a higher standard of living, lower NHS waiting lists, more housing and children getting a better start in life will be good for his constituents in Wolverhampton and good for constituents right around the country.

Michelle Welsh: Vibrant town centres are so important for the health of our local economies. Under the Conservatives, shop lifting was allowed to spiral out of control and we are still dealing with the consequences. Not too long ago, in Hucknall, a shopworker was brutally

attacked. When I speak to local residents and businesses across Sherwood Forest, they tell me that this kind of antisocial behaviour has meant that they do not want to go out into town at night. Can the Minister confirm that the measures announced in the plan for change will deliver safer streets and be a boost to local economies?

Pat McFadden: I am very sorry to hear about the distressing attack on the shopworker in my hon. Friend's constituency. Everyone should be free to go to work without the fear of being attacked while doing their job. I am pleased to say that, under this Government, assaulting a shopworker will be made a separate criminal offence. My hon. Friend is right to say that, on top of that, we need to do more to ensure that our town centres are safe. Restoring community policing with the additional police officers and police community support officers that we plan will enable all our constituents to visit their town centres and go about their business with peace and confidence.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome the announcement on the judicial review proposals. The Government's plan for change is an important endeavour, which will need not just Cabinet colleagues but civil servants to row in behind it. Is the Minister able to tell the House how he is marshalling and co-ordinating political and official activities to deliver that, and who will hold the circle to deliver across Government, rather than just in silos?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, as he points out an important problem. Siloing is a traditional and difficult issue in our system. This is a plan for the whole of Government—right across Government. The Prime Minister has been very clear with the Cabinet that the goals and aims set out in the plan for change are key things to deliver over the next few years. They require a whole-of-Government machine, crossing departmental boundaries and ensuring that we are focused on outcomes for the public rather than on the processes, which sometimes detain us.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answer. The high streets have become almost a battlefield with shopkeepers trying to ensure that their goods are not stolen and that they are not attacked. In Northern Ireland, we had a problem similar to what the Minister has outlined and others have described. What helps is having CCTV in place, and a police force that is receptive and answers quickly to urgent requests for assistance. Has the Minister had any chance to talk to the Police and Justice Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that what has been done here can be replicated in Northern Ireland in such a way that we can all gain?

Pat McFadden: Not for the first time, the hon. Gentleman speaks a lot of common sense. Wherever people are in the UK, they want the freedom to go about their business—shopping, work or whatever it is—in peace. We believe that some of those measures, such as CCTV, are important. So too is community policing. I am very happy to have a positive and constructive dialogue with the Administration in Northern Ireland and all the devolved Governments on these issues. Powers in these

areas are devolved, but we share a common interest in protecting the public and ensuring that our streets and communities are safe.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): In recent weeks, in response to written parliamentary questions, the Cabinet Office has refused to commit to updating Parliament on the status of the targets in this plan; refused to publish information on the delivery board monitoring; refused to have an independent review and audit of the targets and to publish an annual cost analysis of them; refused to publish a risk register on meeting the targets; refused to publish an annual report; and refused to publish a public dashboard. At the same time, Ministers have been unable to explain how a series of targets in the plan will be measured, so will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster explain whether this is a sign that his Department is being obstructive and evasive, or that the plan has not been thought through beyond the slogans?

Pat McFadden: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. If he wants to know what the targets are, I suggest that he reads the plan for change; they are set out very carefully in it. On the lists of processes, I said that we were focused on outcomes. That is why today we have announced reform of the judicial review process to stop repeated, and often lengthy and hugely expensive, actions that delay important investment projects that are in the national interest. I would have thought that he would have welcomed that.

Cyber Security

2. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening cyber security. [902328]

6. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on strengthening cyber security. [902332]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): The battle to ensure protection against cyber-attacks is constant and ongoing. I made a speech to the NATO cyber-defence conference a couple of months ago, and said that the Government are taking action to strengthen our cyber-security and protect our digital economy to deliver economic growth. Last week, we announced important proposals to protect UK businesses from ransomware, the most harmful cyber-crime, which can often cost a lot of money and do a lot of damage. Those measures will complement the Cyber Security and Resilience Bill, which is being introduced this Session, to help to make the UK safer from cyber-threats.

Dr Gardner: Given the critical importance of closing the skills gap across the Government and defence sectors to safeguard against emerging threats in this digital age, which worry my constituents of Stoke-on-Trent South, what plans do the Government have to collaborate with organisations such as Code First Girls to develop a skilled and inclusive cyber-workforce, as highlighted in the artificial intelligence opportunities action plan?

Pat McFadden: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. The AI opportunities action plan gives us great opportunities and shows how seriously we take this matter. I know that organisations such as Code First Girls are doing important work providing free coding courses for women. I thank them for that. It is really important in pursuing this plan that we have the skilled people to do it. I am pleased to say that much of the cyber-security work in Government is led by outstanding women. We want more people with the right skills, so well done to Code First Girls, which we look forward to continuing to work with.

Kevin Bonavia: Between July 2023 and 2024, over 150 cyber-incidents were reported by the local government sector in the UK. Last year, the average ransom demand from a ransomware attack was over £2.2 million. As the local government sector does not pay ransoms, the average cost to our councils of recovering from a ransomware attack is approximately £12 million. Will my right hon. Friend therefore make additional support available to local authorities to enhance their cyber-security and protect local services for constituents such as mine in Stevenage?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the threat to local authorities. This is a whole-system threat. It can affect central Government, private businesses and local authorities. In October, my colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government launched the cyber assessment framework for local government, which sets a clear standard for the sector. They also provide monthly cyber clinics and support local authorities to improve collaboration, share intelligence and tackle common vulnerabilities. There has to be constant dialogue and a constant fight against this growing threat.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Ministers in this Department and in others have been generous in engaging with my repeated requests for engagement with Cheltenham's cyber-security industry, where GCHQ and the National Cyber Security Centre are located. There is increasing evidence that having the private and public sectors co-located is important for our cyber-security sector. The Golden Valley development provides an opportunity to do that, and the Places for Growth scheme might give an opportunity for more public sector officials to be placed alongside one of our most influential cyber-clusters. Would the Minister be interested in having a meeting about that?

Mr Speaker: But not at the expense of Lancashire.

Pat McFadden: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for his relentlessness in raising those issues on behalf of his constituency. He is right to draw attention to the assets we have there—GCHQ and the National Cyber Security Centre—and I pay tribute to the officials working there. There is a benefit to clusters in people learning from one another and in being close by, and it all helps contribute to our efforts in this area.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Last year, the National Cyber Security Centre, located in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), said that the Government were almost certain

that Russian actors had attempted to interfere in the 2019 general election. We are clearly in a new era of politics. Trust in politics is at an all-time low; disinformation is on the rise; and following instances across the world of foreign interference in elections, it is essential that the Government make a plan to address this threat to democracy. It is vital that we take all possible steps to restore faith in politics to strengthen our political system, boost political engagement at home and protect our national democracy from external influences. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to safeguard the democratic processes of the United Kingdom from foreign interference?

Pat McFadden: The Liberal Democrat spokesperson makes some strong points. We have to take the protection of our democratic system and processes seriously. I outlined Russian activity in my speech to the NATO cyber-security conference a couple of months ago. We have to guard against it here and help other countries guard against it, too. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence made very clear yesterday what we think of Russian interference in our waters, and the same applies in the cyber-sphere.

Relations with the EU

3. **Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [902329]

5. **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [902331]

19. **Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to improve relations with the EU. [902348]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission have agreed to strengthen the relationship between the EU and the UK, putting it on a more solid, stable footing. I am taking forward discussions with my EU counterpart, Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič. In two weeks' time, the Prime Minister will attend a summit with fellow European leaders on European defence.

Richard Baker: Does the Minister agree that the arts, musicians and the wider creative sector play a vital role in our economy, which is why working to negotiate a deal with touring artists is so important? Will the Minister confirm that this is still a priority for him?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I can confirm that our priority remains ensuring that UK artists can continue to perform and promote themselves around the world. That is why the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is working collaboratively with the creative sector and across Government to address key issues for our brilliant artists and their support staff touring the EU. As we set out in our manifesto, we will work with the EU and member states to explore how best to improve those arrangements, but without seeing a return to freedom of movement.

Joe Morris: I am frequently contacted by businesses in my constituency who are deeply concerned about the trade barriers put up by the previous Government that are damaging growth in the north-east. May I urge my right hon. Friend in the strongest possible terms to prioritise pragmatism in our relations with the EU and to ensure that businesses in my part of the country can get the support they need and export the goods they manufacture?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend raises a good point. Of course, we set out in our manifesto that we would not return to the single market, to the customs union or to freedom of movement. Within that framework, we absolutely take a pragmatic approach, putting the national interest first to tear down trade barriers wherever we can.

Rachel Blake: The end of this month will mark the anniversary of Brexit. Will the Minister assure me that we will not return to the appalling divisions of the past, and does he agree that the forthcoming summit and reset negotiations are a vital opportunity to discuss growth, not just for the diverse communities and businesses in my constituency, but for our nation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this is a time to look to the future, not to go back to the divisions of the past. The forthcoming EU-UK summit presents significant opportunities to make people in the UK and the EU more secure, safer and more prosperous.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): For more than 15 years, the European Union has been in breach of its international treaty obligations to join the European convention on human rights. What are the Government doing to address the arrogance of the European Union on that issue?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I would say, first, that the Government are committed to our membership of the European convention on human rights, and secondly, that the hon. Gentleman talks about bodies and organisations not being compliant with international treaties, but one of the big problems with the previous Government was how they signed international treaties and then sought to condemn them when they themselves had put pen to paper.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Maroš Šefčovič is today dangling the prospect of the UK joining the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention. Of course, the quiet part is that that would once again turn this country into rule takers, not rule makers. Ahead of the summit, can the Paymaster General rule out the prospect of the UK falling in line with so-called dynamic alignment—in other words, taking EU rules and regulations—and will we instead strike out in the world and do new deals with America and around the Pacific rim?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I do not accept the binary choice that the hon. Gentleman presents. We want to increase trade and export all around the world—that is hugely important. As the Prime Minister said, we do not choose between allies; we look to deepen all our relationships. Of course, we welcome the positive and constructive tone from Commissioner Šefčovič. We are always looking for ways to reduce barriers to trade, but

within our manifesto red lines, because we take a pragmatic view on where the national interest lies. We do not currently have any plans to join PEM, and we will not provide a running commentary on every comment that is made.

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

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Yesterday in Davos, Mr Šefčovič suggested that the UK and the EU were talking about dynamic alignment. As the Paymaster General will be aware, that is, if true, a very significant step. Will he be clear with the House: is dynamic alignment on the table?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have to give the hon. Gentleman top marks for audacity. I do not know whether Conservative MPs have heard, but a week ago, the Leader of the Opposition gave her new year speech, and, as I am sure they know, we listened to it extremely carefully. Do they know what she said about previous EU-UK negotiations? She said that the Conservative Government were engaging in them

“before we had a plan for growth outside the EU... These mistakes were made because we told people what they wanted to hear first and then tried to work it out later.”

Why doesn't the—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we are in danger—*[Interruption.]* I am not going to sit down, Minister. *[Interruption.]* Thank you. We have a lot of questions to get through. If you want to make a statement on that in future, I would welcome it.

Alex Burghart: I would welcome that, too, Mr Speaker, because the right hon. Gentleman was not answering my question—just as he did not answer the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), and just as his Department is not answering questions of any hue at the moment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) made clear. It comes to something when Mr Šefčovič is a better guide to what is going on than the British Government. If the Government are committed to dynamic alignment, that is a significant step, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, because it could bring the European Court of Justice back into having jurisdiction over the United Kingdom. So, for the avoidance of doubt, will he rule out the ECJ having jurisdiction over the UK in any regard in the future?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am astonished by the question, because the hon. Gentleman is also the shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, and will know the role that the European Court of Justice plays in the Windsor framework. Turning to his question about the negotiations, we have set out our red lines in the manifesto, and have set out examples of things that we are seeking to negotiate—that is already there.

The Leader of the Opposition was apologising last week for the conduct of the Conservative party in its relationship with the EU. Why is the hon. Gentleman not starting with an apology, or did he just not get the memo from his leader?

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The wholly inadequate deal with the EU negotiated by the previous Conservative Government has done enormous damage to British businesses, which have seen soaring import costs, increased workforce shortages, and reams of red tape creating huge barriers to growth. The return of a Trump Administration in Washington changes the landscape of trade deals globally with the threat of high tariffs, and will be deeply worrying for many businesses across the country. The UK must lead on the world stage again, standing up for our interests by working closely with other countries—most importantly, our European neighbours—as set out by my right hon. Friend the leader of the Liberal Democrats in his new year's speech last week. I urge the Minister to be more ambitious in rebuilding our relationship with Europe. Does he agree that the best way to boost growth and fix our relationship with the EU is to agree a new UK-EU customs union?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for her question, but as I indicated in an earlier answer, we do not choose between allies. We are looking to deepen our trade links right around the world with different partners, but the hon. Lady should be aware that we are ambitious on the UK-EU relationship, and we will take that ambition forward into the UK-EU summit.

House of Lords Reform

4. **Jade Botterill** (Ossett and Denby Dale) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on reform of the House of Lords. [902330]

17. **Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on reform of the House of Lords. [902346]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): As an immediate first step in reform, the Government introduced the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill to remove the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. That Bill was unamended and passed in this House, and will soon be in Committee in the other place.

Jade Botterill: I regularly meet talented, hard-working and intelligent young people across Ossett and Denby Dale who often feel detached from politics. How quickly can the Government make progress on this legislation so that all young people have an equal chance to make the laws and shape our future, not just those born into privilege?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we want to see this Bill on the statute book by the end of this Session. The role of hereditary peers is completely indefensible in this day and age. Last year, the Bill was resoundingly approved by this House, and it is currently going through the other place, where it will soon be in Committee. It is a clear manifesto commitment by the Labour party, and I look forward to it being delivered.

Mark Swards: I thank the Minister for his answer. Being the MP for Leeds South West and Morley is the greatest privilege I could ask for, and constituency boundaries ensure that all parts of our country are

represented in this place. The same is not true of the other place, which is not representative of our nations and regions. What work is being done or considered to remedy that, to ensure that all of our communities are represented in the other place?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As the Member of Parliament for the seat where I grew up, I share my hon. Friend's passion for representing my area. He will be aware of the Government's manifesto commitment to reform the process of appointments to the House of Lords so that it better reflects the country it serves, and we will consult on proposals for an alternative second Chamber that is more representative of the nations and regions.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): In 2022, the then shadow Leader of the House rightly accused Boris Johnson of abusing the honours system by appointing cronies to the House of Lords, and promised that an incoming Labour Prime Minister would never do such a thing. Now, having lost her seat at the general election, that former shadow Leader of the House is one of 30 new Labour peers waiting to be appointed by the Prime Minister to sit in the House of Lords. Could the Minister explain how the Labour party stuffing the House of Lords with its cronies is any less of an affront to democracy than when the Tories did it?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I do not think the hon. Gentleman can seriously compare the appointments we have put forward with what happened under the Conservative party. We have already set out that each and every appointment will be accompanied by a citation indicating the experience to be brought to the upper House, and the people he refers to will make an excellent contribution there.

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme: Payments

7. **John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): What progress he has made on payments to infected and affected people under the infected blood compensation scheme. [902334]

10. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on establishing the infected blood compensation scheme. [902337]

11. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on establishing the infected blood compensation scheme. [902338]

21. **Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): What steps he is taking to monitor compensation payments for people impacted by infected blood. [902350]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The Infected Blood Compensation Authority has made the first compensation offers to 11 people, with a total value of more than £13 million. The Government have also paid over £1 billion in interim compensation, and in the Budget we announced £11.8 billion of funding for the scheme. Yesterday, I visited the Infected Blood Compensation Authority office in Newcastle, and I was reassured to see the progress that is being made swiftly and compassionately.

John Glen: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his update to the House. I note the press release that went out yesterday, and no doubt there will be another one on 5 March, the day before the next Cabinet Office questions. However, I want to be constructive in my approach; I, too, will be visiting the Infected Blood Compensation Authority in Newcastle, next Thursday.

The legal representatives of the complex web of stakeholders in the infected blood and affected communities remain concerned about the status of the arm's length body, the appeals process and the role of victims in the oversight board. I am absolutely clear that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has the necessary authority and will work through those issues. I urge the Minister to work with and reassure the victims' representatives, so that the lawyers can be more constructive in supporting these people along this difficult pathway. No doubt hon. Members will come in with more questions, but does the Minister agree with me that we need to move forward in a constructive manner?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I look forward to the former Paymaster General's reflections after his visit next week. I was delighted yesterday to meet the user consultants—three victims; two infected, one affected—who are certainly making their voice heard at the Infected Blood Compensation Authority. That voice of victims is hugely important, as is the constructive approach the right hon. Gentleman has indicated.

Jessica Toale: I welcome the £11.8 billion allocated in the Budget for the infected blood scandal, which is a clear commitment from this Government that they are acting on this injustice. However, parents and partners of the infected, including in my constituency of Bournemouth West, are rightly apprehensive about when they will receive compensation; many are elderly or in poor health. Given the urgency of the situation, can the Minister outline when they might receive compensation and whether he will consider including them in the initial waves?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: In October, applications opened for eligible estates to claim interim compensation payments of £100,000. So far, more than 230 estates have received payments. I hope those payments are welcomed as the beginning of recognition for those who have lost loved ones to this devastating scandal. The delivery of compensation payments is rightly a matter for IBCA, which is an independent arm's length body chaired by Sir Robert Francis. The Government expect payments to eligible affected people to begin this year, following a second set of regulations that I will be laying before Parliament in the coming weeks.

Gregor Poynton: I do not imagine there is one MP in this House who has not had constituents come to talk to them about the infected blood scandal. In fact, this week I spoke to one such constituent, Linda Cannon, who told me her story, saying:

"I lost my husband, Billy, in February 2013 to Hepatitis C after a blood transfusion in 1986, for a stomach ulcer, at Bangour Hospital. He was not informed till 2011 that he had been infected, only finding out after presenting with a sore back. He underwent severe treatment, without success, which will live with me forever. Life has been difficult to deal with after this".

The consequences have been completely devastating for her family. Mr Cannon will not see justice, but several of my other constituents must. I welcome the urgency with which this Government have moved forward with this issue, because justice for the victims of this injustice is long overdue. Can the Minister update the House on how he has been working—not just in England, but across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—to make sure that payments get to those who need them immediately?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The whole House will be moved by the story of my hon. Friend's constituent. It is a story from this appalling scandal that many of us across the House will be hearing from our constituents. I am pleased that first payments have been made to people who have waited far too long for compensation. Those payments were made by the end of 2024, as I committed to the House to do. I also commit specifically to my hon. Friend to working closely with the devolved Administrations to ensure that victims across the United Kingdom can achieve justice.

Liz Jarvis: The victims of the infected blood scandal, including those from my constituency who attended Treloar college in Hampshire, have been fighting for justice for decades. They have raised deep concerns about the slow progress of compensation payments; the Infected Blood Compensation Authority projects that by the end of March just 250 people will have been offered compensation. Will the Government accelerate the roll-out of the compensation scheme to ensure that victims see justice within their lifetimes?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am restless for progress on the speed of payments, and I will do everything in my gift as a Minister to lay the regulations before this House speedily. IBCA is obviously operationally independent and—I was having this discussion yesterday in Newcastle—the test and learn approach that it uses, which starts with a representative sample of cases, will allow it to ramp up delivery. When I was in Newcastle yesterday I saw a group of public servants working efficiently in a compassionate way to deliver.

Ministerial Travel: Cost

8. **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the cost of ministerial travel. [902335]

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): Across all our work this Government are determined to deliver better value for money for taxpayers. That is why, shortly after we came to office, this Government scrapped the Conservative party's VIP helicopter service, which was a grossly wasteful symbol of a Government who were totally out of touch with the problems facing the rest of the country. Under this Government, Ministers must ensure that they always make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements, which the Government publish on gov.uk.

Joe Robertson: The Minister refers to helicopter travel, and she has given her description of the previous Government. Does she not accept that the Government are using VIP helicopter travel, not through the Ministry of Defence budget but through the Cabinet Office

budget? Does that not make this Government grossly hypocritical, and is that not a symbol of how out of touch they are with the British public?

Ellie Reeves: Under the last Government, the former Prime Minister would take helicopters for short journeys at huge waste to the taxpayer. The Prime Minister's ministerial travel under this Government is always decided with consideration for the most efficient and best use of time and, crucially, in the interests of the taxpayer.

EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement: Fishing

12. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Whether he has had recent discussions with the fishing industry on the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement. [902339]

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I engage with a range of stakeholders relevant to our relationship with the EU, for example through the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement's domestic advisory group, which I last met in September and which includes representatives of the UK fishing industry. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is the responsible Department, and has ongoing dialogue with the industry. I recently met my hon. Friend the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs to discuss fisheries matters, and I will meet representatives of the Scottish fishing industry in the very near future to discuss their interests in our fisheries relationship with the EU under the trade and co-operation agreement.

Mr Carmichael: I am delighted to hear that those meetings are scheduled, because the review of the TCA is seen by fishing industries around the UK as an opportunity to undo some of the damage that was done by Boris Johnson at the end of the Brexit negotiations. I met the EU Commission official who will be leading the EU side of the negotiations and it is clear that she is informed of their industries' priorities and has a plan for achieving them. The EU sees this as an important piece of work. The Minister can only do what needs to be done if he is prepared to engage with and listen to the views of our fishing industries and communities.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I understand and recognise the strong interest in what happens in 2026 when the arrangements that were negotiated by the previous Government end. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I will listen and engage. We will protect the interests of our fisheries, and also fulfil our international commitments to protect the marine environment.

Public Services Reform

13. **Dr Beccy Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reform public services. [902341]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): As I set out in a speech last month, modern government is about not just what the Government want to do but reform of the state itself. We want to see public services that revolve around the needs of service users, using new technology in the best way possible to

secure value for money and better outcomes for our citizens. We have launched a number of test and learn projects with local authority areas to get better results on difficult issues such as temporary accommodation. Just this week, we announced that we will launch a new gov.uk app in June, which will be a step change in fast and easy public access to Government services.

Dr Cooper: I thank the Minister for those comments. How will he ensure that tackling health inequalities is baked into public service reforms, devolution agreements and local growth plans?

Pat McFadden: At the heart of what we want to do is improving living standards, outcomes and opportunities for all. One of the consequences of the long waiting times and waiting lists in the NHS in recent years is that it has been tougher on those who simply cannot afford to pay. It is therefore in the interests of good health and equal access to put in the investment that was announced by the Chancellor in the Budget, which is being taken forward in the plans announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): The reform of public services and the reliance on artificial intelligence to deliver that led the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to pilot the Microsoft Copilot program. That pilot ended after six months, yet it demonstrated transformative improvements in departmental efficiency and was particularly beneficial for disabled and neurodivergent staff. Will the Minister confirm whether funding for that tool, which has been suspended until 2026, could be released so that staff could benefit from its application?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to point out the advantages that can come from these things. I am reluctant to make specific announcements about funding for specific projects. However, the Government are determined not only to make the UK a good home for investment in AI, which will be huge around the world in the coming years, but to make the best possible use of AI in the delivery of public services, which we believe can get good value for money and better outcomes for the public. The road will not always be easy, and there will be things that go wrong, but frankly, with our tradition of creativity and innovation, we want to grasp this technology and make the best use of it.

Fraud: Public Sector

14. **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce fraud in the public sector. [902342]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): Yesterday, the Government announced ambitious new legislation to take action on fraud, updating the Department for Work and Pensions' powers for the first time in 20 years and introducing new powers to take on high-value fraud across the wider public sector. At the Budget, the Chancellor announced the biggest welfare fraud and error budget in recent history. Under the last Government, fraud spiralled out of control, but we are determined to protect every pound of taxpayers' money.

Daniel Francis: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. One of the biggest scandals that we saw under the last Conservative Government was Ministers giving out dodgy covid contracts to their friends and donors. Will the Minister update the House on what steps the Government are taking to ensure that there will never again be a repeat of that shameful behaviour and that where the public have been defrauded, we will get our money back?

Georgia Gould: My hon. Friend, as a local government leader during the pandemic, will know how hard things were for communities; sacrifices were made and people risked their lives to keep the rest of us safe. He will share my anger at those who used the national crisis to steal billions from the taxpayer. We will take action on that where the last Government failed. The Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, which was introduced yesterday, will give the Government tough new powers to investigate and recover money stolen from the public and will double the time we have to bring those fraudsters to justice.

Public Procurement: Reform

15. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to reform public procurement. [902343]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): Under this Government, public procurement will be laser focused on delivering our missions and value for money for the taxpayer. The Procurement Act 2023 will commence in February, creating a simpler, more flexible procurement regime underpinned by a new mission-led national procurement policy statement. I really welcome the wide interest of hon. Members from across the House in this work and that of so many small businesses, social enterprises and voluntary sector organisations. I look forward to bringing forward the NPPS to support small and medium-sized enterprises, tackle waste and deliver on our missions.

Jayne Kirkham: I am so pleased to hear about the national procurement policy statement next month. As well as encouraging buying British, there are huge opportunities to use procurement to encourage growth and local supply chains, such as in floating offshore wind in Cornwall, as well as in other industries. Will the Minister confirm that there will be a bold procurement policy that will ensure economic growth in every corner of our country, even as far down as Cornwall?

Georgia Gould: I welcomed the conversation last week with my hon. Friend, who talked me through the importance of small and medium-sized enterprises to growth in Truro and Falmouth. A lot of small businesses I have spoken to say the same thing: it can be too complex and slow to bid for Government contracts, sometimes those contracts come out too late and sometimes they cannot get on the playing field. We have listened very carefully to what my hon. Friend and others have to say on these issues, and we will bring forward an NPPS that delivers for SMEs.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Unbelievably, the Treasury Committee has already raised concerns about the Office for Value for Money, citing issues around its remit, cost, cross-Government duplication and more, which could be expressed concisely as fears around the value for money of Labour's new Office for Value for Money. Does the Minister agree with the financial markets, which do not believe this Government's commitment to reforming public procurement or to prudent financial management, which is why they have added a Reeves ratio to the UK Government's debt, costing taxpayers an extra £10 billion a year?

Georgia Gould: Yesterday, the National Audit Office published a report on the almost £50 billion gap in building maintenance. That is the legacy that the last Government left us: crumbling buildings, 15 years of lost wage growth and stalled productivity. Compare that with this Government's record in just the past six months: £63 billion investment at the UK investment summit and leading the way on artificial intelligence. The International Monetary Fund upgraded our growth to the fastest in Europe. The Opposition might want to run down this country, but we are determined to grow our economy.

Topical Questions

T1. [902351] **David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): Since the last Cabinet Office questions we have set out the Government's approach on public sector reform, published our response to module 1 of the covid-19 inquiry, updated the national risk register and launched our artificial intelligence opportunities plan. Just yesterday, alongside the Department for Work and Pensions, we introduced new legislation to deliver the biggest fraud crackdown in a generation, with greater powers for the Cabinet Office's public sector fraud authority to retrieve some of the money that was lost during the last Administration.

David Davis: Quite properly, this week the Government have been talking about applying AI to improve efficiency and effectiveness across Whitehall. When a human civil servant—let us say at His Majesty's Revenue and Customs or the DWP—makes a mistake and is challenged, they can explain their logic and how they came to the decision. We know that the courts always believe that computers are best and give the right answer, but AI makes mistakes—sometimes huge ones. Because of the way it is programmed, it cannot explain how it got to the decision. How will the Government ensure that the appeal process continues to work and we do not have a high-tech version of the Post Office scandal?

Pat McFadden: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. The public inquiry into the Horizon scandal shows that blind faith in a computer system used in a court of law can lead to injustices. I do believe in the possibilities of AI, but it is important to keep the human element at all times. It will enhance human productivity but not replace it. That is the way we should go.

T3. [902353] **Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): The Government were elected on a promise to buy, make and sell more in Britain. What action is the Minister taking to prioritise UK manufacturing and UK-made steel in public procurement for energy and defence products on national security grounds, as is allowed by the World Trade Organisation?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould): I welcome the recent conversation with my hon. Friend on this important matter. The Government's industrial strategy outlines the importance of manufacturing in the defence industry to economic growth and national security. The new national procurement policy statement will put growth at the heart of procurement and will align to our industrial strategy.

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

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Given the news from Germany, will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster update the House on the work the Cabinet Office is doing to prepare for the possibility of an outbreak of foot and mouth?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for his question. Those of us of a certain age will remember the appalling consequences of the last serious outbreak of foot and mouth in the UK, more than 20 years ago. Let me say very clearly from this Dispatch Box that we are treating this with the utmost seriousness. I met with Cobra officials yesterday and have asked for several briefings since the outbreak in Germany, and my colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at a ministerial and official level are taking this very seriously as well. We know the threat that such an outbreak would pose to our farming communities, and we want to work with farmers and do everything we possibly can to protect them from it. So far, there has been no outbreak in the UK, but we will—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a very important subject; I totally agree. The trouble is, in topicals, I have to get a lot of Members in. As this subject is so important, I would always welcome a statement on Monday.

Alex Burghart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his reply. Could he assure me that he is speaking to interested parties in Northern Ireland? Given that Northern Ireland is so closely connected to Ireland, which is part of the EU, farmers there are consequently very concerned that they may be affected by any spread of the disease. Will he therefore assure me that he is undertaking that work?

Pat McFadden: I will keep it short, Mr Speaker: we will ensure that we co-ordinate our response with all parts of the UK.

T4. [902355] **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): The Labour-led city council in Norwich was recently awarded £34 million in Government funding to help to unlock affordable homes and jobs at Anglia Square. This is long overdue, and will bring huge benefit to Norwich. It is a brilliant example of the Government's mission for growth as part of our plan for change. Will

my right hon. Friend update us on broader cross-Government plans to deliver the affordable housing needed across the country?

The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves): My hon. Friend has been a brilliant champion for more affordable housing in her constituency. Through our plan for change, we have committed to building 1.5 million homes this Parliament—the biggest increase in affordable housing in a generation, which will benefit families in Norwich and across the country. I am pleased to hear about the plans at Anglia Square, which are a powerful example of what can be achieved when a Labour council works with a Labour Government.

T6. [902357] **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): More than 170 tonnes of illegal meat products have been seized at the port of Dover since 2022. Given the biosecurity threat posed by African swine fever and foot and mouth disease to more than 800 farms in my constituency, alongside thousands of others up and down the country, what steps is the right hon. Gentleman taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure national security and protect British agriculture? I am sure that a statement would be very welcome.

Pat McFadden: As I said in response to the shadow Minister, we take the threat of foot and mouth in particular very seriously. We want to work with our farmers and protect them. This is a matter of national security, but it is also a matter of making sure that Great British farming is not affected by the outbreak in Germany.

T5. [902356] **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): Under the SNP, every public service in Scotland is straining under 18 years of mismanagement, with Scots paying more for less. Thanks to decisions taken by this UK Government, the Scottish Government have the largest budgetary settlement in the history of devolution. Does my right hon. Friend agree that more money will not solve all the problems with Scottish public services, and that we also need a programme of reform? Given that the UK Labour Government are instituting a comprehensive programme of reform, would he share those learnings with the Scottish Government in order that we can reform our public services, too?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the increased funding for the devolved Government in Scotland as a result of the Budget. We are also putting more money into the NHS in England. He is right to say that when we ask the taxpayer to pay more, that should come with reform. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has been clear about that, and I hope it applies elsewhere too.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence said recently that he would reduce the number of permanent civil servants at the MOD by 10% by the end of this Parliament. Will the Cabinet Office be larger or smaller at the end of this Parliament?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman has perhaps not been paying attention. We announced our programme to reduce the number of civil servants in the Cabinet Office just before Christmas.

T7. [902358] **Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Innovation lies at the heart of our five missions. I would like to ask the Minister about her reflections on seeing innovation when she visited Milton Keynes recently and how we can take it forward across the country.

Georgia Gould: It was wonderful to visit Milton Keynes and to see the work of a pioneering Labour council. The work the Labour council has led to open up services to the NHS is a real example of the shift to community that the Government are committed to. Milton Keynes shows that when a wonderful MP works with a Labour council and the NHS amazing things can happen.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): With impending decisions on airport expansions across the south of England, communities in my constituency, including Flamstead and Markyate, are very worried, not only because the evidence about economic growth is quite low but because the Climate Change Committee has said that the impact on the climate would be rather large. Can the Minister assure the House that the Government will be listening to the Government's own advisers and will have a UK-wide capacity management framework before any airport expansion?

Pat McFadden: There has been a lot of speculation in recent days. I would advise the whole House to not comment on speculation. If there is an announcement to be made, it will be made.

T8. [902359] **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): Travelling and working abroad can be an incredibly enriching experience, and I welcome the Government's steps to strengthen our relationship with the EU. My young constituents would like to know specifically what steps are being taken to increase their opportunities in Europe. What discussions has the Minister had with Cabinet colleagues and EU counterparts regarding an EU youth mobility scheme and any other further actions to ease work and travel for young people in Europe?

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. We have arrangements with France to make school trips easier. I think we agree across the House that school trips are an enriching experience. The Department for Education works with the British Council on the learning assistance scheme, which the Government hugely support and want to drive forward. With regard to a youth mobility scheme, I am not going to give a running commentary. What I will say is that we will, of course, always act in the UK's national interest and that we will not go back to freedom of movement.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): How much longer will it be before we get an answer from the Government on the review of the vaccine damage payment scheme? It was initiated when my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) was in the Cabinet Office about a year ago. When will we get an answer?

Pat McFadden: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care met with colleagues on this issue. We believe the vaccine programme had great benefits for the UK, but there is a compensation scheme in place for cases where that was not the case.

T9. [902360] **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Earlier this month, the Chancellor rightly went to China to put our UK-China relations on a more pragmatic footing. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what assessment he has made of the National Security and Investment Act 2021 to ensure that it remains fit for purpose in safeguarding the UK's economic and national security as we cultivate new commercial links?

Pat McFadden: The Chancellor was right to go to China. It is an important economic relationship, but there is a security aspect, too. The National Security and Investment Act has an important role to play; it is there to safeguard critical areas of the economy. We keep it under regular review, and we will approach the relationship keeping both the security and economic interests of the country in mind.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Two weeks ago, my constituency was hit by the worst snow in 15 years, leaving vulnerable and older residents, schools and GP surgeries blocked in by the snow. I commend the Barnsley council team, who were out 24 hours a day, eight days a week solid, but because resources are stretched, their gritters can cover only the council's primary and secondary roads. Does the Minister agree that much more should be done to improve national resilience in extreme and exceptional circumstances where snow is prolonged by cold temperatures, by giving local authorities that cover rural areas such as mine increased gritting resources and access to snow ploughs?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): I thank my hon. Friend for the work she did to support constituents during the heavy snowfall, and I thank Barnsley council and other responders for their work. This responsibility lies with local authorities, but I know that my colleagues in the Cabinet Office, the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are keen for authorities to receive as much support as possible. MHCLG will be in close contact with local resilience forums to see what support they need.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): What progress has been made on improving engagement with those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal? As the Paymaster General is aware, there has been a great deal of concern among those people and the organisations that represent them. May I urge him to sit down with his opposite number in the Department

of Health and Social Care, which is responsible for getting aid to the organisations that support those people who are infected and affected, because they are desperately in need of the resources?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will be carrying out another round of engagement with victims next week. As I said in answer to the former Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), the role of user consultants in the Infected Blood Compensation Authority is vital as well.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): There are still, sadly, two victims of the contaminated blood scandal dying on a weekly basis. Will my right hon. Friend say what is preventing the Government from instructing IBCA to issue core payments today to all living infected victims registered with the existing support schemes?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: IBCA is operationally independent, but I expect the first payments for the affected to be made before the end of this year. I am restless for progress and will do all I can as a Minister to drive this forward.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Public sector procurement is a fantastic way to drive productivity, innovation and local value in public services, but too often, small businesses, start-ups and voluntary service providers in Newcastle tell me they have difficulty accessing public sector contracts; they do not have as many lawyers, consultants or project managers as bigger businesses. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure better access to public sector contracts?

Georgia Gould: I have heard very similar things from the small and medium-sized enterprises I have been talking to around the country. We are bringing forward a new national procurement policy statement that will put SMEs right at the heart of Government procurement policies.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): Open end-to-end procurement data could be a goldmine for mission-driven government, and as the Competition and Markets Authority warned recently, it could make bid rigging harder. Can the Minister explain how we will grasp the opportunity of open end-to-end procurement data?

Georgia Gould: I have met the CMA about the critical issue of bid rigging, and it is something the Government are looking into. More broadly, the Procurement Act 2023 and the new national procurement policy statement put transparency and openness at the heart of our strategy, including a new online portal, which will make it much easier to see upcoming bids.

Agricultural and Business Property Reliefs: OBR Costing

10.33 am

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment she has made of the Office for Budget Responsibility's supplementary forecast information release on the costing of changes to agricultural and business property relief.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): At the autumn Budget, we took difficult decisions on tax, welfare and spending that were necessary to restore economic stability, fix the public finances and support public services. We had to do that to address the mess we inherited from the previous Government, which the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) will remember well, having served in that ill-fated Government. We have taken these decisions in a way that makes the tax system fairer and more sustainable.

The Government are better targeting agricultural property relief and business property relief to make them fairer. These reforms mean that despite the tough fiscal context, the Government are maintaining very significant levels of relief from inheritance tax beyond what is available to others.

Under the current system, the benefit of the 100% relief on business and agricultural assets is heavily skewed towards the wealthiest estates. According to the latest data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, 40% of agricultural property relief benefits the top 7% of estates making claims. That is just 117 estates claiming £219 million of relief. It is a similar picture for business property relief, with more than 50% of it being claimed by just 4% of estates making claims, which equates to 158 estates claiming £558 million in tax relief. Our reforms mean that individuals can access 100% relief for the first £1 million of combined business and agricultural assets, and 50% thereafter. Given the nil rate bands, this means that a couple can pass on up to £3 million between them to a direct descendant, inheritance tax free.

Yesterday, the Office for Budget Responsibility published further details on the data sources and modelling used to estimate costings across a number of the tax measures announced at Budget, including the reforms to agricultural property relief and business property relief. The costing is the same as published at Budget, and the approach to modelling the costing is typical and in line with other tax policies. As the Government have set out, the reforms mean that almost three quarters of estates claiming APR in 2026-27, including those that also claim BPR, will not pay more inheritance tax. This is a fair approach that protects farms while also fixing the public services we all rely on.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Victoria Atkins: Having inherited the fastest-growing economy in the G7, the Chancellor's Budget has led to the highest borrowing costs since the pandemic, growth flatlining, business confidence plummeting and job freezes. Who has Labour chosen to pay the price for its economic illiteracy? Pensioners, family businesses and farmers. For

months, farmers, farming businesses, professional advisers and economists, and now eight major supermarkets, have warned the Chancellor that she has got her figures wrong, but Ministers cleave desperately to their soundbites. Let us hope that they listen to the OBR.

Yesterday, the independent OBR released additional information about this particular measure and reiterated the "high uncertainty" of the predicted yield. It noted that the yield of the measure is likely to be reduced by 35% because of behavioural responses, and that it is unlikely to reach a steady state for 20 years. The OBR also expressed grave concerns about the impact on older individuals and their ability to plan. In short, the reassurances provided by Ministers are falling almost as flat as the economy.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has lectured this House about the perils of sidelining the OBR. In light of its analysis, will the Minister now commit to a full and proper review of this dreadful policy? The public have noticed that Government Ministers are failing to answer reasonable questions about their policies, so will the Minister please give straight answers to the farmers and businesses watching our proceedings today?

In light of the new analysis, how many farms does the Treasury think will be affected by the changes to APR, APR/BPR and BPR alone? What assessment has he made of the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers' finding that the Chancellor has underestimated the number of farms affected by the changes by a factor of five? How many tenant farmers will be evicted? As worrying reports of suicides among farmers begin to emerge, will the Minister please do what the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has failed to do and measure the number of suicides over the next 12 months, so that we can understand the human cost of this policy?

Finally, why does the Minister think that Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, Morrisons, Marks & Spencer, Aldi, Lidl and the Co-op have all come out against this tax policy and believe the Treasury's figures to be wrong? Why does he think they are wrong and he is right?

James Murray: I think there may be some confusion on the Conservative Benches about what the OBR data shows. The data published by the OBR yesterday refers to exactly the same costing as was published at Budget. It sets out the approach to modelling and the costing, which is typical and in line with other tax policies. Indeed, the OBR's statement makes it clear that:

"The OBR's role is to provide independent scrutiny and certification of whether the Government's policy costings are reasonable and central."

That is exactly what the OBR has done in publishing the extra information, which shows the modelling behind the data that was published at the time of the Budget.

The shadow Secretary of State asked about the data. The data on the number of affected estates claiming APR and, indeed, APR/BPR—some 530 is the upper estimate—is in table 1.1 of the OBR document published yesterday. That is consistent with what we have been saying for many months since the Budget. I think Opposition Members are confusing the value of farms with the value of claims under inheritance tax. The only way to truly understand the impact of changes to inheritance tax policy on inheritance tax claims is to look at the claims data itself.

[James Murray]

We are working in partnership with the large supermarket chains to make sure they are driving economic growth. We are very clear that some of the decisions we had to take in the Budget were difficult decisions that will have consequences, but we are determined to work with businesses across the country to drive economic growth, which is the No. 1 mission of this Government.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The people of Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West love the local produce provided by local farmers in our fantastic markets, such as Grainger market, and they enjoy the beautiful countryside of Northumberland, which has been shaped by generations of sustainable farming. However, we cannot help but be aware that most of that land is owned by, for example, the Duke of Northumberland, big landowners and those seeking to minimise their tax exposure, so does the Minister agree that, by keeping this loophole open for so long, the country has pushed up land prices and pushed out the next generation of young farmers?

James Murray: There certainly is evidence that the current inheritance tax system has caused people to use these reliefs for tax planning and to avoid inheritance tax bills. My hon. Friend alludes to the broader question of the fairness and sustainability of this measure. As I mentioned earlier, 40% of agricultural property relief benefits the top 7% of estates, and 50% of business property relief benefits the top 4% of estates. The Leader of the Opposition has said that she thinks this is a good way to prioritise public money, but we think it is neither fair nor sustainable.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): After years of the Tories failing our rural communities, including with a dodgy and utterly shameful Australian trade deal, it is a great pity that the new Government have picked up the baton. From Orkney to the Isles of Scilly, Liberal Democrat colleagues are extremely concerned about the impact of these proposals.

The report published yesterday clearly demonstrates the uncertainty about the income from the misguided family farm tax over the next two decades. In the light of this, and given that it will hit older farmers in particular and those who put food on the tables of the United Kingdom, will the Minister do the right thing and scrap this tax?

James Murray: The OBR document published yesterday refers to the level of uncertainty associated with this policy, which is exactly what was set out at the time of the Budget, and it is a typical way in which the OBR responds to new measures. What was published yesterday simply reiterates the OBR's conclusions from the end of October.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, once again, the Conservative party has failed to agree with the tough decisions we have made and has no idea how to raise the revenue to finance the public services that benefit rural communities like mine in north Buckinghamshire?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The party opposite—in fact, the parties opposite—routinely support the Government's spending and investment decisions but will not support any of the difficult decisions we have to take to fund them.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The weight of public and business opinion is not with the Minister on this issue, and the body of expert opinion speaking out against this tax proposal is now overwhelming. The Minister is a kindly man, so I wonder if he will indulge me. What would he be saying if he were in opposition and that weight of opinion was being expressed against a Conservative Government's Treasury policy?

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman is a kindly man, too. I value the conversations that he and I have had outside the Chamber. People looking at this policy, and all our policies in the Budget, will recognise that we had to take difficult decisions, and will understand the context: our inheritance from the previous Government. We recognise the toughness of those decisions—they were not easy to make—but we prioritise balancing the public finances and economic stability, because that is how we get investment in growth, which our country so badly needs.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Mr Dickson, I think you were very late. I would not want to embarrass you by allowing you to ask a question.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One of the witnesses before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee told us that the Government's changes hit the people the Government say they are protecting, and protect the people the Government say they are hitting. It is difficult to improve on that analysis of what is proposed. It really does not have to be like that. There is a sensible debate to be had about reforming inheritance tax to stop the super-rich from sheltering their wealth while still protecting family farms. His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has its technical consultation coming up. Why does the Minister not agree to broaden its terms, engage with the farming communities, and look for a way to protect family farms and get at those who are sheltering their wealth in land?

James Murray: The policy that we are implementing includes generous provisions to protect family farms—the £1 million entire relief from inheritance tax for agriculture and business property assets. That is in addition to the nil-rate bands that people can access as part of the general inheritance tax scheme. We think that strikes the right balance between making sure we raise money for the public finances and protecting family farms.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Mr Speaker, have you noticed a pattern—that on a Thursday, a Treasury Minister will be asked to come to the Commons to answer an urgent question, and there will be barely a soul on the Labour Benches behind them when they do?

Mr Speaker: Order. Surely that is not relevant to the question you are going to ask. Come on!

Dame Harriett Baldwin: The Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that the measure will raise £500 million in revenue by 2029, which, in the context of tax revenues of over £1,150 billion, is a very small number. What value does the Minister put on food security for the United Kingdom?

James Murray: Obviously, the Government put the highest priority on food security. That is why our policies set out to support it, and the farming sector more widely. The policy is one of many difficult decisions that we had to take in the Budget to balance the public finances, support public services and provide the economic stability we need for investment and growth.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I have heard from many farming businesses across Glastonbury and Somerton over the last few months, but one farm in Hurcot near Somerton recently wrote to me to describe the anguish and stress that the changes to the APR and BPR have caused them. As in the case of many farming businesses, their succession planning has focused on the primary landowner retaining the farm until death. How will the Minister explain to them that according to the OBR, the potential loss of their family farm business is likely to have little impact on the public finances, and that the policy will hit the oldest farmers hardest?

James Murray: The OBR's publication yesterday sets out the costings that were in the October Budget. There is no difference between the costings set out in October and what the OBR set out yesterday. It simply showed more of the background behind how they calculated those costings, for transparency and so that people are aware. Indeed, it says in the report that that is done in an effort to improve the public debate and ensure that people understand what is behind the data published at the time of the Budget.

As I said to several Opposition Members, clearly this was one of many tough decisions that we took in the Budget to balance the public finances, but we also made sure that there is greater protection from inheritance tax under our proposed reform scheme than is available more widely.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Labour Government's family farm tax will be catastrophic to farmers in my constituency in the Borders. I will join many of them and their tractors in Kelso on Saturday, when the farming community comes together to show its displeasure and disapproval of this policy. Farmers will struggle to pay this tax, so what assessment have the Government made of the policy's impact on vets, feed merchants, machinery suppliers, and all the other people who support the rural economy?

James Murray: Supporting the rural economy, public services and investment right across the country is part of Labour's national mission to get the economy growing, but the prerequisite for that investment and economic growth is stable public finances. Without economic stability, we cannot proceed to the investment and growth that we all so desperately need. That is why the decision

to target agricultural property relief and business property relief was taken, alongside all the other difficult decisions that we took in the Budget.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): This measure is now revealed to be spectacularly ill-considered, leaving aside the fact that it is also a breathtaking betrayal of farmers, who were promised before the election that this would not happen. The measure groups intergenerational farmers with speculative millionaires seeking to dodge tax by getting involved in farming. It has put an immediate brake on investment in farming, which threatens to lower yields and drive up food prices. That then threatens to put inflationary pressures on the UK economy, which is already in a perilous state. This Government cannot just agree with the OBR when it suits them. They must agree with the OBR regardless of what it says. Will the Minister please respectfully pause the measure, take some time to think about this, and come up with something that will actually deliver for the Treasury but not push our family farming sector under.

James Murray: There still seems to be confusion among Opposition Members about what the OBR publication set out. It reiterates the costings that were published at the time of the Budget, on 30 October. It explains how those costings were arrived at, so that people can understand the calculations behind them, but the costings are the same as those published at the time of the Budget.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Mr Speaker, if you look at the Register of Members' Financial Interests, you will see a reference to my family farm in my constituency. Last Sunday, I drove one of our tractors to Fakenham racecourse to support the farmers' protest against the APR and BPR. I talked to other farmers, and the key complaint was that there had been no consultation on the changes, and no time for older farmers to adjust their affairs. All those concerns have been rubbished by Ministers time and again, most recently today. Now that the OBR confirms that it is more difficult for older people to restructure their affairs quickly, will the Government finally listen, show some humility, and consult on how best to tackle the tax shelterers while still protecting our farmers?

James Murray: The comments in the OBR publication yesterday about older individuals reference a point that has been made since the Budget in debates in this place and elsewhere. We have pointed out that our reform of agricultural property relief and business property relief maintains generous exemptions from inheritance tax; £1 million is subject to relief, and there is the 50% relief beyond that, the existing nil-rate bands, and other exemptions in the system.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Unusually, in Scotland tenant farms can be passed down as inheritance. I have been asking the Treasury whether it has made an assessment of the impact on such farms, given that their farmers cannot sell land to meet the APR liability that they might face. So far, the answer appears to be that there is no assessment, so I ask the Minister for an answer from the Dispatch Box: is he aware of agricultural tenancies under the Agricultural Holdings (Scotland) Act 1991, and has he made an impact assessment?

James Murray: The way to calculate the impact of changes to inheritance tax policy is to look at the inheritance tax claims that have been made, and that is what we have used as the basis for our calculations. In fact, the OBR publication yesterday confirms that it used HMRC's data on inheritance tax reliefs in the past and inheritance tax projected forward, and it is on the basis of that data that we designed our policy.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The Minister has just confirmed that the Treasury's modelling is based on agricultural property relief and joint agricultural and business property relief claims, yet tax experts have said in evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that many family farms will wrap their agricultural land into a single business property relief claim, so the Treasury's modelling does not take into account family farms that have used a BPR-only claim, tenant farmers who use BPR, and the many rural family businesses that will also use BPR. Will the Minister please take this opportunity to look at this again, before his Government wreck the countryside?

James Murray: As I set out earlier, the need to reform business property relief is as strong as the need to reform agricultural property relief, in order to have stable public finances and a fair and sustainable tax system. As I set out, 40% of APR goes to the top 7% of estates, and 50% of BPR goes to the top 4% of estates. Given the fiscal context that we inherited, that kind of unfairness is not sustainable. When balancing the books, we need to develop the tax system in a way that is sustainable and gives us the economic stability that we desperately need after the mess that the previous Government left us.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Farmers have made their inheritance tax plans in good faith, based on existing rules. In effect, the measure is a retrospective change to tax law, so will the Minister agree to at the very least delay its implementation until the effects are properly understood by both farmers and the Government?

James Murray: The Government are committed to delivering the reforms announced in the Budget. We have carefully considered their impact, and designed the policy to provide generous exemptions from inheritance tax for small family farms and businesses, while ensuring that we balance the public finances as fairly as possible.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): In the light of the uncertainty in the OBR's report; the fact that the policy will hit elderly farmers the hardest and put food security at risk; and the fact that rural communities will suffer the most, given the impact on tenants and young farmers, and the wider agricultural sector, does the Minister really still believe in this policy?

James Murray: The OBR's allusion yesterday to a degree of uncertainty is exactly the same as what it said at the time of the Budget. The costing is exactly the same as what it published at the time of the Budget. Yesterday, the OBR published more information about how the costing was arrived at, but the costing itself, the degree of uncertainty and the calculations remain exactly the same as at the time of the Budget.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Minister just mentioned balancing the public finances—those are the key words—through these measures. We have just had the debt figures for December, which are 20% higher than the OBR expected them to be just two months previously. At what point will the Minister and the Government recognise that they have got this badly wrong and change course?

James Murray: We recognise that when the Conservative party was in government, it got it badly wrong. The country decided to change course, which is why they elected us into government to fix the public finances, put our public services back on their feet, boost investment and get the economy growing.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): They say that one ought to build one's enemy a golden bridge. I think the compromise and pause proposed by the National Farmers Union is an elegant solution. That golden bridge is now being signposted by Tesco, Aldi, Lidl, the Co-op, and all the major retailers the Minister claims to be engaging with. Why does he not just pause, go back, listen, and review the policy?

James Murray: As I set out in answer to a previous question, the Government are committed to delivering the reforms announced in the Budget. They were carefully calibrated to retain generous inheritance tax exemptions, while ensuring that we balance the public finances as fairly as possible.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Bence Builders Merchants in my constituency has been providing good local produce and good local jobs since the Earl of Aberdeen was in power. The owner, Paul Bence, fears that the combination of business property relief changes and changes to employer's national insurance mean that there is a huge disincentive to invest further. Does the Minister share my constituent's concern?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising his constituent's concern. I do not know the specifics of the case, but more broadly, investment decisions depend above all else on a stable economy and stable public finances. Without the hard work that we have done since taking office to fix the public finances and bring back economic stability, investment would be hampered, and our growth ambitions would not materialise in the way that we are determined to ensure happens.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): There will be a rally on Saturday, and the Minister appears to imagine that this indicates acclamation for his policy. We heard earlier in the week from the hon. Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank) and today from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah)—both well-known rural areas—that this is all about the landed estates and wealthy people, but I can assure the Minister that the farmers I will speak with in Castle Douglas on Saturday are tenant farmers and family farmers, and they face being put off the land after generations. Is he really suggesting that I should tell them they have nothing to worry about?

James Murray: I am not going to tell the hon. Gentleman what he should say to his constituents, but what I can tell him about the Government's policy is that we have reserved generous inheritance tax reliefs for people in

the situations he describes. I encourage anyone who is concerned to seek advice, to understand exactly how the new rules might apply to them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Sometimes I am absolutely flummoxed—we probably all are—by the Chancellor’s intent to tax working family farms, which we all know will result in the loss of small farms, the sale of the land and a reduction in food security. Now it seems that the OBR agrees that it will not make savings. Will the Minister commit to meeting Cabinet colleagues urgently to remove the sword of Damocles that is hanging above small family farms and hurting the agrifood sector as a whole? I say to the Minister that there is a way forward: increase the threshold from £1 million to £5 million, and family farms will be saved.

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I think it was based primary on the OBR publication yesterday. I reiterate the point I have made several times now: that OBR publication reiterated the costings and figures set out at the Budget, it reiterated the level of uncertainty associated with the measure, as published at the Budget, it provides more detail behind that, but the conclusion is the same as it was on 30 October.

Mr Carmichael: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before questioning the Minister, I should have reminded the House of my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. My failure to do so, for which I apologise, was inadvertent—I just got carried away with the excitement of the moment.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that wonderful clarification.

Attorney General’s Office: Conflicts of Interest

11.1 am

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Solicitor General if she will make a statement on the management of conflicts of interest in the Attorney General’s Office.

The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby): The Attorney General’s Office has an established and rigorous process for identifying and dealing with conflicts, and potential conflicts, that arise from the Law Officers’ past practice. That process predates the appointment of the Attorney General and sits against the backdrop of every lawyer’s professional obligation to be alert to, and to actively manage, any situation that might give rise to a potential or actual conflict. Learned Members of this House will keenly appreciate the importance that all lawyers place on that obligation.

In identifying conflicts or potential conflicts, the Attorney General’s Office adopts a cautious and “beyond reproach” threshold to any conflicts or potential conflicts. My Department works with the Government Legal Department, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which oversees international litigation on behalf of the Government, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office to revise and augment the list of conflicts identified.

Once the conflicts have been ascertained and a set of actions identified for each conflict, the Attorney General’s Office takes steps to ensure that the Law Officer is appropriately limited in their involvement on matters related to the relevant area of Government policy or related litigation. The list is kept under review and amended—for example, when new Government policies or litigation emerge. In situations where one Law Officer is conflicted, another Law Officer is asked to act in their place.

The Law Officers’ convention is an important principle—enshrined in “Erskine May” and the ministerial code, and upheld by successive Administrations—that preserves the ability of Government to receive full and frank legal advice from their legal advisers in confidence. I am therefore unable to comment on the specific details of legal advice provided by the Law Officers, other than to note that of course decisions on policy are taken by the relevant Secretary of State, as has been the case under successive Governments. That process sits alongside the system relating to ministerial interests, overseen by the Prime Minister’s independent adviser on ministerial standards, who was provided with the Attorney General’s list of conflicts following his appointment. I can reassure the House that the Attorney General’s Office will continue to apply the most rigorous standards in its conflicts process.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Solicitor General.

Helen Grant: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

The Attorney General previously represented former Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams in a damages claim brought by victims of IRA bombings. Indeed, we know that he received £30,000 for that representation. The

[Helen Grant]

constitutional propriety of our legal system demands absolute clarity on how conflicts of interest with former clients are managed at the very highest levels of Government. This goes far beyond individual matters of advice; it strikes at the very heart of the proper administration of justice.

Let me be absolutely clear that this is not about Lord Hermer's career at the Bar; it is about the proper mechanisms for recusal when matters concerning former clients come before Government. The House must know what safeguards are in place to protect the public interest when such situations arise, especially regarding sections 46 and 47 of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023.

What are the formal procedures for the Attorney General's recusal in matters involving former clients? Has the Attorney General recused himself from any matters since taking office? What assessment has been made of potential conflicts arising from his extensive litigation against the Government? [Interruption.]

This all goes to the heart of public confidence in our legal system. The Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and promised this House a Government of standards and integrity. [Interruption.] The proper management of conflicts of interest at the highest levels of the Government Legal Service is not optional; it is fundamental to that promise—

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, you have two minutes, not three, and we have to stick to the rules. I allowed you to go on, but I was not coughing for my health; it was to give you a hint to come to the end of your question. Have you now finished?

Helen Grant: I have, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I call the Solicitor General.

The Solicitor General: I have outlined the rigorous process that exists in the Attorney General's Office and has existed across Administrations of all colours. The House may be aware that the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), has written to the Cabinet Secretary seeking clarity—the clarity to which the shadow Solicitor General refers—on that process and an investigation into it. The Cabinet Secretary has today confirmed by reply that the Attorney General's Office has a rigorous system in place to ensure that a Law Officer would not be consulted on any matter that could give rise to a potential conflict of interest. He has restated that those arrangements are of long standing and part of standard practice that has applied under successive Administrations. [Interruption.] I encourage Opposition Members to take comfort from that statement—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. [Interruption.] Solicitor General, when I am standing, you must sit down. Mr Mullan, whether here or elsewhere, I do not want a running commentary from you on everything we debate. Do we understand each other?

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Good, because I have certainly had enough of it.

The Solicitor General: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The shadow Solicitor General raised the previous experience of the Attorney General. Lord Hermer is a very experienced barrister, and during his time in private practice—prior to his appointment to Government—he represented high-profile clients in a number of cases. It is a central and well-understood aspect of the British legal system, as she knows, that barristers are required to accept instructions if they are available and qualified to do so—the well-known “cab rank” principle. She will also be very aware that, put simply, barristers are not their clients. As the Bar Council states:

“Barristers do not choose their clients, nor do they associate themselves with their clients' opinions or behaviour by virtue of representing them.”

In recent days, the Opposition have cynically linked the Attorney General with some of his previous clients. I grew up on military bases in armed forces communities in the 1980s, and I remember what it felt like when my dad had to check underneath the car before every single journey we made. I note that because it is the backdrop against which I say that I would defend with every fibre of my being the duty of any barrister in this country, including Lord Hermer, to defend any client before any court, as we all should. I will end by restating the principle in words that I think are particularly powerful:

“Don't judge a surgeon by their patients, a journalist by their interviewees—or a lawyer by their clients.”

Those were the words of the current Conservative shadow Attorney General.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Does the Solicitor General agree that what the shadow Solicitor General is asking her to do, in a not very subtle way, is to breach the Law Officers' convention by the back door? If the Attorney General were to reveal whether or not he is able to advise on a particular issue, that would reveal the fact that he had been asked to advise on it. The Opposition's intention is clear: it is to gain party advantage. The effect is to undermine the rule of law.

The Solicitor General: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I am happy to confirm that where the Attorney General has conflicts, he will recuse himself.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The shambolic Conservative Government created a crisis for democracy in this country with their cronyism, rule breaking and constant sleaze scandals. They even appointed as their Attorney General the right hon. and learned Member for Torridge and Tavistock (Sir Geoffrey Cox), who before his appointment represented some of the world's largest tax dodgers. The Liberal Democrats want to repair the damage that was done by the constant stream of Conservative sleaze and finally restore public trust in our politics.

I do, however, have some questions for the Solicitor General. Has the Attorney General sought independent legal advice regarding any possible conflicts of interest relating to his previous work at Matrix Chambers? Can the Solicitor General assure the House that all and any

impropriety will be thoroughly looked into, and will she please introduce annual training on conflicts of interests and ethics for all Ministers and finally enshrine the ministerial code in law?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has mentioned another Member. I do not think it was critical, and that is fine, but if it was critical—[HON. MEMBERS: “It was.”] Just let me finish. If it was critical, I am sure that he will have informed that other Member.

Ben Maguire: I did.

Mr Speaker: You did. There we go—and Members were getting all excited. I call the Solicitor General.

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question. I have outlined the rigorous process that exists in the Attorney General's office and, as I said, has existed across Administrations of all colours.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the Justice Select Committee. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Opposition's position fundamentally misunderstands the role of lawyers in our justice system? The Attorney General also represented victims of the tragedy in Grenfell Tower. Does my hon. Friend also agree that the Attorney General has followed the same processes as his predecessors in managing any potential conflicts, and that what we are faced with is just another example of the Opposition trying to undermine our legal institutions merely for political gain?

The Solicitor General: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. The undermining of this foundational principle of our legal system has been extremely cynical.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Sections 46 and 47 of the legacy Act enjoyed unanimous support in both this House and the other place. It is the Government's choice to repeal those sections that has raised the question before us today and opened up the possibility of compensating Gerry Adams, isn't it?

The Solicitor General: I do not agree, I am afraid.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Does the Attorney General's experience, having served both as a distinguished advocate and now as a Law Officer, not make him uniquely qualified to uphold the rule of law and advise the Government appropriately?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, and it will be no surprise to hear that I very much agree with her. Lord Hermer is an extraordinarily experienced barrister, and he brings that experience to his role as Attorney General.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I understand that the Solicitor General wants to maintain the confidentiality of the Law Officers' office, but the issue before us is whether there is a conflict of interest. For example, the Attorney General has advocated in relation to the policies of the Israeli Government, and then we have had a change of policy by the Government that has been directly influenced by the legal advice that has

been given. The challenge is whether that advice has been given on the basis of prejudicial views held prior to entering the Attorney General's Office. I do not expect the Solicitor General to unveil the details, but she must understand that that is the impression being given. Every aspect of transparency and democracy requires that the advice given by the Attorney General to the Government is impartial, correct and not prejudiced.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Member will know that the Law Officers' convention means that I cannot confirm that the Attorney General has advised or whether his advice has been sought on any matter.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): We are seeing some extraordinary and absolutely shameful attacks, because not only is the Attorney General a barrister of international standing, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) said, he represented the victims of Grenfell Tower. Does the Solicitor General agree with me that Conservative Members would do well to remember that when they attack the Attorney General about his former clients?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, and I agree with her.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon. *[Interruption.]*

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Oh, sorry, Mr Speaker. I am so used to being called last. *[Laughter.]* My humblest apologies.

My motivation is clearly justice for the innocent victims; that is what I am about. At the heart of this urgent question is Gerry Adams. When this House put in place a pension for innocent victims of the troubles and at that time excluded perpetrators from applying, Gerry Adams and his colleagues sought to block those pensions. Adams' hands are dripping with innocent blood, not least from when he was the commander of the La Mon bombing, which killed and maimed my constituents. Will the Attorney General recuse himself from all matters relating to Adams, and will this Government ensure that Adams does not get one single penny?

The Solicitor General: As I have already stated, the Law Officers' convention does not permit me to reveal when the Attorney General has been asked for advice or when he has advised.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a member of the Bar.

It seems that Conservative Members are deliberately feigning ignorance about our constitution to make an empty political point. The truth is that lawyers in this country represent clients without fear or favour. We do not in this country associate the views of our clients or the clients with the views of their lawyers, and there is the concept of the cab rank rule. Does the Solicitor General agree with me that the Law Officers' convention and existing processes, which, as she says, have been in place for many years under successive Governments, can be left to regulate conflicts of interest, as they

[Tony Vaughan]

always have done? If the Conservatives genuinely had a problem with that, they would have changed it when they were in government.

The Solicitor General: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to him for making that point. As I said earlier, barristers are quite simply not their clients, and I have quoted the words of the current Conservative shadow Attorney General.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The current Attorney General has a track record of taking up multiple cases against the British Government. Given his previous work with regards to both Gerry Adams and the families of those making claims against UK special forces, on which matters will the Attorney General recuse himself from advising Ministers owing to clear conflicts of interest? If he is not able to fulfil the full scope of his role owing to his prior career, is his position even tenable?

The Solicitor General: I am afraid I could not be more clear: I have already said that where the Attorney General has conflicts, he will recuse himself.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): As someone who grew up in Warrington and who was friends with Tim Parry who was murdered by the IRA, I subsequently had to do public affairs engagement work in Northern Ireland, so I am well aware of some of the difficulties that can come from the outcome, shall we say, of some of the violence suffered in Northern Ireland. Does the Solicitor General agree that

“A lawyer should not be identified personally with the cause for which they are arguing”?—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 June 2022; Vol. 822, c. 1597.]

Those are not my words; they belong to the distinguished commercial barrister, the Conservative shadow Attorney General. Does the Solicitor General agree with me about those words?

The Solicitor General: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Under the ministerial code, every Minister has a responsibility to address a conflict of interest or a perception of such an interest. Will the Solicitor General be open with the House about whether, when the Attorney General was appointed, he chose or was required to recuse himself from advising on issues relating to his previously representing clients such as Gerry Adams?

The Solicitor General: I have already addressed that point.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Does the Minister accept that the Law Officers' convention does not extend to questions of recusal or conflicts of interest, and that the House and the British people have the right to have questions on those matters answered transparently?

The Solicitor General: I have been abundantly clear on this: where the Attorney General has conflicts, he will recuse himself. The Law Officers' convention does not permit me to say in relation to which matters he has recused himself, because in doing so I would reveal the matters that the Law Officers have been asked to advise on, or indeed have advised on.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Like the Solicitor General I also practise as a solicitor. She must know that the questions that are being put are not calling into question a barrister's right to represent clients. This is about a barrister who is now the Attorney General. Does she accept that the Law Officers' convention is being extended in the interests of the Attorney General not answering legitimate questions about recusal and conflict of interest, and that nobody should seek to extend that principle beyond its intention in order to remain silent?

The Solicitor General: I do not accept that the Law Officers' convention is being extended at all. As I have said, I could not be more clear: where the Attorney General has conflicts, he will recuse himself.

Business of the House

11.22 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for the week commencing 27 January includes:

MONDAY 27 JANUARY—General debate on the creative industries.

TUESDAY 28 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Water (Special Measures) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 29 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Arbitration Bill [*Lords*], followed by motions relating to the charter for budget responsibility and the welfare cap.

THURSDAY 30 JANUARY—General debate on proportional representation for general elections, followed by a general debate on the future of local post office services. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 31 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 3 February will include:

MONDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill.

TUESDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Motions to approve the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2025 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2025.

WEDNESDAY 5 FEBRUARY—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

THURSDAY 6 FEBRUARY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 7 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

Jesse Norman: Over the past few months, the Labour party has been generous indeed in offering the people of this country regular evidence of its remarkable incompetence, but even by its formidable standards it has excelled itself this week. The Prime Minister said some time ago in terms that he prefers Davos to Westminster, but this week he has left the global hobnobbing and après-ski of the World Economic Forum to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to assist her in her relentless search for growth. Her latest idea is to revive the third runway at Heathrow: a project so toxic to her Labour colleagues that it had been briefed against by the Energy Secretary and publicly rejected by the Mayor of London before it was even preannounced. As so often, I am afraid we will have to wait for the announcement to be made in this House.

Meanwhile, the Chancellor's wizard wheeze of the autumn to set up a new Office for Value for Money was publicly rubbished in the most unsparing terms by the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), who described it as

"an understaffed, poorly defined organisation...set up with a vague remit and no clear plan to measure its effectiveness."

That is from the Chancellor's own Labour colleague.

Spending reviews are always fraught, and this one will be still more so, because the Chancellor has boxed herself in so badly on taxes and spending. What the Government think will be achieved by a couple of dozen hastily assembled newbies and some adolescent management consultants running around—apart from making things even worse—is hard to imagine. In case we forget, Mr Speaker, you and I and everyone else in the Chamber—indeed, every taxpayer—is paying for that.

Then we had no less a figure than the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies weighing in. He noted that the Government have done nothing but talk about growth ever since the last general election. He then noted:

"At the same time, we have seen the imposition of additional employment regulation, further regulation of rental housing, a hike in stamp duty, a big increase in tax on employers, an inflation-busting rise in the minimum wage, a refusal to contemplate any serious liberalisation of trade or free movement...and, perhaps, a clampdown on immigration."

He asked:

"What is this government's 'theory of growth'?"

He then answered his own question: "Nobody knows".

Those are just three examples of the Government's absolute lack of seriousness in economics, but, as we have just heard in the urgent question, there is a serious issue in the area of law that they cannot avoid. Let me remind the House what has happened. The Attorney General has been repeatedly asked whether he has or has had a conflict of interest in relation to legal matters that could affect his former client, Gerry Adams. In response, a spokesman for the Prime Minister has highlighted systems to prevent potential conflicts from arising. The Attorney General has cited the convention that Law Officers do not discuss their advice to Ministers and has disclaimed any connection between his work for Mr Adams and the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. As the Solicitor General has just said, the standard that they are aspiring to is to be beyond reproach. The problem is that none of that addresses whether the Attorney General in fact recused himself. This does not fall either within the Law Officers' convention or the cab rank principle. He either did recuse himself or he did not.

The problem is made worse when one reflects that this Attorney General is the first in the history of the office to have come into Government directly from private practice—that point was completely ignored in the urgent question—and that that practice was not in one of the less political areas of law such as corporate law or chancery but squarely in the highly contentious and political area of human rights, with some of it in Northern Ireland. There is no reason whatever in law or ministerial practice why the Attorney General should not be transparent on this issue, as he has been already in relation to the legacy Act. There is a strong public interest in him doing so. His legacy comment proves that he concedes the point about the importance of clarity in this area.

In the independent adviser on ministerial standards' recent letter regarding the former anti-corruption Minister, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq), he highlighted that the ministerial code says:

"Ministers...must ensure that no conflict...could reasonably be perceived to arise, between their public duties and their private interests".

[*Jesse Norman*]

That conflict clearly exists now in relation to the Attorney General. Does the Leader of the House share my view that we should have a debate on the standards to be applied in these complex cases where there is a potential conflict between the demands of the ministerial code and the statements made by the Government in defence of the Law Officer concerned?

Lucy Powell: I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House and the country will again be with the families of Bebe, Elsie and Alice, the two teachers, the neighbour and all the children who attended the Taylor Swift dance class in Southport, after the horrific attack and murders last summer. What they faced is truly unimaginable. This tragedy is made all the worse by the fact that it could have been prevented, as the Home Secretary said this week.

The House will be aware that the Government are pursuing a number of actions in response: an independent public inquiry that will leave no stone unturned, an end-to-end review of Prevent, stronger measures to tackle online knife sales and knife crime, and a quicker piece of work on the limitations of the current definition of terrorism. I will ensure that the House is kept up to date on those and related matters.

The right hon. Gentleman raised issues of standards in public life. As I gently reminded him last week, he may not want to draw on the record of the Conservative Government and compare it with ours. But he raised some important questions, which have just been answered in the urgent question. As he will know, the Cabinet Secretary replied to the shadow Justice Secretary that the Attorney General has properly declared his interest from his previous role as a senior barrister.

As a barrister with a wide-ranging legal practice, the Attorney General will have represented many clients. According to Bar association rules, barristers do not choose their clients, nor do they associate themselves with their clients' opinions or behaviour by virtue of representing them. The Cabinet Secretary has explained that as well as the declarations process for all Ministers, the Attorney General's Office has a rigorous system in place to ensure that a Law Officer would not be consulted on any matter that could give rise to a potential conflict of interest. The right hon. Gentleman will know that these arrangements are long-standing and have been practised in successive Administrations. I am not sure whether he is arguing that we should no longer have an Attorney General who has been recently involved in private practice at the highest level—perhaps he will let us know.

Today is actually a very special day—perhaps a historic day—because it is the last day that the former Prime Minister could have called a general election. Oh, how different things could have been. The Conservatives would have still been on this side of the House, with three times as many Members as they have now. The right hon. Gentleman would still be enjoying himself on the Back Benches, and the House would not have the delightful presence of the hon. Members for Clacton (Nigel Farage) and for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice).

Instead, we are six months into a Labour Government. I am sure the Conservatives regret calling the general election early, but I am afraid the country does not. Let

us imagine for a moment what the country would be facing today: doctors still on strike, making the NHS winter crisis even worse; public services facing huge cuts due to the Conservatives' economic plans; waiting lists ever growing, leaving people sick and out of work; the hospital building programme still on the never-never; the asylum backlog rising with no plan to get it down; more and more councils going bust; more trains being cancelled than run; and the black hole in the public finances still going. Let us not even imagine what would be happening with our prisons. The country would be on its knees, with living standards falling, Britain an embarrassment around the world and politics in the doldrums.

Thankfully, the former Prime Minister made a big misjudgment for the Tory party but a good decision for the country. He called the election early because he wanted out. We have not been able to put everything right immediately—the problems run too deep—but we have made a lot of progress. We have ended the doctors strike and put record investment into the NHS. We have reset our international relationships, restoring Britain as a global leader. We have tackled the asylum backlog and achieved record numbers of returns. We are giving workers security and dignity. We are turbocharging house building, with new, ambitious targets. We are working towards energy security with lower bills and GB Energy. Trains are now running in the interests of passengers. The right hon. Gentleman might be sorry that he is now sitting on the Opposition Benches, his party still licking its wounds, but the country is getting the change it voted for.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): My constituents Mandy and Bernie, along with many other homeowners in Bury North, are facing serious issues with Residential Management Group. Despite dutifully paying their service charges, residents of Wharfside Apartments and Broad Oak have been hit with additional fees and alarming practices that equate to neglect and exploitation: overpricing, sudden price changes, premature bailiff actions and non-compliance with fire safety and accessibility standards, to name just a few. This is not an isolated case; some 70 Members of this House have constituents across the country facing the same level of activity by rogue management companies. Will my right hon. Friend assure my constituents that under Labour, these unscrupulous practices will be tackled, and will she provide time in the House for a debate on this urgent matter?

Lucy Powell: As ever, my hon. Friend raises important issues to his constituents. I am another of those Members with a high caseload of these issues. As he will know, the Government are committed to ensuring that homeowners are protected from abuse and poor service at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents, which is why we will be bringing forward a draft leasehold reform Bill later in the Session. I will ensure the House is updated on its progress.

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

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I echo the words of the Leader of the House on the Southport attack.

May I take this opportunity to welcome the ceasefire in Gaza? Many of my constituents have contacted me about the conflict, and I know it will be a comfort to them to know that bombs are no longer falling in that part of the world—long may the peace last.

At the beginning of January, the Care Quality Commission published a report into the maternity services at Broomfield hospital, which serves my constituency. Worryingly, it downgraded the services from “requires improvement” to “inadequate”. A few days ago, the CQC published two more reports about maternity services at the two other major hospitals run by the Mid and South Essex NHS foundation trust, Basildon and Southend, which were both rated “requires improvement”. This is understandably concerning to my constituents, who are served by all three hospitals. When I visited Broomfield’s maternity services a couple of weeks ago, I was pleased to see encouraging signs of improvement, so I hope my constituents will take some comfort from that.

It is worth noting that the CQC’s reports in all three cases were based on assessments carried out in March 2024. Does the Leader of the House think it is acceptable for the CQC to take such a long time to report its findings on services that are obviously struggling, and will she grant Government time for a debate to discuss whether the CQC needs better resourcing and support to carry out its important duties?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments on the ceasefire in Israel and Gaza; since we last spoke of it last week, it has seemed to be holding to some degree, which is very welcome.

I also thank her for yet again raising an issue of such importance to not only her constituents, but those of many Members across the House. Too many women are not receiving the maternity care that they deserve. I am really sorry to hear about the particular case she raises, but I am glad there are now signs of improvement in her local services.

Many patients rely on assessments by the CQC to make decisions about their care. The independent Dash review of the CQC highlights serious failings with the watchdog, and the Health Secretary recently said that it is not fit for purpose. The Government are determined to take action so that people can feel the confidence in the service that they need. We are pressing the CQC to raise standards and deliver significant performance improvements. Last week, the chief exec and the chair of the CQC were questioned by the Health and Social Care Committee. I will ensure that the House is continually updated on these important matters.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Last week, I visited Briarwood, an acute dementia care facility run by mental health charity Everyturn in Blaydon. Everyturn runs a wide range of mental health services, including its safe havens, which are open for anyone to start receiving mental health support just by walking in off the street. Today, one opens at George Street Social in Newcastle, serving Tyneside. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the charity on opening this hub, which will provide support to so many people, and can we have a debate in Government time on how to make mental health support easily accessible in our communities?

Lucy Powell: I am pleased to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Everyturn charity on all the outstanding work it does to support those with mental health issues and dementia in her constituency. She will know that the Mental Health Bill is currently making its way in the House of Lords. It will be a very good opportunity to debate these issues further when it comes to this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): 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 on Backbench Business Committee time, on 6 February in the Chamber there will be a on Government support for coalfield communities, followed by the debate on financial education that was due to take place on Monday but time did not allow.

The business in Westminster Hall agreed by the Backbench Business Committee is as follows: on Tuesday 28 January, there will be a debate on road safety for young drivers. On Thursday 30 January, there will be a debate on medicinal cannabis, followed by a debate on a subject we will announce very shortly. On 4 February, there will be a debate on National Apprenticeship Week. On Thursday 6 February, there will be a debate on improving rail services with open access operators, followed by a debate on debt cancellation for low-income countries. With Mr Speaker’s permission, on Tuesday 11 February there will be a debate on the cost of energy. I ask the Leader of the House to advise us, at early notice, of the dates for estimates day debates.

On Sunday, many of my constituents gathered and paid for a screening of the film “Emergency” in the Harrow Vue cinema. At about 30 or 40 minutes into the screening of the film, masked Khalistani terrorists burst in, threatened members of the audience and forced the screening to end. I understand that similar disruption took place in Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Slough, Staines and Manchester. As a result, Vue cinemas and Cineworld have pulled the film from being screened.

The film is very controversial, and I am not commenting on its quality or content, but I defend the right of my constituents and other Members’ constituents to be able to view it and make a decision on it. It covers the period when Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister of India. It is very controversial and there are certain views that it is an anti-Sikh film, but our constituents should be able to see the film and judge for themselves, and not be threatened by thugs who want to disrupt democratic opportunities to see public films.

May we have a statement from the Home Secretary next week on what will be done to ensure that people who want to see such films, which have been passed by censors, can do so in peace and harmony? I absolutely defend the right of people to demonstrate outside cinemas, but not to disrupt viewings.

Lucy Powell: First of all, I thank the hon. Gentleman for announcing forthcoming Backbench Business Committee slots, which will be of great interest to the House.

The hon. Gentleman raises a very important matter about the relationship between free speech and the right to protest peacefully, and the ability of people to go about their activities freely whatever they choose to do,

[Lucy Powell]

whether that is seeing a film which, as he says, has been agreed by the censors and all those who look at those issues. I will certainly ensure that he and the whole House get an update on the very important matters he raises.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Research from the Centre for Cities shows that the average wage in the north-east is £17,000 per annum less than here in London, and the gap is likely to be much higher than that in constituencies like mine. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss how the Labour Government will bridge that staggering gap and ensure that there are good, well-paid, secure jobs in the north-east of England?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. He is absolutely right that the key reason why we have suffered in this country, over the last 14 years in particular, from stagnant growth and falling living standards is that we have widespread regional inequalities. We have poor productivity, we do not have the high level of skills that we need, and we have deep-seated health inequalities, which also affect people's ability to work and earn the wages they deserve. That is why this Government have an agenda to ensure that we get the growth the country needs—growth that is shared around the country, is sustainable and is underpinned by a healthy, highly-skilled, productive economy—and that the new jobs of the future are found in his constituency and other parts of the country that deserve to get them.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement. Lib Dem-controlled Dorset council is proposing to introduce night-time car parking charges. That would have a devastating impact on the market towns of Verwood, Blandford Forum, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton in my constituency, bringing into doubt the viability of many businesses providing entertainment and hospitality services. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning the proposal to introduce these charges, and will she find Government time for a debate on how Government policy and other policies can support rural market towns and their local economies?

Lucy Powell: As someone who represents a city centre, I can assure the hon. Member that I am well aware of the issues around car parking charges and the public attention they give rise to. He is right that charges have to be brought in while balancing the needs of independent shops and the hospitality sector in the area. I am sure the local authority has heard his question, but I will ensure that he gets a ministerial response about the matter.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Last week, a broken mains water pipe in my constituency left 40,000 people without water. The engineers worked really hard to fix the repair in challenging circumstances, but despite an incredible community response, too many people face an unacceptable wait for bottled water. We need to get much better at identifying vulnerable people in emergency situations, using the information that we already hold across various Government Departments. Will the Leader of the House ask the relevant Ministers to meet me to discuss how we can better use data to improve our response during emergencies such as this?

Lucy Powell: First, I thank my hon. Friend for the fantastic job she did when she stepped in as my Parliamentary Private Secretary in an emergency last week; I could not have got through business questions without her great support. I know that she has been raising the issue of last week's water outage strongly for her constituents, and my sympathies go to them. She will know that it is the responsibility of water companies to manage such disruption. They do not do that well in many cases, and that is why we have brought in the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which will drive meaningful improvements in the water industry. The Cabinet Office will soon issue guidance about how to better respond to these local emergencies, and I will ensure that she gets the meeting she has asked for.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The EU offered the UK a youth mobility scheme that would give the invaluable opportunity for our young people to live, work and love across our continent. It was rejected out of hand. Since then, the EU has offered a customs arrangement for the UK Government, which again has been rejected out of hand. Can we have a debate about how the EU reset is going, and will the Leader of the House confirm that we are forever doomed to this chaotic and self-defeating hard Brexit?

Lucy Powell: As the hon. Member will know, we have been absolutely clear that there will be no return to the single market, the customs union or freedom of movement, and we have no plans for a youth mobility scheme. That is because we feel that we can make great progress in resetting our relationship with the European Union, which is under way, and that the country does not need further disruption in this area but needs us to make sure we get the trade agreements and the relationship with the EU that will get better outcomes for those in Scotland and elsewhere.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): In South Derbyshire, we have an incinerator in Drakelow. Just outside my patch, in neighbouring Derby, there is an incinerator in Sinfen. Despite that, there has been an application to build another incinerator 9 miles from the one in Sinfen and just 4.8 miles from the one in Drakelow. It has already been rejected by both the district and county councils and, most importantly, by my constituents. Community Against the Swadlincote Incinerator is a data-driven and facts-based campaign led by Dr Tracey Wond. It is not just that we do not want the incinerator; given the numbers, we do not need it, especially as it would not be significant infrastructure of national importance and the Government are seeking to reduce waste. Will the Leader of the House please consider having a debate in Government time on where we should agree to build new incinerators? There is certainly no sense in building another one in South Derbyshire.

Lucy Powell: I think this is my hon. Friend's first business question, and she is a fantastic new MP for South Derbyshire who is yet again raising an issue of concern for her constituents. She will know that the Government are committed to delivering a package of reform to transition to a circular economy, which will dramatically reduce our reliance on waste incineration. We will back new waste incineration projects only where

they meet strict new conditions, which we recently set out. This issue gets raised many times in business questions, and I can see that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is still in his place. My hon. Friend should get together with other colleagues and try to secure a broader debate on the matter.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate on the importance of volunteering, to celebrate community spirit? Coldstream community council recently hosted a senior citizens' Christmas party in the town's community centre. Over 100 local residents enjoyed a belated Christmas meal and entertainment, but it would not have happened had it not been for the hard work of the volunteers. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Fiona Shepherd, the community council and the team from Presenting Coldstream for making that event happen, and for everything they do to support the Coldstream community?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely will join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating those people and organisations from his constituency—Coldstream community council, Fiona Shepherd and others. The Christmas lunch sounds like a wonderful way of bringing people together. The hon. Gentleman attends these sessions regularly, and I am waiting for an invitation to his constituency to see the great things that he often describes. He has highlighted another one today.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): My constituents in Brent East work extremely hard, and some are able to purchase a smartphone. Yesterday, we heard from the Met that an estimated 64,000 phones were stolen across London in 2023; I think one mobile phone is stolen every four minutes in Westminster. The Met and the Mayor of London are working together to combat the escalation, but more work is needed, especially with providers such as Apple and Google. Will the Leader of the House please consider having a debate in Government time to discuss this important issue?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises a really important matter. Mobile phone theft can be incredibly traumatic, and it is a really bad problem for not just the individuals who face it, but society as a whole. Antisocial behaviour chips away at communities' sense of confidence and pride, which is why this Government are taking strong action to stop antisocial behaviour by bringing in respect orders and a number of other measures. I will ensure that the relevant Minister gives her a full response on this matter, and I am sure that it would make a very good topic for a debate.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Many of our professionals, including doctors, teachers and police officers, are struggling with recruitment and retention. They all serve our communities with dedication and selflessness, and we rely on them, but they are affected by the rules relating to their pensions. In the case of doctors, it is costing them money to work additional hours for the NHS. In the case of long-standing teachers and police officers, changes to their pensions partway through employment can mean that they owe money or are trapped and unable to claim pensions, due

to legislative change. Will the Leader of the House agree to have a debate in Government time on public sector pensions?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady will know that the issue of public sector pensions, and the disincentives that often apply to those in senior roles, has been a matter of debate over recent years. I understand that most of the issues have been resolved, but I will certainly get an update for her. If there are matters that still need wider discussion, I will ensure that the House is made aware of them.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): My neighbours in Ilford South and I are concerned about reports of democratic backsliding and human rights abuses in Pakistan. Reports of female political candidates being harassed and intimidated to get them to stand down, male candidates being imprisoned, journalists going missing and protesters losing their lives have sadly become the norm. Pakistan is a human rights priority country for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which is committed to ensuring human rights, democracy and the rule of the law in Pakistan. Does the Leader of the House agree that we must continue to work towards guaranteeing the rights of all people in Pakistan? Can we have Government time for a debate on this important issue?

Lucy Powell: The Government urge Pakistan to uphold its international obligations and human rights. My hon. Friend may be aware that the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), visited Pakistan in November and highlighted our concerns about the need for it to uphold its democratic values in relation to protests and military courts, and to uphold its fundamental functions. We continue to urge Pakistan to address concerns about the fairness of the February 2024 elections and to uphold its obligations under international law. I will ensure that the House is kept updated on these important matters.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Replies to my parliamentary questions are often late. They are often evasive and often refer to websites that are infrequently updated, and sometimes they are even overtly political. I know that the Leader of the House cares passionately about improving performance in this area, so will she make a statement to update the House on how she is working to get better responses from Departments to parliamentary questions?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady is right that I take these issues incredibly seriously. The House and its Members have a right to timely, proper and full replies to parliamentary questions. I regularly remind members of the Cabinet about their duties in this regard, and I wrote to them recently.

The hon. Lady will know that the Procedure Committee also takes seriously its responsibility for monitoring the timeliness of replies to parliamentary questions. We have seen a dramatic increase in the number of written parliamentary questions tabled since the general election, but that is no excuse for what she describes. I encourage

[Lucy Powell]

her and any other Member to let me know when they receive a particularly poor or late reply to a parliamentary question.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): Last week, I visited Leeds City college at the invitation of University and College Union reps, and I heard about the great work they do on campuses across the city, including at Temple Newsam in my constituency, in very challenging circumstances. Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of the further education sector? Alongside the UCU's demand for the restoration of national pay bargaining, it is important that the FE sector is not seen as a poor relation of the higher education sector. The FE sector does a vital job for people in our communities, as well as for our economy and our infrastructure as a whole.

Lucy Powell: The hon. Member is right that the further education sector does an immense job in ensuring that this country's young people have the skills, the ambition and the pathways to get into the great jobs of both the future and today. Historically, further education has often been seen as a Cinderella sector, but that is not this Government's view, which is why we gave a record settlement to the FE sector in the recent Budget. We have Education questions coming up at the end of January, but I am sure this would also make a good topic for a debate.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): John Cross, a Bromsgrove pharmacist who believed in the importance of vaccines, took his own life after suffering paralysing complications after receiving the covid vaccine. John's widow Christine and their children have been campaigning for justice in his memory, including seeking compensation from the vaccine damage payment scheme. Unfortunately, their claim has been rejected. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should have a debate on the Floor of the House about the vaccine damage payment scheme in relation to covid vaccines? Will she assist me in brokering a meeting between the Cross family and the Health Secretary?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of what happened to John Cross and all that his family must be going through subsequently, as well as their challenge in getting the compensation they deserve. I will certainly arrange for a ministerial response and a ministerial meeting with the family.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): My constituency is among the UK's worst hotspots for deaths linked to a cancer caused by exposure to asbestos at work, with 344 deaths since 1980. Indeed, in the last five years 16 men and five women have died from cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. The Labour Government passed the Compensation Act 2006 to make it easier for people diagnosed with mesothelioma to claim full compensation, with the need to find just one negligent employer rather than them all. However, the Act does not apply to those suffering from asbestos-related lung cancer. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent debate in Government time to address that injustice and help deliver full and fair compensation for all those who are not protected from asbestos exposure at work?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend greatly for raising the issue of those who have been exposed to asbestos and those suffering from mesothelioma, which is now coming through strongly. In previous Parliaments we had a number of hon. Members who strongly led on those issues. They are no longer in the House, so I encourage my hon. Friend to become a parliamentary leader in order to get the debates and continue to raise those issues, as I will now do on his behalf with Ministers, to ensure that we get further action.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I declare my interests as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital and as having a family member with shares in a medical company.

My constituents are heartbroken by the Government's decision to push the start date of the Royal Berks's reconstruction to 2037. That decision will disappoint many patients and staff. There is a £400 million total of maintenance backlogs, statutory improvements and other capital expenditure that the Royal Berkshire hospital requires over the next 10 years. Will the Leader of the House ensure that there are future opportunities, in Government time, to debate the progress of the campaign so that maintenance issues caused by the delay to the rebuild can be raised?

Lucy Powell: I recognise that the hon. Gentleman and his constituents will be disappointed with what is happening to his local hospital. However, I am sure that he will recognise that the previous Government's commitment to 40 new hospitals was not funded, there were no timelines and they were on the never-never. That is why this Government have had to take the decision to be completely honest with people and to have a programme that we think is deliverable and that there is money for. That, unfortunately, means that the timeline for some hospitals is longer than the fictional ones they were previously presented with. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care gave a lengthy statement on the matter earlier this week, and I know that he will want to keep the House strongly updated on these issues.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I have a 13-year-old constituent who suffers with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a muscle-wasting disease that he was diagnosed with at age 11, which is very late, due to what is called a spontaneous mutation. None the less, the condition has progressed rapidly. There is medication—givinostat—that can delay the advancement of the illness. It is being made available free to the NHS, but the hospitals that want to use it on their patients need some financial assistance to roll it out as part of an early access programme. May we have a statement from the Department of Health and Social Care on the issue, so that we can make representations on behalf of our constituents who suffer with Duchenne?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising Duchenne and the much-needed treatment that his constituent needs. I am pleased to hear that the treatment is being made available to the NHS for free, but I hear what he says about hospitals being able to access it speedily so that his constituent can get it. I will absolutely ensure that the relevant Minister has heard his question today and, if a response is not to my hon. Friend's liking, I will help him to secure some time on that.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I had intended to raise today the appalling decision of the Planning Inspectorate to allow a battery energy storage system on Chapel Lane in my constituency, and to ask for a debate. However, just this morning I received the deeply disappointing and disturbing news of the closure of Aldridge police station. How on earth is that decision by the Labour police and crime commissioner compatible with the Prime Minister's stated intention of strengthening neighbourhood policing?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear of the closure of a police station, but the right hon. Lady will know that we are absolutely strengthening neighbourhood policing. We are putting 13,000 extra neighbourhood police officers on the frontline. Part of the way we are funding that is by ensuring that we are delivering services efficiently and effectively in local areas. I will get her a response on that, and I look forward to her raising in future the local battery storage unit in her constituency.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): This weekend, I will be taking part in a run with people from Active Fusion—*[Interruption.]* Don't sound so surprised. Active Fusion is a charity in my constituency that works with education, charity and community providers to help deliver physical education activities for young people across Doncaster. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the fantastic work done by Active Fusion, and will she make time for a debate on how the Government can better support charities and organisations to deliver mental and physical health activities for young people who so desperately need it?

Lucy Powell: I wish my hon. Friend luck on her run—I am glad that she did not ask me to join her, because that is not something the public are quite ready for yet. She is absolutely right that it is the many voluntary organisations such as Active Fusion that do the vital work of making sure that young people and others remain active, fit and healthy, and that they are given fun ways to do that. That is vital for the future health of the nation. And these organisations often do all of this work as volunteers, or for free.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Ambulance crews strive every day to provide the very best care for their patients, but ambulances are not arriving to the most serious emergencies quickly enough. An 89-year-old Somerton constituent recently had a fall at home and was left lying on the floor in agony for 10 hours. Sadly, that is all too common, as South Western Ambulance Service has among the worst records for waiting times across the UK. May we have a debate in Government time on ambulance waiting times in Somerset?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Ambulance wait times, which are closely linked to A&E wait times, which in turn are closely linked to what is happening in many of our hospitals, are the big legacy in the NHS that this Government have inherited. There is no greater symptom of an NHS in crisis than the unacceptably long wait times that she describes. That is why we have put record investment into the NHS this year, and we will continue to prioritise the NHS in further spending rounds. We want to get A&E and ambulance wait times right down, because these waits are completely unacceptable and are putting lives at risk.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): In the Hillhead, Waterside, Harestanes and, in particular, Twechar parts of my constituency, the issue of buses—or, more accurately, the lack of them—is continually being raised with me. My constituents cannot get access to local services, whether it is going to the bank or going to church. They need to change buses and wait for up to an hour for a connecting service—that is if the connecting service ever turns up. I wish to request a debate in Government time on the need for bus services in local communities.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why we are introducing the Bus Services Bill, which is currently making its way through the Lords. She will know that in Scotland, under the Scottish National party, bus routes have been almost halved since 2006, and local authority franchising has been delayed for five years, which has been failing communities. However, as a result of our Budget, the Scottish Government will receive their largest settlement, in real terms, of any time since devolution. This must now be used by Scotland to put in place the bus services and other services that her constituents so desperately need.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Despite stating in 2021 that it was in “strong financial health”, Labour-controlled Bradford council now wants to put up council tax for my constituents by a whopping 15%. This is a shocking situation, resulting from continuous mismanagement by our council leaders, who have splashed millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on Bradford city centre projects, including £50 million on a music venue that is finished but not yet open, despite our city of culture status. All the while, the council has let children's services degrade to an unacceptable level, despite the last Conservative Government stepping in and issuing it a bail-out just last year. May we have an urgent debate in Government time on how to stop local people across Keighley, Ilkley, Silsden, the Worth valley and my wider constituency paying the price for Bradford council leaders' failures?

Lucy Powell: I have to gently say to the hon. Gentleman that the failures were under the previous Conservative Government, who left local government on its knees, with years of austerity moving money away from areas of high need, such as his Bradford constituency, to areas of lower need. He will know that the cost of children's services has gone up and up in recent years, with a huge rise in demand, but central Government failed to provide any of the funding or support that local authorities needed to get a grip of the situation. That is why we introduced our Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill—a Bill that I think he voted against the other week—which will begin to address some of the chronic costs for local authorities in providing children's services. It is also why the Government are putting local government finances back on an even keel and ensuring that we deliver on the basis of need, not of politics.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Yesterday I received one of the best emails that I have received since becoming a Member of Parliament. It came from my constituent Gareth Stewart and related to his son Hugo, who has finally secured a place at the Royal School for the Deaf in Derby. Hugo is deafblind, and it took two years for

[*Dave Robertson*]

his parents to secure an education, health and care plan for him. It had to go to tribunal because it was consistently blocked. Even though the school had agreed to Hugo's place, ready for September, the county council continued to fight his parents, so the resolution came only yesterday.

I have spoken to Gareth several times about his case, because it is so serious. He was content with me raising it on the Floor of the House on the condition that, in his words, I used it to speak about the wider problems that we have in Staffordshire with the special educational needs and disabilities system. Too many parents face the same challenges. They often use the phrase "delaying tactics" to me regarding the need to go to tribunal, and the consistent arguments at every step of the process. Will the Leader of the House update us on her discussions with Cabinet colleagues about introducing a Bill to fix our broken SEND system, and will she bring forward a debate on the shocking number of wrongful council decisions on SEND support that end up being overturned at tribunal?

Lucy Powell: Receiving that email from Gareth Stewart about his son's place at the Royal School for the Deaf is an early reminder for my hon. Friend of how fulfilling the job of being a Member of Parliament can be; it does not happen all that often, but hopefully it will happen often in his case. He and his constituent are right to raise the chronic challenges faced by our special educational needs system, which a recent National Audit Office report found was at the point of crisis. Costs and demand are rising, yet outcomes continue to fall. This really is a broken system, and the Government are committed to addressing that. As an initial step, we put an extra £1 billion into SEND in the recent Budget. There have already been seven debates in this Session on SEND, which reflects the great importance of these matters to the House. I will ensure that the House is constantly updated on our plans.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): From Bude to Bodmin, and across my constituency, my constituents express their anger at having to pay astronomical fees to property management companies that provide little to no service. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the right of freeholders to challenge fees through arbitration and other dispute resolution mechanisms when services are simply not delivered?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman is right: unscrupulous managing agents are a plague for many leaseholders and homeowners in this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) also raised this matter, which suggests a good potential cross-party application to the Backbench Business Committee. The Government are committed to tackling the scourge of unscrupulous managing agents and putting power back in the hands of leaseholders. That is why we will publish a draft leasehold reform Bill later this year.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): At the request of several of my constituents in Wolverhampton West, this morning I attended a National Autistic Society event about the constant fight that autistic people face for support across health—including mental health—social

care, education and employment. What strikes me is the general ignorance about autism and what autistic people require. Will the Leader of the House please agree to a general debate in Government time about autism and the inequalities faced by autistic people, to ensure that early diagnosis and support for those who are autistic is a policy priority for the Government?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. This is an important issue, and the Government want autistic people to succeed in all aspects of their lives. The Government provided £4.3 million this financial year to improve services for autistic children, but clearly much more needs to be done, and done better and faster. I think that it would make an extremely good topic for a debate.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): This week, we saw the tragic murder of Leo Ross, who was just 12 years old. Two weeks ago, 14-year-old Kelyan Bokassa was also murdered. The fatal stabbing of a child has become an all-too-familiar occurrence. The number of teenagers murdered by knife has doubled in the past decade. Teenagers are twice as likely to be fatally stabbed as any other demographic. The Government have pledged to halve knife crime, legislating to ban zombie knives, but they account for only 3.6% of murders involving a knife. Kitchen knives account for over 52.6%, and everybody has access to a drawer full of those in their own home. We desperately need a conversation about the root causes of knife crime, why the situation is now worse than ever, and why our children are, shockingly, prepared to kill other children—why they find it so easy to take a life. Will the Leader of the House make time in the parliamentary schedule to discuss the causes of knife crime?

Lucy Powell: I echo the hon. Gentleman's remarks about yesterday's awful news of the stabbing and murder of Leo Ross, who was just 12 years old, in the west midlands. I have a child that age, as will, I am sure, many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents and others watching. The Government are committed to halving knife crime over the next decade. That is an incredibly ambitious agenda, which drives much of our activity in this space. In September, the Prime Minister brought together a coalition in No. 10 Downing Street to tackle knife crime. We have taken very quick action to ban zombie knives and dangerous ninja swords. Further measures will be introduced in the Policing and Crime Bill later this year, but the hon. Gentleman is right that it will take a strategic, holistic, wide approach that also looks at preventive measures, education and youth services, and brings all the players in our communities together, to tackle the scourge of knife crime.

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I was disappointed to hear of plans to close the Old Chainyard pub in Coseley in my constituency to make way for yet another convenience store. Will the Leader of the House give her support to campaigners in Coseley fighting the closure of their local, and will the Government make time for a debate on the vital role of local pubs in local communities?

Lucy Powell: Local pubs play an absolutely vital role in local communities as a social hub, gathering place, centre point and focal point for community get-togethers.

This Government support our local pubs. That is one of the reasons why we reduced alcohol duty on draught products in the recent Budget, and it is also why we are committed to the regeneration and support of our town centres and high streets. That would make an extremely good topic for a debate, and I look forward to her raising it.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): My train got cancelled on my commute home last night from Waterloo to Sunbury, but that gave me the wonderful opportunity to catch up on one of my favourite radio programmes—that of Mr Matt Chorley on BBC Radio 5 Live. My joy was only increased when I had the opportunity to listen to a rare interview given by the Leader of the House, during which she said, “We are not going for the sugar rush of quick growth”. Given that since the Government were elected the economy has not grown at all, could I on behalf of the people of Spelthorne congratulate her on her mastery of understatement and ask her what sort of growth she is going for and when it will come?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for listening to my interview. I would not say that it was that rare an interview, and obviously I am in the House once a week being fully accountable to him and colleagues for all my comments, which I happily do today. I think the hon. Gentleman is the constituency successor to the Chancellor who crashed the economy—is that right? Maybe not; maybe I will get a letter asking me to desist from saying that ever again. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on replacing the former Chancellor; I am sure he is better.

This Government want sustainable, long-term, productive, high-skill, high-wage growth with an economy that is healthy. The challenges we have inherited are so deep and profound, which is why it is taking time to turn the oil tanker around, as the hon. Gentleman will know. His Government's record of living standards falling for the very first time in our history over the course of the previous Parliament is perhaps a record he should reflect on more before he raises it with me.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): In my surgery in Drighlington, I met a constituent who has been suffering terribly as a result of mesh implants. Despite having multiple surgeries to remove them, she still suffers with long-term health consequences and now has cancer in the affected area, which she attributes to the mesh implants. My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) hosted a Westminster Hall debate on the matter in December, but those affected are still waiting for justice and an answer. Will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate in the Chamber in Government time on the urgent need to support those suffering with long-term health consequences as a result of mesh implants?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter. Last month's debate was an opportunity to hear those powerful testimonies, and I commend him and the campaigners for continuing to raise this important issue, which was a live one in the last Parliament as well. The Government are carefully considering the work done by the Patient Safety Commissioner and the resulting Hughes report, and I will ensure that the House is updated at the earliest opportunity on the Government's reflections. I encourage him to apply for a Backbench

Business debate on the Floor of the House on those important matters, because I know they would be well attended.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): A year ago today, the former MPs Theresa May and Sir George Howarth launched their inquiry report into type 1 diabetes and disordered eating. The report made a number of recommendations to ensure the funding and continuation of the TIDE pilot services that have been started around the country. Since then, two services have shut down, in London and on the south coast in Bournemouth, and the remaining five pilot sites, including in the Humber and North Yorkshire, are set to run out of funding in March. If that happens, vulnerable patients will be put at risk. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on this issue as a matter of urgency?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Member in paying tribute to the former Prime Minister and, I think, former Leader of the House on their campaigning on type 1 diabetes. He is absolutely right that ensuring we have community-led preventive services for type 1 diabetes and other infections or diseases is the focus of this Government, and that is absolutely as it should be. I will ensure that he gets a ministerial response about the closing of those services, what has caused that and what plans the Government have to take that forward, and I will ensure that he is updated.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Last weekend, I had the pleasure of meeting the Friends of Doncaster Sheffield Airport at Little Bawtry's restaurant. That incredible group of volunteers has supported the airport since its original opening back in 2005, and they cannot wait to be volunteering again once those doors reopen. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the vital role that volunteers like Friends of Doncaster Sheffield Airport play in ensuring the success of local projects right across the country? Will she join me in wishing them and the campaigners success in their continued efforts to get that airport reopened?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is quickly making a name for himself as Mr Doncaster airport—there is no question about that. Like him, I look forward to the skies of Doncaster being filled again with aircraft coming into that important airport in his constituency, and I look forward to him raising it again and again at these sessions until it happens.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to ask the Leader of the House a question on an issue of urgent concern—such questions may be similar, but they are none the less important. There has been an alarming, violent increase in the number of killings of Christians in Nigeria; there were 63 deaths between 27 November and 25 December alone. Of those, half occurred over two days in late December. On 22 December, 15 people were killed in the Plateau state in Nigeria, and on 25 December—of course, when we were all celebrating the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ—12 people were killed in the Benue state. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning those murders and killings and ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to address the escalating violence against Christians in Nigeria and ensure the safety of citizens there?

Lucy Powell: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a serious and important issue. Terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province have sought to undermine the right to freedom of religious belief in Nigeria. That is why we are providing £38 million in programming to strengthen peace and resilience in Nigeria to help tackle the root causes of violence in the region. I will ensure that he is constantly updated on those matters.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Before Christmas, I received a lovely letter—as opposed to an email—from Maisie Fox, a six-year-old pupil at St John's primary school in Rosyth. Maisie was very concerned about the safety of her walk and her route to school, as she was unable to use her scooter or bike while crossing the busy A985 in Rosyth. I accompanied Maisie on her walk to school a couple of weeks ago and, indeed, it was incredibly dangerous. Will the Leader of the House congratulate Maisie on being a young person with an interest in politics—something we should always encourage in young people—and do everything she can to work with the Scottish Government to ensure that roads are safer for routes to school?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate Maisie on being mentioned in the Chamber and getting her name in *Hansard*. I am sure my hon. Friend will get a copy to her. She raises the important issue of safe walking routes to school. We want to encourage young people to walk to school on their own, where possible, and that is why it is important that we take issues of road traffic, safety and safe walking routes to school incredibly seriously. As raised here again today, the Scottish Government now have the funds they need to take some of those issues as seriously as we do.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I often joke that my time between being an MP and being re-elected was less a career break and more a sabbatical. During that time, I had the pleasure and great opportunity of working at a fantastic facility—Leigh Spinners Mill. We created affordable spaces for local businesses and

community organisations to set up and thrive. Remarkably, 80% of those businesses are owned by women—an inspiring example of inclusive talent and growth. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need more research and debate on how to better support and nurture future women entrepreneurs? Will she arrange a debate on women in business?

Lucy Powell: We greatly missed my hon. Friend when she was on her political sabbatical—one that she did not want to take, but which I think she enjoyed—and I hope that she never takes another. It is great to see her back in her place. Thanks to her work during that time, I know about the great work that the Leigh Spinners Mill does. It is great to hear that so many women entrepreneurs are using that platform to take their businesses forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): For the final question, I call Neil Duncan-Jordan.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): Sunseeker International is a luxury boat-building company in my constituency, and it employs around 2,000 people in the local area. Just before Christmas, it issued temporary lay-off notices to more than 100 workers, with the promise that they would come back to work on 27 January. As that date approaches, those workers now fear the worst. Throughout this difficult time, the company has failed to tell its staff what is happening. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that our Employment Rights Bill will ensure that employers must consult and inform their workers when they face such challenges, and will she agree to a debate in Government time on the role and importance of shipbuilding in the UK economy?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the Government have introduced, through the Employment Rights Bill, a huge boost to workers' rights in such situations. The Bill will shortly come back to the Chamber on Report, when we can discuss at great length the action that we want to take against fire and rehire and to support workers in the difficult circumstances that he describes.

ECO4 and Insulation Schemes

12.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the energy company obligation 4 and Great British insulation schemes. The Government have identified an emerging issue of poor-quality solid wall insulation installed under those two inherited schemes.

Energy company obligation 4 began in April 2022, and the Great British insulation scheme began in May 2023. Around 65,000 households have had solid wall insulation installed under the schemes. In October 2024, TrustMark, the independent body that oversees tradespeople working in homes, did routine audits and found significant examples of solid wall insulation under those schemes that did not meet the requisite standard.

At that point, TrustMark began suspending a number of the installers responsible. After officials in our Department were made aware of the issues, they asked TrustMark to conduct a much fuller audit, which concluded in mid-December. Officials informed Ministers at the start of December about the situation, and told them that early findings suggested that there were widespread cases of poor-quality installations that did not meet the required standard. Since that point, we have consulted the certification bodies responsible for overseeing the work, and the Building Safety Regulator, to understand the true scale and nature of the emerging problem.

It became clear to me that there is a serious systemic issue around ECO4 and GBIS solid wall insulation. It ranges from minor problems, such as missing or incomplete paperwork, to major problems, such as exposed insulation or poor ventilation, which, if not fixed, could lead to damp and mould. As more poor-quality work has come to light, a total of 39 businesses have been suspended from installing new solid wall insulation in people's homes. I can inform the House that suspended installers will not be able to deliver new solid wall insulation under any Government schemes until they have fulfilled their obligations to put any issues right.

Additional on-site audits are being conducted as I speak, so that we can get a full picture of the scale of the problem and identify affected households. The auditing work continues at pace, and we have put in place a comprehensive plan for immediate repair and remediation where needed. Let me be absolutely clear about this: installers must fund any repair work themselves and carry it out as soon as possible. Consumers should not be asked to pay a penny towards the cost of getting the problems fixed.

We have instructed Ofgem, the energy regulator, to oversee that work. Ofgem will work with TrustMark and certification bodies to ensure that it is delivered at speed. Non-compliant work found through the audits is already being fixed. In the very small number of cases in which TrustMark audits found health and safety concerns, including wires not being fitted properly, the problems are being fixed urgently, with the expectation that they should be resolved within 24 hours.

Critically, I reassure the House that additional monitoring and checks are being put in place to ensure that future solid wall insulation is done to the requisite standard. It is also important to say that, based on what we know so

far, we believe that the issues we have discovered are specific to solid wall insulation installed under ECO4 and GBIS. Stronger systems of checks and balances are in place for other schemes that involve local authorities and social housing providers, so we do not expect to see the same scale of problem there. However, the Government are reviewing the quality of solid wall insulation under other schemes. I will update the House on the results of that work as soon as they are available. We will continue to require the urgent remediation of any issues found across all Government energy efficiency schemes.

I know that this will be concerning news for families who have had solid wall insulation fitted through those schemes. Getting this sorted for those customers is our No. 1 priority. Since I was informed of the problems, I have worked with Ofgem to develop a full plan for assessing all affected properties and getting any problems fixed. Let me set out what our plans mean for those families. Ofgem will now oversee quality checks on all solid wall insulation installed under either scheme, to identify households that might be affected. That will begin with every measure being examined over the coming weeks by qualified professionals, and that will include looking at photographic evidence. If a quality check raises issues, the certification body that oversees the installer, or TrustMark, will arrange an inspection of the property and the problem will be fixed as soon as possible. Installers will be required to provide evidence to TrustMark that issues have been properly fixed. Let me reiterate our assurance that where solid wall insulation under the schemes has not been done right, consumers should not have to pay a penny to fix that.

We are clear that the responsibility for finding and fixing any problems lies with those who carried out the work. Consumers do not need to take any action now. However, given the inevitable concern among those who have had those measures installed, all households with solid wall insulation fitted under the schemes will be sent a letter from Ofgem in the next three weeks. It will set out the steps that we are taking, and how households can proactively raise concerns. We are also setting up a gov.uk advice page specifically for those affected.

The Government are moving fast to protect households, but I must be honest with the House: these issues are the result of years of failure in a system that must be reformed. Home upgrades are, we believe, one of the best tools to get bills down for good and deliver warm homes. That is why our warm homes plan will cut bills for millions of households by upgrading their homes, including with solar panels, batteries, heat pumps and energy efficiency measures such as double glazing and loft insulation. However, the Government have inherited a fragmented and confusing system of protections for people who want to insulate their homes—too many organisations with different roles and responsibilities, not enough clarity for consumers about who to turn to if things go wrong, and problems that should have been picked up earlier being missed. The system is in dire need of reform.

Installers are responsible for poor-quality installations, but they have been allowed to operate in a failed system that has left some households exposed to bad practices. The system can no longer command confidence, which is why we are committed to overhauling it, and to driving up quality and protecting consumers through the warm homes plan. We will look at the entire landscape

[*Miatta Fahnbulleh*]

—from how installers work in people's homes and are certified and monitored, to where homeowners turn for rapid action and enforcement if things go wrong—and we will ensure that there is more of a guiding mind overseeing upgrades across the system.

The steps I have set out demonstrate that the Government will do whatever it takes to protect consumers. We will regularly report back to the House about the steps being taken. We have set up a process through which colleagues from across the House can raise concerns about their constituents. Above all, we are determined to ensure that families are never let down in this way again. We will put in place a robust system of compliance, audit and regulation, so that consumers have the confidence to take up the offer of upgrading their homes. We will do what is necessary to ensure that families can have warmer homes and lower bills. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.40 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement, and for taking the time to meet me this morning prior to making the statement.

The ECO scheme and the Great British insulation scheme were set up because we know that improving the energy efficiency of homes is one of the best ways to cut energy bills and keep people warm. This is especially the case for those who are in fuel poverty. When we took office in 2010, just 14% of homes in this country had an energy performance rating of A to C; today, that figure is around 50%, and for social housing, we went from 24% in 2010 to 70% today. That is a record that we are proud of—a record of reducing bills for households and keeping families warm. Almost half of the measures installed under GBIS have been in low-income households.

Solid wall insulation is a small proportion of the overall work that the ECO scheme and the Great British insulation scheme undertook. The vast majority of installations under those schemes have been cavity wall and loft insulation, alongside installations of smart thermostats and boiler upgrades under the ECO scheme. However, it is deeply concerning that examples of substandard solid wall insulation have been identified in some of the installations under those schemes. We of course support the action that the Minister has announced today, and Ofgem being given responsibility for overseeing the repairs and remediation, and it is right to conduct additional on-site audits to inform action moving forward. I thank TrustMark for the work it has done to identify examples of poor-quality solid wall insulation, and we also welcome the fact that there will be a review of the quality of solid wall insulation under other schemes. It is absolutely right for installers to fund the repair work, and to ensure that the situation is remedied for affected households as soon as possible. Nobody should have to live in a house with damp or mould as a result of poor-quality insulation.

Could the Minister, in addition to taking the action that she outlined in her statement, please answer the following questions? First, have the audits undertaken so far identified

what proportion of the solid wall insulations are affected by poor-quality work? Can she confirm that all 39 companies that have been suspended still exist, and set out the mechanism by which they will be required to remedy their work? What action is being taken to make sure that remedial work is of the required standard, to ensure that consumers are protected from yet more poor-quality work? What action is the Minister taking to make sure that everyone who had solid wall insulation installed under the schemes is informed promptly and in full, and that nobody will be missed? Will she publish a full list of the 39 companies suspended from the scheme for carrying out poor-quality work, and has the Department considered taking legal action against them?

Members in all parts of the House want to ensure that families have a warm and comfortable home that is efficient and cheap to run. The Minister has our assurance that we will work cross-party to ensure remediation for those affected.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank the hon. Member for his response. I am glad that there is consensus across the House that energy efficiency measures and home upgrades are key to delivering warmer homes and lower bills, and I hope all Members are supportive of the action the Government are taking.

In answer to the hon. Member's questions, we are still conducting audits to get a full picture. From sampling that has been done—I stress that the sampling was geared towards the installers that we thought were most risky—it seems that a significant proportion of that sample has major issues, which is why we are taking this action. On the 39 installers that have been suspended, we are working through certification bodies and TrustMark to require them to go into households and remediate the work. In the cases that we have audited, that is happening. The vast majority of installers want to do the right thing and want to do a good job, and where issues have been flagged, they are repairing the work. Where we think there are problems, we have mechanisms in place for making sure that the installers deliver on their obligations, and the guarantee system acts as a backstop.

A crucial question is how we ensure both that where remediation work is being done, it is being done to the right standard, and that future solid wall insulations are done to a better standard. We are putting in place additional spot checks across the piece to make sure that where work has been remediated, it has been done to the required standard, and critically, all solid wall insulations will be given more monitoring and checks. Suppliers have committed to that, so that when people are having this work done, they can be confident that it is being done to a much better standard than we have seen.

On keeping everyone informed, we will be writing through Ofgem to all households that have had solid wall insulation installed. We will be doing quality checks on all 65,000 solid wall insulations. I should stress that we hope the vast majority of those will be okay and that any issues will be minor, but we want to do a quality check across the piece. Our priority is getting in, making sure we are doing a proper inspection of the property, and getting key issues remediated as quickly as possible. Through all of that, our priority is the consumer, whose experience has to be as hassle-free, stress-free and cost-free

as possible. This should never have happened in the first place, and we are determined to get this right and fix it on those consumers' behalf.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Ind): As the Minister knows, I have long campaigned in this area, and I am grateful to her for meeting my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) and myself, along with the SSB victims support group, last year to discuss these important issues. As such, I welcome the concrete steps that the Minister intends to take in this area. She will know that many of the victims of the SSB Law scandal were directly impacted through faulty cavity wall insulation, but the steps that the Minister has outlined today are about solid wall insulation. Can she confirm that exactly the same actions will be taken when we are dealing with cavity wall insulation, and if not, why not? Will she also agree to make sure that compensation is available—whether through remedial work or in other ways—for all those impacted by the cavity wall insulation scandal?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank my hon. Friend for his avid and consistent campaigning on these issues. As he knows, there is an ongoing investigation into the case of SSB Law at the moment.

To answer my hon. Friend's specific question, for any insulation that is installed under Government schemes, we expect that the system will kick in and respond. We are aware of cases that have been raised with TrustMark and other bodies, and we are working to make sure those are remediated. Where the insulation has not been installed under a Government scheme—we have examples of that, where constituents have engaged with insulation schemes that are not Government schemes—there is a different set of mechanisms. We are working with the system to make sure we are responding to households, because as I have said, this is not the fault of individual households; the system is not working properly. We are going to prioritise Government schemes, because we have the levers, but we recognise that there is an issue for households that have had work done outside Government schemes.

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

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. I can only imagine the frustration that consumers feel when they go through the quite often complicated process of trying to upgrade their home to bring down their bills for good, only to be met with substandard work and a subsequent lack of enforcement. Liberal Democrat Members recognise that the Government have inherited a fragmented and confusing system, and that the focus today is on consumers and on remedial work affecting the shoddy work they have had installed. I am glad that the Government are committed to ensuring that the onus of that remedial work does not land in the pockets of consumers.

We agree that the system needs a complete overhaul, especially since the last Conservative Government left the Great British insulation scheme falling woefully short of the targets it set for itself and supporting far too few people far too slowly, while some who did receive installations have found them to be well below

the required standard. If faults are found with other energy efficiency measures, will the Minister guarantee that consumers do not have to pay a penny for those, as for the ones she has highlighted? How soon can consumers expect their quality checks to be delivered, and will priority be given to households in fuel poverty as well as to the elderly and the vulnerable?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank the hon. Member, and I am again glad to hear that she agrees we need a big overhaul of the system, which is absolutely our focus and our commitment. On other measures under ECO and GBIS, audits are not finding the same scale of systemic problems. We think the problem is focused on solid wall insulation in particular. We are doing stress tests and additional audits of other measures to make sure, but we think there is a specific problem with those measures, so we are focusing on them and moving at pace to get them remediated. Where we are finding major issues, we are setting expectations that that work is prioritised, and installers are coming in and remediating it as soon as possible.

Under the existing publicly available specification framework, remediation after installers have not put the work right has to be done within 12 weeks, and we are setting the expectation so the system moves at pace to respond to consumers. We will absolutely be looking to prioritise households in fuel poverty and vulnerable households. We are doing two things: we are contacting them, but we will also create the ability for people to reach out if they are worried or vulnerable, so that we are doing the necessary triaging and, critically, getting into properties to fix work that has not been done right.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I sincerely thank the Minister for her great work on this. In the six months she has been in post, she has made more progress than the last lot did in 14 years. This has been a serious problem for victims in Burnley, so I thank her. I am glad she is looking at earlier schemes, too, because many homes have fallen victim to cowboy builders and failed insulation over several years. I look forward to her updates on earlier schemes, which needed to be actioned by the previous Government but were not, and were ignored for an awful long time. I particularly welcome the stronger regulation, the clarity for consumers and the clear process for complaints, which will make a genuine difference.

I have two questions. Will the bans on particular companies follow the directors of those companies? Too often, we have seen companies being established and putting in poor insulation, and then the directors go away, extinguish the company and start again somewhere else. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) asked, will this cover cavity wall insulation where it has been Government-backed?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done on this, and for engaging with me and my Department. We are aware of instances where companies have folded so as not to deliver on their obligation to remediate work, and have then set up again. We are putting in place processes through the certification bodies to mitigate that, with a clear expectation that companies will not be taken on by another certification body if they do not get the work right.

[*Miatta Fahnbulleh*]

Our priority at the moment is solid wall insulation, because that is where we think there is an immediate problem with ECO and GBIS. We are aware, from Members contacting us, of the wider issues that need to be addressed. I come back to the fact that we understand that the system has not been working for consumers. Quite frankly, the quality—and quality assurance—across the system has been far too fragmented and patchy. Critically, consumer protection has not been underscored in the way it needs to be. We are looking to overhaul the system, and we are conscious that there are issues with other schemes and are thinking about the best way in which we can resolve them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I refer the Minister to the last words in her statement, which were that the Government will “ensure that families have lower bills.” There will always be a problem with insulation in a country with a massively degraded and older housing stock, which underlines the vital importance of cheap energy. We have had a month with virtually no wind and no sun, and so-called green energy is producing hardly any of our energy. We are importing energy, we are stopping drilling in the North sea and we are not building gas-fired power stations. What about old people? Their heating allowance has been taken away, and we are crucifying them with ever higher bills. Meanwhile, China—its annual increment in emissions is more than our entire emissions—is going on pumping out emissions, and “Drill, baby” Trump is pumping out emissions. Why are we crucifying our old people?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that the status quo is not fit for purpose. He says we should not take action, yet the last Government presided over the worst energy crisis we have seen for a generation. Over the past two and a half years, we saw his model result in record energy bills. The Conservatives were willing and content to accept that, and they thought it was tenable. It is not acceptable to us. Our view is that we have to wean ourselves off our over-reliance on global fossil fuel markets that are volatile and that, critically, will not guarantee lower bills.

We are committed to delivering clean power—yes, because it delivers on our climate requirements, but critically because we think that that is the route by which we will deliver homes that are warmer and cheaper for consumers. At the heart of everything we are doing is ensuring that consumers—who rely on energy not because it is a luxury good, but because it is absolutely foundational—have energy at stable prices that they can access and afford. This is not a status quo we are willing to accept, and that is why we are taking action.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement, and I commend her for the work she has been doing. It must be said that we have inherited an almighty mess from the previous Government, which is incredibly frustrating. She will know how important this issue is to my constituency, which is rural, with too many people on low wages. We have more than our fair share of poorly insulated homes, and fuel poverty is

therefore a real concern. Can the Minister reassure my residents, and I am sure many residents across the country, that the news of this latest setback will not delay progress on the improvements in rural communities such as mine?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank my hon. Friend, and we are absolutely committed to upgrading people’s homes. We believe that that is the route to delivering warmer homes that are cheaper to run, and that commitment stands for all communities. We want to move at pace with our warm homes plan because we want to deliver upgrades in people’s homes. However, we are very clear that part of that has to be an overhaul of the system, because if consumers want to go on this journey, they need to be confident that the work done will be of the utmost quality and standard, and that if things go wrong, we have proper redress systems in place. That is not what we inherited, but it is absolutely what we must deliver.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome what the Government are saying about the need to address this issue, and it will be reassuring for the very many people who have raised the problem with their MPs. However, are they also going to look at whether there is a wider problem with insulation generally, as has been mentioned, and have they had discussions with the devolved Administrations about schemes in the wider UK?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank the hon. Member, and yes, we have spoken to the devolved Administrations. We have spoken to the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government, and we are working closely and collaborating with them. It is important to stress that schemes operate in slightly different ways. In the case of the Welsh Administration, we think greater checks and balances are in place in the schemes with local authorities and social housing providers. I think there is a collective appetite and desire to work together, because everyone agrees that home upgrades are fundamental to delivering warmer homes and cheaper bills. We need to get the delivery right to make sure we deliver at the scale and pace of our ambition, but do so with quality at the heart of it.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. Parts of my constituency are 1,000 feet above sea level and our winters can be bitter, so good-quality insulation schemes are really important. I welcome the Minister’s emphasis on much better standards, but on a wider scale, can she please tell me how she is going to grow the workforce needed to deliver these initiatives for the future?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: building the supply chain and the workforce will be critical to delivering the pace and the scale of our ambition. We are already putting in place training schemes to build up the next generation of installers, and we are working with local and regional government on how to build our supply chain. A key part of the warm homes plan will be working with a range of organisations from local to national level to build the supply chain and ensure that, through that, we are delivering quality jobs that pay a decent wage. This is a big opportunity. There

is an opportunity for consumers, but we also believe that this is good for the economy, including particular local economies, and working with local and regional government to ensure that we realise that is a priority.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she confirmed that the 39 suspended companies are suspended from providing new solid wall insulation under the scheme. Are they also suspended from providing other sorts of insulation, such as external, loft and cavity wall insulation?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We have suspended the 39 companies, and under Government schemes they will not be doing any work on solid wall insulation. The vast majority, particularly those installers that TrustMark believes are risky, are prohibited from doing other work. Where we have evidence that some of the companies are delivering loft insulation, for example, and other measures to standard, they are allowed to do that, but we are keeping this closely under review. TrustMark is looking at the 39 companies constantly, and there is a big onus on the requirement on those companies to deliver and remediate the work in order to be able to any further work.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on her sterling work to tackle this minefield of rogue companies who abuse the good will of residents when installing energy saving measures, by scamming them with substandard products and damaging their homes. Will she work with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to consider extending the scope of this excellent regulation to look at spray foam insulation? My historic market town constituency of Shrewsbury has many beautiful older properties and many older residents. It saddens me that it was elderly residents such as David and Sue, and Mr and Mrs Balcombe, who were approached by ruthless companies offering spray foam insulation, despite the fact that it was inappropriate for their older properties. As a consequence of the damage caused, those families have faced bill after bill for surveys and remedial work, costing tens of thousands of pounds. Crucially, they are now struggling to sell their homes, as lenders will not approve mortgages for homes with faulty spray foam insulation. David and Sue now face bills to replace their roof, and sadly Mr Balcombe passed away recently, leaving his widow to continue the fight for a resolution to this nightmare. May I ask that families such as those be considered for the same enhanced regulation and compensation scheme?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issues in her constituency. We are aware of the issues with spray foam insulation—indeed, a number of Members from across the House have raised it with us—and we are working with MHCLG. For example, we have done a lot of work on mortgages, and have worked with lenders to ensure that there is not a blanket policy of not giving mortgages where there is spray foam insulation within the property. We acknowledge that there is a problem and that we need to strengthen the regulation, assurance and consumer protection across the piece with all energy efficiency measures. That is why, alongside remediating the immediate issues that we find within ECO4 and GBIS, we are working at pace to deliver wholesale regulation of the way the system works.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Over the past 14 years, I have regularly raised the building industry and its failures to provide decent homes of decent quality. The one strand that follows all the way through is the failure properly to inspect independently work that has been carried out, to certify it, and to ensure that it is fit for purpose. Will the Minister ensure that, beyond the current audit, all future work is properly inspected, certified and signed off, so that the people receiving the insulation can feel confident that the work has been done properly?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: The hon. Gentleman is right. There is a poor and weak system of inspection, certification and assurance. We believe that that is one of the reasons why we have ended up where we have, and we are clear that we must reform that part of the landscape. In the end, we must command the trust and confidence of consumers, and problems such as this fundamentally undermine that trust and confidence. As part of reforming the system we will look at how we inspect work when it is done, how we monitor what has been done and, critically, how we can have that assurance so that when consumers have work done, they can be confident that it is done to the highest standard.

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): I commend the Minister for her statement. I have heard from many constituents in Pembrokeshire who have been affected by these schemes, with incorrect insulations of air source heat pumps, faulty or shoddy building work, lack of valid warranties, grant misuse, and regulators such as TrustMark simply siding with the contractors. All of that has a disproportionate effect on vulnerable groups. Does the Minister agree that it is only thanks to this Labour Government that we are finally sorting out the failed system of regulation?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the problems we are finding across the piece. We are clear that the system we inherited is not fit for purpose. It is a patchwork of disjointed, fragmented regulation and consumer protection, it is frankly a nightmare for consumers to navigate through, and it is not fit for purpose. There has to be a root and branch overview of how the system works. Our priority is to ensure that if consumers choose to do home upgrades, it is as easy as possible for them to navigate the system, and they can have quality. The difference between this Government and the previous one is that we believe there is a role for Government. There has to be a guiding mind overseeing home upgrades across the piece, and we must ensure that the system is delivering for consumers.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I welcome today's statement, but it is not just about solid wall insulation. It is not right that anybody has to take any ECO4 supplier to the small claims court to get recompense for fixing shoddy work. TrustMark as a process is intrinsically ill-designed to protect vulnerable people, because it presumes that acceptance of a supplier on to the scheme is a sufficient safeguard. Will the Minister consider—I bear in mind what she has already said—empowering local authorities to sign off work before a penny is paid?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: The right hon. Member is right to highlight the important role that local authorities can play. Across the country, including in Wales, where local authorities or regional government are overseeing this work and providing additional quality and checks, we are not seeing the same scope of problems. We are looking at this in the round. We are clear that the status quo is not fit for purpose and that we must put in additional checks, balances and assurances. We think there are lessons to be learned from what is happening in Wales and Scotland, and what is happening in regional and local government.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement, and congratulate her on the detail with which she is answering questions and on showing how much she is on top of her brief. Only on Friday, a constituent came to see me who had a new boiler fitted and insulation done under an ECO grant. The work had been subcontracted by the company that originally won the contract, and that something that exacerbates the problem. That company clearly was not up to the standard required to carry out the work, and lots of remedial work was required. How can we ensure that the people who win these contracts do not subcontract to companies that are not capable of carrying out the work, meaning that we end up with the situations the Minister has described?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is right to highlight subcontracting within the system. Often we find that subcontracting is happening two or three times, and the starting client is not overseeing the work in the way that they should. That is why we are clear that we must look at the entire system, and part of that is looking at who is delivering the work, how they are delivering it, and how we ensure that there is proper accountability in the system. It is obvious to me that the current system does not allow for that accountability, and that is what puts consumers in a difficult position.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I am sure the Minister will recall our intimate Adjournment debate before the House rose for the Christmas recess—it was just her and me here. [*Interruption.*] Yes, and it was the day after our Christmas party, so it was an interesting debate.

I sincerely welcome the steps that the Minister has outlined for solid wall insulation. The problem I have is that, fundamentally, all these issues apply to spray foam insulation, as I said in my Adjournment debate. There are blanket bans by some mortgage providers: research by the BBC showed that one in three of the top 12 mortgage lenders have such policies. I am more than happy to send on that information again. There is a real issue of fairness and justice here. It is right that we are seeking to get this right for people done wrong by those who have not installed insulation to spec, but the same must be true for those who are victims of the spray foam insulation scandal, including my constituents Tom and Norma in Knaresborough.

The Minister has acknowledged in her statement that there are systemic issues, that TrustMark is not doing its work and that there are to be audits of solid wall insulation. However, when I asked whether there was an understanding of how many people had been impacted

by spray foam insulation, I was told that there was not a number. How can it be that we are counting how much of one sort of insulation has been installed, but not another? Some 250,000 people have been affected by spray foam insulation. Will she give justice to them, too?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank the hon. Member for all the work he has done on spray foam insulation and the campaigning he has done for his constituents. I fondly remember that Adjournment debate with just the two of us, and I vividly remember the stories he told of Tom and Norma. I reiterate the commitment to work together to try to resolve this.

The difference between spray foam insulation and work done under the ECO and GBIS schemes is that, because those are Government-backed schemes, we have the data. Large numbers of people have had spray foam installed, and some but not all of that work was done through the green homes grant.

We recognise that there is a problem with the system of quality assurance and regulation across the piece—we have acknowledged that very clearly in the House. We will continue to work with MHCLG and other colleagues to think about what we can do on spray foam. The priority, as the hon. Member will understand, is households who have had work done under ECO and GBIS that, if we do not fix it quickly, could result in damp and mould. We must act quickly on that. However, I acknowledge that there is an issue with households that had spray foam insulation done under the old system. As I said when we had the debate, we will continue work to think about ways in which we can resolve that for those households.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and, in particular, her remarks on consumer protection. Following on from the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon), a constituent recently told me at my surgery about work carried out on their home under the last Government's green homes grant. Following spray foam insulation being put into their loft, they have a leaking roof that cannot be accessed, as well as damp that was not there previously. Those issues have had a huge detrimental impact on their lives. They find themselves unable to afford remedial works amounting to thousands of pounds. What message can the Minister share with my constituents? Will she meet me to discuss spray foam insulation installed under the green homes grant scheme?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I will absolutely meet my hon. Friend to discuss spray foam insulation. Given the correspondence and parliamentary questions I have received on this issue, I offer to meet with hon. Members more broadly, because we need to ensure that we are listening to constituents. If the work was done under the green homes grant, we need to think about how we can get the system to respond as it should. I give that commitment to him and other hon. Members across the House who have cases in their constituencies and are worried about this.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I apologise to the Minister, because like the hon. Members for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) and for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), and my hon. Friend the Member for

Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon), I will raise the issue of spray foam. My constituent Matt was told that his house was unmortgageable with the nation's largest building society, despite his paying extra for an extensive survey of his timbers to prove that there was no problem. He has since been forced to replace his roof at a cost of £21,000 just to get a chance to remortgage and perhaps one day sell his house. The roofing companies told him that the market is booming for spray foam removal by the very same people who put it in, which feels like exploitation. How will the Government address that, and why are Government sites still promoting and recommending spray foam insulation?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: It is important to stress that the Government never recommend a particular solution. The approach that the last Government took and that we have adopted is that, in the end, people have to find the right measure for their home. We never promote any particular measure.

I acknowledge that there is a problem with spray foam, and that installers in the market are putting spray foam in properties where it is not fit for purpose. We have been doing a lot of work with colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to respond to that point about lenders. If there are specific cases where a lender finds something problematic despite a survey saying that it was absolutely fine, please feed that through to us, as we are continuing to work with the industry on that. There should not be a blanket ban.

It is important to stress that where spray foam insulation is carried out well and is appropriate for a property, it is a good thing, but I agree that there are too many cases where it has not been carried out well and is not appropriate. I therefore extend an offer to meet. We need to think about what we will do in response. We have inherited this system, and I wish I could change the past, but I cannot. What we can do is draw a line under it. We can absolutely ensure that we reform the system so that this never happens again, and so that we can command the trust of consumers.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): My constituents have unfortunately faced a double whammy of not only having had defective cavity wall insulation installed, but being pursued by law firms such as SSB for adverse legal costs. Consumers were badly let down, and we need to ensure that does not happen again. Will the Minister assure us that this will not happen again under future programmes, such as the new warm homes plan? On pipelines, are the Government working cross-departmentally to ensure that we have the right skills and training for future programmes? We want to ensure confidence in the system.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Let me reassure my hon. Friend that we are absolutely working to ensure that the lessons learned from the schemes we inherited are applied to the warm homes plan as we develop it, and that we put in place systems for checks, assurance and advice, so that consumers can have confidence. We are working across Government, because building up the supply chain and making sure that we have installers with the skills to do the work well is an absolute priority. We are working to deliver that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for a comprehensive response and, as importantly, for giving hope to all those people affected. That assures people and gives them confidence through their elected representatives in this House. In Northern Ireland, we have the affordable warmth scheme, which is different, but the goals are the same. Shortcomings have been identified; will the Minister be so helpful as to share the lessons learned with the Northern Ireland Assembly and the relevant Northern Ireland Minister? That is vital. If something goes wrong here, the lessons learned could help us to solve problems in Northern Ireland.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We will engage with colleagues in Northern Ireland. We are working closely with all the devolved Administrations. We are building up the evidence base on what happened and thinking about our response, and we are keen to share with other authorities any insights that we gain.

Holocaust Memorial Day

1.19 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day.

It is an immense privilege to open this important debate on behalf of the Government. As hon. Members will know, 80 years ago this month, soldiers of the Soviet 60th Army of the First Ukrainian Front opened the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau. That infamous camp has become the symbol of the Shoah and is synonymous around the world with terror and genocide more widely. Its distinctive railway tracks that led almost directly to the gas chambers, as well as the chilling words over the gate of the Auschwitz I main camp, “Arbeit macht frei”, are instantly recognisable, as are the piles of shoes, suitcases and other personal effects—the only remnants of the more than 1 million Jewish men, women and children from every corner of Europe who perished at the site.

Almost all the deportees who arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau camps were immediately selected for death in the gas chambers. It is estimated that the SS and police deported at least 1.3 million people to the complex between 1940 and 1945. Of these, the camp authorities murdered 1.1 million.

On Monday, world leaders will gather at Auschwitz-Birkenau to mark the 80th anniversary of its liberation. The United Kingdom will be represented by His Majesty the King. Mala Tribich MBE, Holocaust survivor and sister of the late Sir Ben Helfgott—may his memory be a blessing—will also attend. The number of those who survived the Shoah is dwindling, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker. Those who remain with us grow ever frailer. As a result, this is likely to be the last gathering of Holocaust survivors.

Eighty years ago, the US 3rd Army 6th Armoured Division liberated Buchenwald, the largest concentration camp on German soil. General—later President—Dwight D. Eisenhower, wrote afterward:

“I have never felt able to describe my emotional reaction when I first came face to face with indisputable evidence of Nazi brutality and ruthless disregard of every shred of decency.”

Eighty years ago, British forces liberated concentration camps in northern Germany, including Neuengamme and Bergen-Belsen. They entered the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, which was about 45 km from Hanover, in mid-April 1945. Some 55,000 prisoners, many in critical condition because of a typhus epidemic, were found alive. Within three months of liberation, more than 13,000 of them had died from the effects of malnutrition or disease. BBC journalist Richard Dimbleby famously described the scenes of almost unimaginable horror that greeted him as he toured Belsen concentration camp shortly after its liberation.

Bergen-Belsen began as a prisoner of war camp, and was used for Jewish inmates from 1943 onwards. It is estimated that 70,000 people died there. Richard Dimbleby was the first broadcaster to enter the camp and, overcome, broke down several times while making his report. The BBC initially refused to play the report as it could not believe the scenes he had described. It was broadcast only after Dimbleby threatened to resign. The images from Belsen—emaciated figures lying half-dead on open

ground in freezing weather, while thousands of corpses were bulldozed into great pits—are excruciating to see to this day. Some of the first-hand witnesses simply cannot bring themselves to speak of it. It haunts them to this day.

Over the decades, Holocaust survivors, many of whom experienced Belsen or Auschwitz, have shared their testimony, but 80 years after the Holocaust, their numbers are dwindling, and soon these first-hand witnesses will no longer be with us. The remarkable Lily Ebert MBE died aged 100 at home in London last October. Her life after Auschwitz showed that even in the face of unspeakable evil, the human spirit can triumph. She emerged from the darkness to bear harrowing witness, but also to rebuild hope with future generations. May her memory be a blessing. Henry Wuga, aged 100, and Bob Kirk, aged 99, who both came to the UK on the Kindertransport, died in 2024. Both men dedicated their lives to Holocaust education. The impact that Lily, Henry and Bob had on young and old cannot be overestimated, and highlights the importance of first-hand testimony.

Both because of the alarming rise in anti-Jewish hate in recent years, and because those who survived are now in their 80s and 90s, it is essential that as a country, we do more to preserve the memory of this unique act of evil and those who perished in it. It is also imperative that we continue to educate future generations about what happened, both as a mark of respect to those who were lost and those who survived, and as a warning about what happens when antisemitism, prejudice and hatred are allowed to flourish unchecked.

Some 27 years ago, former Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson decided to establish an international organisation that would expand Holocaust education worldwide. He asked President Bill Clinton and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair to join him in that effort. Persson also developed the idea of an international forum of Governments interested in discussing Holocaust education, which took place in Stockholm from 27 to 29 January 2000. The forum was attended by representatives of 46 Governments, including 23 Heads of State or Prime Ministers, and 14 Deputy Prime Ministers or Ministers.

The declaration of the Stockholm international forum led to the establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January, and the foundation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. This year, the UK had the privilege of holding the chair of the IHRA, and it continues to have an excellent reputation in the field of Holocaust remembrance and education, and tackling antisemitism.

We are fortunate in the UK to have organisations such as the Holocaust Educational Trust, led by Karen Pollock CBE, and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, led by Olivia Marks-Woldman OBE. The Holocaust Educational Trust, which has worked with Holocaust survivors for decades, is well aware of the increasing frailty of survivors, and that there will come a day when we no longer have living witnesses. That is why it has recently developed, with the support of the Government, Testimony360—a free digital education programme that combines digital eyewitness testimony with virtual reality, revolutionising access to survivor testimony and providing an invaluable opportunity for students learning about the Holocaust.

The UK took on the presidency of the IHRA in 2024, with the world on the cusp of significant change in Holocaust remembrance. Within a few short years, Holocaust survivors will move from contemporary memory into history books. How we remember is a matter of debate, but different views coalesce around three headings: landscape, archives—including testimony—and objects. Our presidency has successfully strengthened all three under the general title of “In plain sight”. This title is a reminder that the Holocaust did not happen in dark corners but in broad daylight. Jewish men, women and children suffered persecution in the full view of their neighbours—indeed, often by their neighbours. Laws discriminating against Jews and depriving them of rights and property were passed openly by legislatures. The attempted destruction of the Jewish people and their culture was not conducted in secret, but brazenly and openly.

Our presidency was also keen to engage young people, through our remarkably successful “My hometown” project, which invited schools across IHRA member countries to look at what happened in their hometown during the Holocaust. Schools in former occupied countries, and those receiving victims of Nazis and their collaborators, produced original and moving projects. Schools participated from as far afield as Argentina, Greece, Canada and Poland, alongside other member countries, including the UK.

Projects ranged widely in their subject matter. One focused on the influence of Holocaust survivors fleeing to Argentina on the music of Argentinian tango. In Nottingham, an amazing teacher, Domonic Townsend, from the Nottingham University Samworth Academy, worked on a remarkable project. The school houses a specialist provision unit for deaf children. Alongside the Nottinghamshire Deaf Society, Domonic created the first Holocaust-specific sign language lexicon for accessing Holocaust education, to empower our young children to access that education in an inclusive way. I urge all hon. Members to watch the video on YouTube. It is truly inspiring.

The UK presidency also worked with the Association of Jewish Refugees on our legacy project, the Holocaust testimony portal, which pulls together for the first time testimony from UK Holocaust survivors and refugees who made their home in Britain. This includes testimony from the AJR Refugee Voices initiative, the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation, the Shoah Foundation and many more archives. Hopefully, more archives—particularly the smaller, more specialised ones—will join in the coming months. The portal allows users to find in a single place the testimonies of individual survivors across the decades.

To commemorate the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, we have developed with the AJR the digital project “80 Objects/80 Lives”, a collection of one-minute clips featuring 80 objects from filmed testimonies of British Holocaust survivors and refugees. The objects represent the personal histories and experiences of Jewish Holocaust survivors and refugees before, during and at the end of the second world war. Objects such as a teddy bear, a doll, a watch or a spoon take on special meanings; a passport stamped with the letter J, a yellow star, and a bowl from Bergen-Belsen are bittersweet remnants of a lost world.

Eighty years after the Holocaust, we sadly still contend with Holocaust denial. Some forms of denial are less common, and in some states it is now illegal and punishable under the law, but the forms that Holocaust denial can take are ever-changing. It once referred to those who claimed that 6 million Jews were not murdered, and that there were no gas chambers whatsoever; today, these outright deniers are few and mostly relegated to the fringe. The problems we face today are more complex and more subtle, and are often nuanced and difficult to identify. However, that does not render them less dangerous, or the need to challenge them less compelling. After all, we are living in an age when facts are routinely disputed, and disinformation and misinformation are rampant. This presents a real and present danger for Holocaust education, remembrance and research.

It has been a long process even for democratic countries to confront their own problematic histories. It was only in 1995 that the French Government accepted responsibility for the deportations and deaths of more than 70,000 Jews, and that Austria finally dispelled the myth of being Hitler’s “first victim” and made amends to Austrian Nazi victims.

We have all watched the misinformation emanating from Russia that tries to justify the war in Ukraine as “denazification”, but across eastern Europe fascist leaders of the past who were involved in the persecution of Jews but who fought communism are shamefully being rehabilitated and, in some cases, given public honours. Lithuania’s Genocide and Resistance Research Centre decided that the leader of the Nazi-allied Lithuanian Activist Front is worthy of such honours. Hungary’s Government built a new museum that would tread lightly on the role of local collaborators. Even in Romania, which has done so much to confront its own problematic history, the Church is canonising religious leaders who were known for their wartime antisemitism.

Other forms of distortion have come about more quietly. Following a UN recommendation, dozens of countries now mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day with special programmes and educational initiatives. This is a real achievement, but it has brought with it a universalising of the Holocaust and its meaning. There are, however, general lessons on how hatred and intolerance can lead to discrimination, exclusion and even mass murder, and the need to be open to asylum seekers fleeing for their lives.

Yet with growing frequency the essential story of the Holocaust—the pernicious spread of antisemitism, the widespread indifference and the genocidal murder of a third of the world’s Jewish population—is obscured or ignored. It is as though antisemitism is no longer a problem, and Jews are no longer threatened. Surely this cannot be the message that Holocaust commemoration carries with it. We must guard against the watering down of Holocaust Memorial Day. It is a day when central to all our commemorations should be the murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children.

Today, Holocaust denial and distortion move instantaneously across social media platforms and are amplified by algorithms that drive anger and division. Sadly, the alarming resurgence of antisemitism since 7 October 2023 shows how the hate of the past is still with us. Today and every day, we stand in solidarity with the Jewish community at home and abroad.

[Matthew Pennycook]

The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2025, “For a better future”, is particularly timely, because remembrance without resolve is a hollow gesture. Even as we remember the past, we must be ever vigilant about the present and future. That is why we have a duty to remember, and why the new Holocaust memorial and learning centre at the heart of Westminster is so important in keeping alive the memory of those murdered during the Holocaust.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention the long-awaited ceasefire between Israel and Hamas that began on Sunday 19 February. As part of the agreement, we saw the release of three of the Israeli hostages who were taken from their homes and from a music festival on 7 October, and the release of hundreds of Palestinians. One of the hostages was British citizen Emily Damari, who has now been reunited with her family, including her mother Amanda, who never stopped her tireless fight to bring her daughter home. We wish all three hostages the very best as they begin the road to recovery after the intolerable trauma they have experienced.

Yet while we rightly welcome the ceasefire deal, we must not forget about those who remain in captivity under Hamas. We must now see the remaining phases of the ceasefire deal implemented in full and on schedule, including the release of the remaining hostages and a surge of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Hopefully, these first tentative steps will lead to a lasting solution, with the people of Israel and the Palestinians living side by side in peace. The UK stands ready to do everything it can to support that hope for a permanent and peaceful solution. I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

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

1.35 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is my privilege and solemn duty to open this debate on behalf of the Opposition. I thank the Minister for his very thoughtful remarks.

The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day, “For a better future”, encourages us to reflect on the lessons of history and on the steps we must take to ensure that such atrocities never happen again. This Holocaust Memorial Day also marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, a place where more than 1 million Jewish people lost their lives—part of the 1.1 million victims who also included the disabled, members of the gay community and political opponents of the Nazi regime.

We should always strive to stamp out the evil that is antisemitism. It has no place in our society, or any society. Earlier this month, like others, I was honoured to sign the Holocaust Educational Trust’s book of commitment, and today I am honoured to speak in this important debate. I pay tribute to the trust for its outstanding work in keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive through educational outreach and keeping the Holocaust in our curriculum for more than 30 years. I also thank the survivors of the Holocaust for the work they have done to educate past, present and future generations on the horrors of the past and to give us lessons for the future.

My party will always support the Jewish community, so it was encouraging to see the Leader of the Opposition engaging with the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Leadership Council and the Community Security Trust to discuss the challenges facing the Jewish community. As part of my role as shadow Secretary of State, I am meeting the Jewish Leadership Council in February, and I look forward to engaging with it and other Jewish organisations in the future. Our party will continue to engage with the community in opposition, and together we reaffirm our commitment to tackling antisemitism, promoting community cohesion and holding this Government to account on these critical issues.

This debate and this period of reflection come at an important moment for the middle east, which we hope will usher in a sustainable end to the conflict. Every single hostage must be returned safely home and reunited with family and friends after 15 months of the most unimaginably cruel captivity at the hands of Hamas. We have firmly in our thoughts the victims of the 7 October terror attacks—those who lost their lives, and those whose lives have been changed forever. This was the worst terror attack in Israel’s history. We are all relieved to see the first returns of hostages back to their loved ones under the recent ceasefire agreement, including, as the Minister says, the British-Israeli national Emily Damari. We pray for their good health, and I sincerely hope they can now begin to rebuild their lives after the most unimaginable trauma. None of the hostages or their families ever deserved to be put through this nightmare.

Remembering the Holocaust is something that we must continue to do every day and every year; it cannot be forgotten. This debate is just one way of doing that, and it is the responsibility of all of us to do so in our own way. Indeed, my wife and I took our children to the Holocaust galleries at the Imperial War Museum, which was a very solemn and sobering experience for us all. That day we also visited the Kindertransport memorial at Liverpool Street station. How proud we should be of those people, such as Nicholas Winton, who played their part to help Jewish people flee the horrors of Nazi persecution, saving countless lives and offering hope to those facing darkness.

It is also important that we take this opportunity to remember all those killed in genocide around the world. We remember the atrocities in Rwanda, where over 800,000 people were murdered. This year also marks 30 years since the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia, where more than 8,000 mainly men and boys were killed in just a few days by Bosnian Serb forces. Most were killed in an organised and systemic fashion, blindfolded and shot. While it was mainly men and boys who were murdered, thousands of women and girls suffered unthinkable violence and sexual abuse, including rape and torture, with thousands more, including children and the elderly, abused and displaced.

Those horrors remind us of the vital importance of standing against hate wherever it arises. That is why this debate on Holocaust Memorial Day is so important. We must stamp out antisemitism and stop it impacting the lives of British Jews and Jews around the world, but we also owe it to the memory of all victims of genocide to educate future generations and to work tirelessly to

prevent history repeating itself. Let us honour their memory by building a better future, free from hate, division and violence.

1.41 pm

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): Each year, Holocaust Memorial Day serves as a powerful reminder of the horrors that humanity is capable of inflicting, and of where antisemitism can lead. For me, this day is not just a time to remember the 6 million Jews murdered across Europe, but an opportunity to reflect on their personal stories, including my own family's. Critically, this day is also a chance to renew our solemn pledge, "Never again," which has particular meaning for me and my family.

My father is a Holocaust survivor. He was born in Budapest in 1943. In spring 1944, after Nazi Germany invaded Hungary, he was herded, along with tens of thousands of other Jews, into the ghetto in Munkács, his mother's hometown. Over just two months, more than 437,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz, the vast majority of whom were murdered. Many members of my family counted among their number and did not survive, but my father did and so did my grandmother, thanks to the extraordinary bravery of a woman named Maria. In a last desperate throw of the dice, my family entrusted my infant father to her care. She risked everything to smuggle him, and a short time later my grandmother, out of the ghetto just days before it was liquidated. Maria's courage was extraordinary. Her willingness to risk her own freedom, and maybe even her own life, for a stranger and her child is a testament to the power of human decency even in the darkest of times.

I often think of what the last tearful meeting, where my great-grandparents bade farewell to my father, barely 10 months old, knowing that they would never see him again, must have been like. I think of my grandmother, forced to live under a false identity for the remainder of the war, not knowing what happened to her family. And I think of Maria, whom I never met and who I know little about, but to whom I owe so much. In these moments, the enormity of what happened hits me hardest.

A few years ago, I took my family to the Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem. There, in its files of those who perished, I looked up my family on my father's father's side. Now, my name is pretty unusual, but among the names of those who were murdered I found literally hundreds of Duschinskys. I know I am not alone in that; my family's story is far from unique. There are millions of Jewish families with stories like mine: stories of loss, trauma and persecution, but also of survival. And not just Jewish families; there are so many others—other victims of Nazi persecution, as well as survivors of the Rwandan genocide, and those in Bosnia, Darfur and Cambodia, who have similar stories to tell. Victims of hatred, victims of persecution, they are bound together by a common experience and a common humanity.

Holocaust Memorial Day is particularly important this year. It comes at a moment of dawning hope after 15 months of darkness, with the release of three hostages, including Emily Damari, and a ceasefire in Gaza. I pray for the safe release of all the hostages, for the ceasefire to be sustained, and for us to take the first steps towards a sustained peace.

But 27 January is also critically important this year because it marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. It is a hugely significant milestone. For those of us who know survivors, it will be the last major anniversary when we have them with us. In Hendon, we are enormously proud of the work of our local survivors, including Manfred Goldberg, Renee Salt, Vera Schaufeld, Peter and Marianne Summerfield, and my good friend Rabbi Bernd Koschland, all of whom have done so much work to raise awareness.

Yet with each anniversary, the Holocaust slowly but surely slips from living memory. As the generation of survivors passes on, so the responsibility falls upon us to ensure that their stories endure. The torch of remembrance is being passed and it is down to us, the people here today, to safeguard the memory of the Holocaust: to spread understanding, tell its stories and keep them alive for our children and grandchildren. This is not just about the numbers and statistics; we must remember the people, the families, the communities. We must speak for them and, where we can, make sure their stories and voices are heard, especially in an age when misinformation proliferates. When truth competes with a blizzard of distortions and lies, and when conspiratorial thinking and shrill rhetoric numbs us to true horror, we cannot rely on the facts of the Holocaust alone to speak for themselves. We must tell its stories insistently and repeatedly, and make sure they reach every ear.

That is why the work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust in running Holocaust Memorial Day is so important, and why the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Association of Jewish Refugees and so many other charities is so vital. It is why the Government's pledge to ensure that the Holocaust will be at the core of a national curriculum that is taught in every school is so welcome, as is the extra £2 million in funding for the HET. It is also why the deep personal commitment of the Prime Minister, seen in his strong advocacy and his recent trip to Auschwitz, is so critical.

This anniversary is not just about remembering. It is about reaffirming our collective commitment to the values that ensure such atrocities can never happen again. That is why the importance of Holocaust Memorial Day cannot be overstated. It is not only a time of reflection, but a time of vigilance and a time when we renew our vow to act, because, as history often reminds us, prejudice and bigotry are light sleepers. At a time when antisemitic incidents are up over 1,500%, we can see that hatred, particularly the world's oldest hatred, is never fully vanquished. It must be fought and defeated anew with every generation.

In Britain, we take pride in our pluralistic society, a society where people are free to practice their religion, express their identity and live without fear of persecution, but we must always remember that those freedoms must never be taken for granted. They are the product of a long history of struggle and sacrifice, and they are something we must constantly protect and defend in our politics, our rhetoric and our daily lives. We can all play our part. This coming Monday, at 7 pm, I urge everyone who can to tune in to BBC One for the national ceremony of commemoration. At 8pm, I ask everyone to light a candle and put it in their window—a light in the darkness to keep memory alive.

[David Pinto-Duschinsky]

The theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is "For a better future." The path to a better future, one where tolerance and mutual respect trumps division and bigotry, lies in a steadfast defence of our values and a willingness to confront hate. The foundation of this determination in turn rests on our collective remembrance of the Holocaust and our determination to tell its stories and echo its truth down the generations. I know something about that, because that is the path my family trod. It seems unlikely that a baby boy in a ghetto leaving his family in the arms of a stranger might be on a path to a better future, but because of their decency and bravery he found his way to a place of safety. He travelled to a new country that was a bastion of those values, a country in which his son was able to carry his family name, a name that was on the verge of extinction, into Parliament and sit surrounded by so many colleagues whose own family stories are marked by hardship and oppression. That is why I am so proud to sit here and to be a co-sponsor of this debate. The lesson this journey teaches us is that a path to a better future is possible if we work together to build it. On this Holocaust Memorial Day, we should renew our determination to strive to build it every day.

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

1.49 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a privilege to speak in this debate, and it is humbling to follow the hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky); I thank him for his incredible testimony about his family.

I pay tribute to Mr Speaker and his office for the moving parliamentary ceremony yesterday, especially the testimony of Yisrael and Alf, who both survived the Nazi Holocaust. To mark this event in the same week as the fragile ceasefire in the middle east and the release of Emily Damari and two other hostages makes it even more poignant.

When my son Isaac was nine, his school, Springdale First, held a world war two tea. Children were invited to bring a grandparent to share their memories of living through the war, but he came home distressed because my parents—his grandparents—were not born until several years after its end. Being an ingenious child, he knocked on the door of our neighbour Margaret and asked her to be his adoptive grandmother for the day, so that she could share her memories with his classmates and enjoy the wartime entertainment, which included his singing of "We'll Meet Again". I tell this story because, as the living memory of the Holocaust reduces, it is more important than ever that each of us keeps it alive through our own annual acts of remembrance and in calling out antisemitism and all acts of discrimination and hate against groups because of their faith, nationality or identity.

Twelve years ago, I visited Israel and Palestine as part of a Liberal Democrat delegation, during which we made a trip to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum. The experience stays with me for many reasons, but the thing that struck me hardest was what came well before the death camps like Auschwitz: a decade of dehumanising

a whole community; of families being rewarded with crates of beer for betraying their neighbours; of the boycotting of Jewish businesses, the burning of Jewish authored books and, most strikingly, the sale of ashtrays depicting so-called Jewish faces on them, so that people could stub out cigarettes on their faces, helping to foster the feeling that Jews were not really people at all.

Last Sunday, I attended a Holocaust memorial event in Wimborne Minster in my constituency. The service, which can be seen on the minster's YouTube page, was based around the book "Violins of Hope" and accompanied by the haunting playing of pieces of music reminiscent of that time by classical violinist Emma-Marie Kabanova, herself a refugee from Ukraine.

As well as the accounts of those whose music continued to be played in the camps, maintaining hope and retaining their humanity, some of the testimony we heard shared more about what came before the war—how Jewish people were forced to leave their homes and their businesses, how they fled in boats from European shores to reach Palestine but were refused landing or, worse, died at sea. I closed my eyes to listen to the simplicity of the violin played in the minster, as the words of those who lived through that horror were shared with us all. The contrast between the evil perpetrated in the name of power and ideology and the selflessness of those condemned to death for something they could not control was incredibly moving.

By the end of the Holocaust, as we know, 6 million Jewish men, women and children had been murdered in ghettos, mass shootings, concentration camps and death camps. In addition, and often forgotten, were the other groups targeted by the Nazis for extermination, among them Romani Gypsies, those with disabilities, gay and bisexual men and black people.

This year carries a special significance, as we mark 80 years since the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Next Sunday I will be attending the Poole Lighthouse Holocaust memorial event, as I do every year, at which candles are lit for the victims of not only the Nazi Holocaust but later genocides, all of which unbelievably occurred within my lifetime, in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. That is what Holocaust Memorial Day is for: looking backwards to look forwards.

The theme of Holocaust Memorial Day this year is "For a better future", so I return to my son, Isaac. At the age of 12, he joined his fellow Broadstone scouts on a European adventure focused on world war two. They travelled across several countries, alternating light-hearted activity days with visits to the Colditz castle prisoner of war camp, to Auschwitz and, on their return, to the Menin Gate to see the war graves and witness the last post at sunset. We thought carefully about whether he was too young for such a trip and whether he could really understand what he was seeing, but I have seen the positive impact of that trip on him. The relationship that we all build with history and truth goes some way to structuring our perspectives in adulthood and preventing our susceptibility to dangerous narratives.

The work of the Holocaust Educational Trust in training and supporting hundreds of teachers each year to help us all learn from the past and work towards a more united future, and of the Antisemitism Policy Trust in training decision makers like us, should be commended and supported. As my party's spokesperson for housing, communities and local government, it should

not be surprising that I will say there is a role for our communities to play too. At a time of rising antisemitism and Islamophobia, many UK communities are feeling vulnerable, with hostility and suspicion of others rising. The Home Office's own statistics revealed that the number of religious hate crimes recorded in the year to March 2024 had rocketed, which it has directly attributed to a spike in anti-Jewish hate.

We have also seen inconsistent responses from the police to language and behaviours that may well be antisemitic or viewed as hate crimes. I call on the Government to ensure that the police have the resources and, most importantly, the training they need to respond effectively and swiftly to antisemitic hate crimes, and to provide funding for security organisations such as the Community Security Trust.

We must speak up against Holocaust and genocide denial and distortion. We must challenge prejudice. We were told by Holocaust survivor Alf Garwood in Mr Speaker's service yesterday:

"When my parents were coming to terms with their trauma after the war, I saw what their hate towards those who had destroyed our lives did to them. Hate only poisoned them."

We must all continue to remember, and to work for peace and understanding at a time when the world feels fragile, and we in this place must lead that work together for a better future.

1.56 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to listen to the powerful testimony from my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky).

Racism and antisemitism is on the rise—that is without a doubt. It is on the rise behind closed doors. It is on the rise on the dark web. It is also hiding in plain sight. We have seen an acceleration since 7 October. When my constituent Noam's mum Ada was kidnapped and held hostage, we worked tirelessly day and night for her release, and luckily we saw that day. Noam is always saying that we must strive for peace and that only light when we enter a dark room will make us see clearly.

It is really important that we mark the Holocaust every year in this debate. Although I am not so well—I apologise for my voice today—I wanted to come in to mark this day, because hate cannot win, and we have to show time and again that there are more of us than there are of them. This debate stands as a warning of the depths of cruelty and hatred that can be released when prejudice is allowed to grow unchecked and unchallenged. We cannot allow that, especially in this place.

In my constituency, Brent council marks Holocaust Memorial Day every single year, and this year we will mark it in the iconic Wembley stadium. Local events bring people together from all backgrounds to share in remembrance, united in the mantra of "never again", fostering greater understanding and stronger bonds within our community.

As the Holocaust Memorial Day website states:

"following the 7 October attacks in Israel by Hamas and the subsequent war in Gaza. Extremists are exploiting the situation to stir up anti-Muslim hatred in the UK. Many UK communities are feeling vulnerable, with hostility and suspicion of others rising. We hope that HMD 2025 can be an opportunity for people to come together, learn both from and about the past, and take actions to make a better future for all.

There are many things we can all do to create a better future. We can speak up against Holocaust and genocide denial and distortion; we can challenge prejudice; we can encourage others to learn about the Holocaust and more recent genocides."

I am proud to be working with local rabbis in Brent East, such as Rabbi Mason, and others to bring everyone together, including African-Caribbean and Jewish people, to fight against the rise of prejudice and discrimination. Together we can strengthen our ability to challenge hatred in all its forms.

As we have heard, the chosen theme for Holocaust Memorial Day is "For a better future", which calls on all of us to actively work towards creating a society that stands up against hatred and prejudice. We know that antisemitism has risen alarmingly in recent years, and we each have a responsibility to confront toxic beliefs wherever they appear, regardless of who is acting on them. We cannot afford to be gaslit and to allow hateful ideologies to resurface in the mainstream. We have a collective responsibility to call out such actions and ensure that they do not gain traction.

As we come together on this important day, we have to ensure that our remembrance is accompanied by action. Genocide and crimes against humanity are not inevitable, and we can prevent them. We must raise the alarm when we witness dangerous rhetoric and divisive actions and symbols, and we must hold perpetrators accountable. However, the reality is that people are often scared because someone else with more power says otherwise. They are scared of being incorrectly labelled, scared of the unintended consequences.

We must not forget that genocide does not come about overnight; rather, it is a gradual process. Even though it can sometimes seem scary, especially for those who are not in the in-crowd, hatred cannot and must not be normalised if we are truly to look towards a better future. If you are the last person standing and calling at the top of your voice for peace and love, that must be the ultimate goal for a better future.

2.2 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler). I wish her well in her recovery from cold and flu.

I thank the Government for putting on this debate and for making sure that we continue to honour the victims of the Holocaust, and I thank the Minister for both the tone and content of his opening speech. I declare my interest as co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Holocaust memorial since its formation in 2018, and I am also proud to chair the all-party parliamentary group on UK-Israel.

This Holocaust Memorial Day is particularly prominent and poignant, as it marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest concentration camp during the war. Time is going quickly, and many of the courageous and inspirational survivors are sadly passing away, so it is important that we preserve their memories and stories, and teach the next generations, so that we do not make the same mistakes again. I think I have spoken in every Holocaust memorial debate since I was elected in 2010, and today I will focus on the origins of the Holocaust, and on how the United Kingdom could and should have done more to prevent it.

[*Bob Blackman*]

The Holocaust was one of the most tragic events the world has ever seen. The brutal, systematic murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children by the Nazis in Germany and their collaborators during the second world war must always serve as a stark reminder of the evils that can be perpetrated by humankind. The Jewish genocide did not officially start until January 1939, but Jews have been irrationally targeted throughout the centuries, dating back to as early as 270 BC. I do not intend to go through the history of that.

Let us fast forward to the end of the great war, when the escalation of antisemitism was about to begin. The allied forces sanctioned Germany extremely harshly at the end of the great war. Germany had to accept full blame for the war and pay £6.6 billion—in today's money, that is a huge amount—because of the damage it caused during the war. Alsace-Lorraine, which had been taken from France by Germany in the 1871 war, was returned to the French, and the Anschluss was banned. Germany was allowed to have only 100,000 soldiers, with no tanks and no air force, and its navy could have a maximum of six battleships. The Rhineland, an area of Germany on the border with France, was demilitarised, and Woodrow Wilson's idea for a League of Nations was agreed to. The reparations caused immense problems for the German people, who universally believed that they were too harsh, not least because of the damage and instability that they caused to the German economy. Many held a lot of anger and were ready to shift their blame, which fell on the Jews.

Shortly after that was the great depression, sparked by the Wall Street stock market crash of 1929. Economies across the globe were affected, leading to a crisis in world trade, prices and employment. Almost overnight, the regular loans from the United States through the Dawes plan, on which the German economy depended, ceased. Hitler, a rising star in the German political scene at the time, promised that the humiliation of Versailles would be avenged and that Germany would be made great again. Many Germans believed that they had been betrayed by the high command of the army in the great war, and they were tired of endless ineffective coalition Governments following the war.

Hitler had no connections to the elite, and he offered a new beginning. Most of all, he promised jobs and bread at a time when unemployment and poverty were at extremely high levels. It is important to ask the question: if we had acted differently after the great war, would Hitler ever have come to power? Of course, we know that he did and that his Nazis embarked on a systematic and deliberate attempt at extinguishing the Jewish race across Europe.

Next Monday marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, which was the largest concentration and extermination camp used by the Nazis. The site consisted of Auschwitz I, which was the main camp; Auschwitz II-Birkenau, a concentration and extermination camp with gas chambers and incinerators; Auschwitz III-Monowitz, a labour camp for the chemical conglomerate IG Farben; and dozens of other sub-camps. The camps became a major site of the Nazis' horrific final solution to the Jewish question.

Between 1942 and late 1944, freight trains delivered Jews from all over Nazi-occupied Europe, and collaborators from across those different countries joined in. A shocking

1.3 million people were sent to Auschwitz, where 1.1 million were sadly murdered. Some 960,000 were Jews, 865,000 of whom were gassed on arrival, having been singled out for immediate extinction. About 74,000 non-Jewish Poles, 21,000 Romani, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war and 15,000 others were also killed. Those who were sent to the camp but escaped being gassed were murdered through starvation, exhaustion, disease, individual executions or beatings. Others were killed during torturous medical experiments—we should remember what that must have been like.

The first mass transport to arrive at Auschwitz, on 14 June 1940, contained 728 Polish male political prisoners, including Catholic priests and Jews. By 1942, transport was arriving regularly, containing thousands of Jews who were all earmarked for execution. If inmates were lucky enough not to be sent straight to the gas chamber on arrival, they were sent to the prisoner reception centre, where they were tattooed, shaved, disinfected and given a striped prison uniform. The horrors escalated dramatically from there. Youth and fitness for work gained prisoners a temporary reprieve from the gas chambers.

From the time they entered Auschwitz-Birkenau, everything was done to debase and dehumanise the Jews. Their immediate gassing was delayed in order to rob them of their individuality. Each was identified solely by the number that he or she was designated.

The day would start at 4.30 am with a roll call. Prisoners would walk to their place of work, wearing striped uniforms and ill-fitting wooden shoes without socks. Kapos, the prisoner supervisors, were responsible for the prisoners' behaviour and conformity while they worked, as was an SS escort. The working day lasted 12 hours and was marked by torture and fatigue. Much of the work took place at construction sites, quarries and lumber yards. Visits to the latrines were permitted only at designated times, not when nature called. Work was carried out in the shadow and smoke of the crematoria chimneys that burned incessantly day and night, burning the bodies of murdered Jews and others, invariably including the family members of those forced to work. The belching smoke was a constant reminder of their potential fate.

In the evening, after block inspection, there was a second mandatory roll call. If a prisoner was missing, the others had to remain in place until he or she was found, or the reason for his or her absence discovered. After roll call, individual and collective punishments were meted out before the prisoners were permitted to return to their barracks for the night and receive their bread rations and water. Prisoners received a hot drink in the morning, but no breakfast, and a watery, meatless turnip soup at noon. In the evening, they received a small ration of bread. At no time did their daily intake exceed 700 calories.

Sanitary conditions were poor, with inadequate latrines and a lack of water. The camp was infested with vermin, such as disease-carrying lice. Inmates suffered and died during epidemics of typhus and other contagious diseases.

While we commemorate 80 years since Auschwitz was liberated, it is important to note that there were 23 main camps across Europe, each with a series of internal camps, totalling over 1,000 camps in all—all dedicated to the torture and extermination of the Jewish community.

To implement the final solution during the latter years of the war, the Nazis built extermination camps on Polish soil. We must remember Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek and, of course, Auschwitz-Birkenau. I commend the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust for their brilliant work to educate us about the horrors that people endured. I urge the Minister to confirm funding for the Holocaust Educational Trust's wonderful "Lessons from Auschwitz" programme so that young people can learn what happened.

It is clear that the Nazis deliberately set out to kill the 6 million Jews, but there are many actions that we in the UK and the United States could have taken. Auschwitz was accessed by a vast network of rail routes, bringing trains full of Jews from across Europe. At no point did the allied forces choose to bomb those rail networks to prevent access to the camp.

In 1944, the US Department of War refused multiple requests from Jewish leaders to bomb the railway lines leading to the camps, despite 452 bombers of the 15th Air Force flying along and across the deportation railway lines on their way to bomb the Blechhammer oil refineries just weeks later.

Time and again, military commanders said that a precision strike on the camp had no chance of success. However, no study was ever made. Proposals to drop weapons into the camp to enable a rebellion were considered but abandoned. From 1942 to 1943, British intelligence was regularly able to intercept and decode radio messages sent by the German order police, which included daily prisoner returns and death tolls for the 10 concentration camps, including Auschwitz, yet no action was taken. Another common argument is that the allies did not know the numbers and the horrors of the camps until after the war, despite the fact that hundreds of prisoners escaped and described their ordeals.

The US Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency that had been established in 1941-42 to co-ordinate intelligence and espionage activities in enemy territory, had received reports about Auschwitz in 1942, but no action was taken to target the camp. On 7 April 1944, two young Jewish inmates who had escaped from the camp, Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler, published detailed information about the camp's geography, the gas chambers and the numbers being killed. Roswell McClelland, the US War Refugee Board representative in Switzerland, is known to have received a copy by mid-June and sent it to the board's executive director, but no action was taken.

We are 80 years on from the liberation of Auschwitz. Antisemitism has increased significantly in the UK and globally following the 7 October attacks by Hamas and the subsequent war in Gaza. Many UK communities feel vulnerable, with hostility and suspicion of others rising. We hope that Holocaust Memorial Day 2025 can be an opportunity for people to come together, learn from and about the past, and take action to make a better future for all.

I finish on two points. First, it is extremely concerning to see the stark rise in open antisemitism on our streets following the 7 October attacks on Israel by the terrorist organisation Hamas. Jewish people are afraid to go about their lives, and have to hide their identity for fear of being attacked in their own country. We have reiterated,

time and again, that the Holocaust must serve as a reminder that we must never allow such persecution of any race or religion, so we must make a conscious effort to stand up against such violations on our own streets.

Secondly, the Minister kindly mentioned the Holocaust Memorial Bill, which is going through Parliament. Sadly, as time moves forward, survivors are passing, and there are fewer and fewer to share their stories. It is crucial that we enable the Holocaust memorial to be built alongside this place, together with the education centre, so that future generations can learn the true horror of what happened during the war and pass it on to their children, so that we never allow history to repeat itself. I have had the privilege of visiting the original Yad Vashem and the modern-day Yad Vashem. Those who visit will know the horrors that the Jewish people encountered, and it is hard to express those horrors. We must make the Bill's passage a matter of urgency, so that the few Holocaust survivors still with us can see the centre for themselves and be proud of the amazing work they have done in sharing their stories.

I leave the House with the poignant words of Sir Ben Helfgott MBE, a Holocaust survivor and successful Olympic weightlifter. His words should resonate with us all when assessing the urgency of this project:

"I look forward to one day taking my family to the new national memorial and learning centre, telling the story of Britain and the Holocaust. And one day, I hope that my children and grandchildren will take their children and grandchildren, and that they will remember all those who came before them, including my mother, Sara, my sister, Luisa, and my father, Moishe."

Sadly, Sir Ben died last year. I have no doubt that, through the memorial and learning centre, his memory and story will live on for his children, grandchildren and generations to come, so that we can all learn the lessons of the Holocaust and vow never to repeat them.

2.18 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): It is an immense privilege to speak in this debate and express my heartfelt support for Holocaust Memorial Day. This day is not merely a reflection on a single tragedy in human history; it is a time to remember the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered during the Holocaust and to honour those who survived. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) for such a moving, personal speech on the importance of honouring those who survived. The theme for this year, "For a better future", resonates deeply; it calls on each of us to reflect on our role in building a more peaceful society. It reminds us that we all share a collective responsibility to ensure that no one suffers prejudice, discrimination or violence because of their faith, ethnicity or any other characteristic.

Five weeks before the horrific massacre committed by Hamas in 2023, I had the opportunity to visit Israel and the Palestinian territories as part of a delegation. During that visit, I met leaders from both sides of a long-standing conflict. I also witnessed something that left a lasting impression on me: young people, both Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians, who were critical of their leaders but united in their shared desire for peace. They, like us, want an end to the cycle of violence; and they want leadership that will guide them towards a better future. That is a message that I will hold on to.

[Jo Platt]

During my visit, I had the profound honour of experiencing Yad Vashem. The exhibits, documents, testimonies and historical artefacts told a story that was truly harrowing. What struck me most was the reminder that the Holocaust did not occur in isolation or overnight, but was the culmination of years of cultivated hatred, prejudice and dehumanisation. The horror of the Holocaust was not just the atrocity itself; it was the slow erosion of civility and the gradual unravelling of humanity. That is why we must continue to resist antisemitism, Islamophobia and all discrimination and persecution in every form. Holocaust Memorial Day is about understanding how hatred creeps into society, and how we as individuals and communities must prevent them from taking root again.

Education plays a vital role in that process, and I welcome this Government's announcement, and the focus on teaching the Holocaust, so that we ensure that pupils understand why and how it happened. More locally, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Joan Livesey for her dedication in organising Holocaust memorial events in my constituency and beyond. Her work with schools to engage young people in learning about the Holocaust is essential in ensuring that that history is never forgotten. One such event will be held at Leigh Film Factory: a poignant screening of "Sophie Scholl: The Final Days". Those efforts are crucial. They create spaces for communities to come together to reflect on such horrific events. They also remind us of the values we must all work towards in this House: tolerance, acceptance and mutual respect for all people, regardless of their background. Wherever hatred exists, whether it is in the UK or elsewhere, we must challenge it. We must confront the language of hate and bigotry wherever it is found, and ensure that we never allow those forces to gain a foothold again.

2.22 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to this important debate. I thank those individuals and organisations that work throughout the year to ensure that Holocaust Memorial Day is commemorated, and that our young people in particular are reminded of the horrors of the past and encouraged to work towards the peace that all right-thinking people seek.

As Members will be aware, Holocaust Memorial Day falls every year on 27 January. As has been mentioned, that is the date when the notorious Auschwitz-Birkenau camp was liberated. This year, the date marks 80 years since that liberation, and it is just as important now as it has been in any year to remember the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust, and the millions of other victims of Nazi persecution, along with those who have been victims of genocides since then.

Sadly, 80 years on, antisemitism is at an all-time high, as is anti-Muslim hatred. For that reason, I want to focus on the Srebrenica genocide, which took place in July 1995 during the Bosnian war. Despite the international community pledging after the Holocaust that mass atrocities would never again occur, they have remained a feature of the world since world war two, as we saw in Bosnia just 30 years ago.

While I was working as the constituency agent for the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), I studied part

time at Lincoln University for a politics degree. One of the units was on the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. When I was fortunate enough to be elected to this House, I became involved in the all-party groups for the western Balkan nations, and was then appointed the Prime Minister's trade envoy to that region. I have visited Srebrenica on two occasions, and I challenge anyone who visits a site where genocide has taken place to be anything other than moved by the experience. How can such evil be perpetrated? There seems to be no end to man's inhumanity to man.

The same emotions are stirred when visiting war graves in France, Belgium or elsewhere. In 2012, I was part of a delegation to Gaza. Things were bad there then, but they are much worse now. One of my abiding memories was of visiting the Commonwealth war graves cemetery there. It is small compared to many, but as we are reminded in November each year, the tombstones stand row on row. The local man and his son who cared for the graves—if I remember correctly, the man's name was Ibrahim—did so much, with as much care as if they were tending to their own family plots. When focusing on the evil that is perpetrated in our world, we must never lose sight of the goodness exemplified by those who, like Ibrahim, show love and care—often, as in that cemetery in Gaza, for those they never knew.

Both of my visits to Srebrenica were led by our former colleague, Colonel Bob Stewart, whose affection for the country and its people was self-evident; we were privileged to witness his interaction with local people. In 1995, there were 8,372 Bosniak Muslim men and boys murdered during the massacre of Srebrenica. Those murders were mainly committed by units of the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska in what is recognised as the worst crime on European soil since world war two. I understand that the massacre in Srebrenica, a town in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, was the first legally recognised genocide in Europe since the end of world war two.

Those events followed Bosnia declaring independence from Yugoslavia in 1992, a move that was resisted by the Bosnian Serb population, who wanted to be part of a greater Serbia. Sadly, Bosnian Serbs were prepared to achieve that goal by isolating ethnic groups—their own neighbours—and, if necessary, exterminating them. A campaign of war crimes, ethnic cleansing and genocide was committed on the non-Serb population of the former Yugoslavia, and the Bosnian war culminated in the death of around 100,000 people and the displacement of more than 2 million men, women and children.

In July 1995, Bosnian Serb troops and paramilitaries descended on the town of Srebrenica and began shelling it. When those troops took the town, they proceeded to separate Bosniak men and boys over the age of 12 from women and younger children. Over the course of several days, more than 8,000 Bosniak Muslim men and boys were murdered in and around Srebrenica, merely because of their ethnicity. Shockingly, the perpetrators were often former neighbours, classmates and teachers of those they persecuted. They murdered both young and old; I understand that the eldest was 94 years old and the youngest nearly five. They were killed in some of the most brutal and barbaric ways imaginable, and their bodies were bulldozed into mass graves in an attempt to conceal them.

The testimony of survivors is harrowing. There are reports of children being murdered by soldiers with knives, the bodies of elderly men lying on the ground with their eyes gouged out, and the mass rape of women and even children. One can find it very difficult to believe the horrors that men are capable of, and when visiting Srebrenica, one is reminded of the evil that can take place, even in mainland Europe. In fact, it is important that we note that those atrocities did not take place in some faraway land in an age long past, but right here in Europe, on our doorstep, less than three decades ago. Many of the children who witnessed these atrocities at first hand, who saw things that no children should ever see, are adults now with young children of their own—that is how recent this genocide was.

As such, the commemoration of these events should serve as a warning to us all, particularly those in government or in positions of influence, of what can happen here in Europe, which, in the main, in the post-war period, we tend to think of as civilised, safe and secure, particularly compared with many parts of this troubled—and becoming ever more troubled—world.

Holocaust Memorial Day reminds us where prejudice, fear and hatred can lead, particularly if they become normalised and encouraged. The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2025 is “For a better future.” It is only by learning from the past that we can strive for that better future.

Evil can, it seems, enter the hearts and minds of men of all races and creeds. As the Service of Compline, in the Book of Common Prayer, says, we must

“be vigilant, because our adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”

Those are stark words. Sadly, the devil can enter the hearts of people, especially when propaganda and evil leadership are involved. We must never forget the brutality of which man is capable, and it is right that we use parliamentary time to commemorate these horrific events. The atrocities now taking place across the world remind us that we must remain eternally vigilant. The UK’s voice on this matter is important and I am proud that we have contributed, over many generations, to the attempt to bring peace and stability to many troubled parts of the world.

The tragic events of the Holocaust, and of other genocides since then, such as at Srebrenica, must never be forgotten, and we must continue to speak out on this issue if we hope for our children and our grandchildren to have a better future.

2.31 pm

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their contributions. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) for the moving story about his family.

Like many other Members who have spoken today, I too have visited Yad Vashem—in July 2023. Nothing quite prepares you to stand in the Hall of Names, surrounded by the images of those who perished in the Holocaust and the Pages of Testimony that detail their lives—lives so cruelly and brutally cut short by the greatest act of mass murder in human history. To describe them simply as victims robs them once again of their humanity, dignity and individuality. As Benjamin Fondane, the French-Romanian poet who was murdered at Auschwitz just three months before its liberation, wrote:

“Remember only that I was innocent and, just like you, mortal on that day. I, too, had had a face marked by rage, by pity and joy, quite simply, a human face!”

Two days after visiting Yad Vashem, I visited Kibbutz Kfar Aza, a quiet, unassuming kibbutz close to the border with Gaza, founded on socialist principles by Mizrahi refugees from Morocco and Egypt in 1951. None of us who visited that day knew that within weeks its peace and tranquillity would be shattered, the kibbutzniks would be raped and murdered, and hostages would be taken, including our own Emily Damari, whose release alongside the two other hostages at the weekend has provided a glimmer of light in the darkness. Now we must make sure that all the hostages come home to their families.

None of us knew that day that on 7 October 2023 the Jewish people would suffer the bloodiest day in their history since the terrible events of eight decades ago, which we mark today. That modern-day pogrom was committed by Hamas, an organisation that shares the same genocidal aspirations and sadistic fervour of those who perpetrated the Holocaust.

And none of us knew that day that within hours of those terrorist attacks, Britain would see the first wave of antisemitic incidents, which last year reached their highest-ever recorded total. It is beyond shameful that, in 21st-century Britain, Jewish places of worship are defaced and graffitied, and require protection by security guards; that Jewish pupils are unable to wear their uniforms on the way to school; and that Jewish students are intimidated on our campuses. All the while, antisemites take to our streets chanting for Jihad, glorifying Hamas’s crimes, and comparing the state of Israel to those who sought to annihilate European Jewry less than a century ago.

But Britain is not unique. In Amsterdam, Israeli football fans have been hunted, attacked and abused on the eve of the anniversary of Kristallnacht. In Melbourne, a synagogue was set alight while worshippers were sat inside. And in the UAE, a young rabbi was kidnapped and murdered. Each one of these crimes reminds us that hatred against Jews and hatred against the world’s Jewish state cannot be separated. Anti-Zionist antisemitism is simply the latest iteration of history’s oldest hatred.

As the Prime Minister rightly said last week while visiting Auschwitz:

“But where is “Never again”, when we see the poison of antisemitism rising around the world in the aftermath of 7 October?”

I am proud that our Prime Minister and this Government are committed to tackling that evil. I commend the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Leadership Council, the Community Security Trust, the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and all those others who work day in, day out to fight antisemitism and to teach our children and young people of the utter horrors that can be unleashed if it goes unchallenged.

The battle against antisemitism and hatred must be fought on many fronts, and it is on all of us to join that fight. For a better future, we cannot be bystanders. I wish to close with the words of Elie Wiesel on the perils of indifference and the dangers of passivity:

“We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

2.37 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I am very grateful to the Government for making time for the House to debate the important topic of Holocaust remembrance ahead of Monday's Holocaust Memorial Day, a day of solemn remembrance and reflection. On that day, 80 years will have passed since the death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated, yet the memories remain as poignant as ever, largely due to the day that we mark every year.

Six million Jewish men, women and children were brutally murdered by the Nazis, and millions of others suffered under Nazi persecution. The Holocaust was a crime of such magnitude that a new word was coined by the Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin to describe its horrors: genocide. Today we also remember the victims of more recent genocides, including those in Bosnia, Rwanda, Cambodia and Darfur. Those atrocities are a stark reminder that hatred and intolerance, if left unchecked, can have devastating consequences, inflicting terror and eradicating entire communities. Such tragic events serve as stark reminders that we, as a global community, have not yet fully learned the lessons of the past, and the promise of "Never again" is not one that we are doing a good job of upholding.

We cannot stand by while radicalisation and hatred flame up around us, when 245,000 survivors of the Holocaust are still alive today. It has not even been a lifetime since the world promised justice at the Nuremberg trials, and promised "Never again", yet antisemitism is rising once more here in the UK and around the world. Extremist voices are fuelling division and fear, and exploiting tensions to spread further hatred, disinformation and cultural amnesia. We must remain vigilant, for one lesson of the Holocaust is that silence is never an option.

In my constituency of Chichester we are proud to have a community that is committed to remembrance and education. Over the past decade, Chichester Marks Holocaust Memorial Day has organised meaningful events, from ceremonies held in local assembly rooms to educational films and talks for our schoolchildren, ensuring that future generations understand the impact of the Holocaust and the importance of standing up against prejudice and intolerance. This year, Chichester festival theatre will host "The Last Train to Tomorrow", an opera that tells the story of the Kindertransport, a rescue effort that brought 10,000 Jewish children to safety here in the UK. Such stories remind us of our shared humanity, and the power of compassion in the face of unimaginable darkness. I praise the chair of Chichester Marks Holocaust Memorial Day, Councillor Clare Apel, whose dedication has been instrumental in making these events happen over the past decade. Her personal connection to the Holocaust, having lost 50 members of her family, serves as a poignant reminder of why we should never forget.

On Monday, a new blue plaque will be unveiled as part of the Selsey heritage trail, to commemorate the part that Selsey played in helping the Kindertransport children who came to the UK. Plans are under way to establish a permanent memorial site in Chichester to honour the victims and educate generations to come. That initiative stands as a testament to our collective commitment to ensure that "Never again" is not just a phrase but a call to action. The words "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it" are inscribed at the memorial site at Auschwitz, so today we honour the survivors, the victims and those who continue to

bear witness. It is our collective responsibility to carry forward their legacy, challenge hatred wherever we see it, and build a future based on understanding and respect for all.

2.41 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): It is impossible to do justice to the scale of the horror witnessed by those entering Auschwitz-Birkenau when it was liberated 80 years ago. They found a death camp that was specifically designed to facilitate starvation, forced labour and the most chilling methods of mechanised execution in human history. Historians estimate that 1.1 million people perished at Auschwitz in just under five years. Across the whole of Nazi-occupied Europe, 6 million Jewish people were murdered, and millions more prisoners of war, political prisoners, Poles, disabled people, members of the LGBT community, Roma and others were slaughtered.

I found the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) so moving, and I will share my own family's story. One of those we believe was lost was my great-grandfather, a Polish Jew who emigrated to the UK and changed our family's name in the face of antisemitism here. He returned to Poland just before the second world war, and my family never heard from him again. That is just one reason I am proud that my constituency contains the Kirkcaldy Polish club—branch No. 50 of the Association of Polish Combatants, set up across the UK after the second world war by heroic Poles who, together with so many others, resisted Nazi aggression.

I read a letter written by Helen Oglethorpe, a British medic who was one of the first into Bergen-Belsen when it was liberated. The letter was dated 28 May 1945. She described some of what she found:

"We left Holland on April 29th and came up to the Belsen Concentration Camp. It has been truly terrible and I never really believed what the newspapers told us but it was even worse than that. The first few weeks we spent clearing out all the SS and Hungarian troops' barracks and turning them into hospitals and cleaning out the actual Concentration Camp. There were 52,000 living and 10,000 unburied dead in an area of about 1 sq. mile. One can't imagine it unless one has seen it. A further 13,000 died on our hands in the next three or four weeks. We had medical students...working in the Concentration Camp picking out the people who might live and trying to clean up a bit."

Despite the Nazis' attempts to strip their victims of their humanity, including by assigning numbers to those held in concentration camps, these people were not numbers or statistics; they were humans loved by their families and citizens who contributed to the cultural, economic and social life of Europe. Indeed, across the great cities of Europe and beyond, each Holocaust memorial is marked by an attempt to remember these people by using their names. That is why I would like to commend the important work of the Holocaust Educational Trust. Each year, as we have heard across the House, we lose Holocaust survivors, and the trust's efforts to keep the stories of survivors and victims alive ensures that we do not forget them or, indeed, what was done to them.

The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2025 is "For a better future". In the face of mass atrocity crimes taking place across the world, the need for us in this place and, indeed, globally to work for a better future could not be clearer. We must learn the lessons of history,

especially in this era of misinformation. We know what happens when antisemitism, hatred and prejudice are allowed to flourish. We must do far more to prevent identity-based violence, genocide and mass atrocity crimes. We must honour those who perished in the Holocaust and those who survived.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Shockat Adam.

2.45 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

"Hate is the worst 4 letter word that exists", said Holocaust survivor Mathilde Middleberg.

I am deeply honoured to be called in the debate. As movingly articulated by the hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky), 80 years has passed since the liberation of Auschwitz, but it is heartbreaking to see acts of genocide, hate and evil still happening across the world and increasing threats from a new wind of far-right. The horrors of the camps must never be forgotten, and the testimonies of the survivors are still ringing in our ears and are as relevant today as they were 80 years ago, because what is 80 years in the history of the world but a blink of an eye? Yet, sadly, current events suggest that some people today need a reminder of the lessons of that horror.

For the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, the University of Leicester in my constituency published extracts from the east midlands oral history archive of an interview with Leicester nurse Erti Wilford. Erti treated the survivors of Belsen for two years after its liberation by the British Army. She spoke of approaching Bergen-Belsen and smelling the dreadful smells from as far away as five miles, saying that she had:

"Never seen so much suffering and lice and filth. At Belsen they were just bag of bones and it was just dreadful, but some of them lived, it was quite incredible".

Erti recalls the excitement of a camp doctor finally being allowed to deliver a baby and return it back to its mother rather than hand it to a guard for execution.

We must remember the names of Anne and Margot Frank, whose final resting place is Bergen-Belsen. They unfortunately died of typhus approximately a month before the liberation.

One would hope that such experiences mean that hate and genocidal and Nazi actions are a thing of the past, but sadly that is not the case. As articulated by the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), in Bosnia, the trucks arrived and they said, "Men, young and old, tall and short—get on and we will transport you to safety." Within two weeks, 8,000 Muslim men, women and children were executed.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I commend hon. Members for their contributions. Would the hon. Member join me in congratulating organisations such as Remembering Srebrenica, which has done so much to remember those Muslim boys and men killed during the Bosnian war, which is now some 30 years ago—we will be remembering that anniversary this year—and to learn lessons as well?

Shockat Adam: I welcome that intervention. All the work being done is absolutely vital.

We have seen genocide in Rwanda, where close to 1 million Tutsi were killed, and now, as we speak, in Sudan. If "never again" means anything, it means that the international community must take decisive action to pursue the perpetrators through the International Court of Justice. Instead, the far right is almost being indulged. Earlier this week, people who rioted on 6 January, who very much have far-right tendencies, were forgiven. Many of them were radicalised online.

This year's Holocaust Memorial Day theme is to take action "for a better future". That is why I am delighted to hear from the Minister that education will remain a priority. If we do not learn the lessons of history, we will live them again. Inter-faith work is absolutely vital. That is why I am proud to have been part of a team that set up an inter-faith group so that religions can talk to each other, not point fingers, and build bridges, not burn them. We must also take action against and hold social media firms and publishers to account for far-right misinformation.

I end with the words of Elie Wiesel:

"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

2.51 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is a privilege to take part in this debate and to have heard so many poignant contributions.

A number of Members have spoken about the importance of education, which increases yet further as time passes. Next week, I have the distinct privilege of attending one of the "80 Candles for 80 Years" events to mark the 80th anniversary. I was honoured that the Lotus academy trust in my South West Norfolk constituency invited me to join that service and be part of a very special nationwide arts and education project to mark the event. As a former youth worker, the importance of education and of continuing the message is pertinent to me. The unimaginable horrors and crimes of the Holocaust were a defining moment in the 20th century. Through events such as "80 Candles", we keep alive the memory of those who lost their lives under Nazi persecution.

On Monday, I will attend a Holocaust Memorial Day flag raising ceremony organised by Thetford town council in my constituency. I am pleased that for the first time ever, the council will fly the Holocaust Memorial Day flag. I pay tribute to the mayor of Thetford, Councillor Chris Harvey. It is fitting that the flag is being raised this year, during his term as mayor, to mark the 80th anniversary.

As other Members have done, I pay tribute those at the Holocaust Memorial Trust for their work. Their impact on education over two decades is testament to their dedication and commitment. I have certainly benefited from their work.

Finally, as the Minister mentioned in his opening remarks, we mark 25 years since Holocaust Memorial Day was created. The UK was one of the founding signatories to the Stockholm declaration on Holocaust remembrance in 2000—we should all be proud of that. Alongside 45 other countries, the UK Government are committed to preserving the memory of those who were murdered in the Holocaust. I know that Members on both sides of the House stand by that commitment. We should never let it falter or waver.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Cameron Thomas.

2.54 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

“We had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair... They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains.”

“He who loses all often easily loses himself.”

“My number is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die.”

Prisoner 174517 was liberated from Auschwitz concentration camp in January 1945, one of only 20 surviving members of the 650 who had arrived on his transport 11 months earlier. He was liberated strictly in a physical sense, but remained tortured by what he had experienced until his death in 1987. Before his death, Italian-Jewish liberal Primo Levi wrote extensively about his experiences. I recommend his collection of essays, “The Drowned and the Saved”, as one of the bleakest—yet most compelling—books I have ever read.

My past visits to Dachau and Sachsenhausen camps cast long shadows in my memory. We are fortunate that those relics of this horror continue to haunt their landscapes as foreboding reminders, but with the surviving voices fading year on year, we must guard against the path that led to Auschwitz. The Holocaust was unique in its industrialisation of genocide; nothing so terrible at such scale had happened before, nor since. We must not delude ourselves that it could not. As the hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) said, “never again” must mean never again, and as the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) said, genocide does not occur overnight.

The black shoots of fascism were intolerance. It was then—as it is now—spread throughout a frustrated population, appealing to their sense of national identity and stimulating a feeling of injustice. In this environment, nationalism festers and larger groups are mobilised by divisive populism that validates them as superior, but oppressed by an imagined elite and undermined by minorities. In 1920s and 1930s Germany, the Jews were both the imagined elite and the minority. Today, we see various groups demonised, including Jews, Muslims and refugees—it depends on the source.

I recommend that Members read a compilation of Nazi propaganda, “The Jewish Enemy”, by Jeffrey Herf. Those who choose to read it will observe very clearly the parallels between such propaganda then and now. It is not a coincidence; it is learned and it is finessed, with the same stereotypes, the same accusations, the same divisive rhetoric, and the same risks of following that same terrible path. We must not be fooled by those who mislead us—who minimise, normalise and amplify the actions and the rhetoric of division and fascism. Those who do must be challenged, outed and comprehensively defeated. I associate myself with the Minister’s statement that remembrance without resolve is not enough. Let us honour the memory of those who suffered the Holocaust by standing vigil to stave off its repeat.

2.58 pm

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) for his powerful and moving testimony. His grandparents would be truly proud.

As many have said, 2025 marks 80 years since the liberation of the Nazi concentration and death camps, and that awful milestone means that this is likely to be the last landmark anniversary at which a significant number of Holocaust survivors will be present. Holocaust Memorial Day encourages us to remember, yes, the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust, but also all those who were persecuted by the Nazis, including the Roma, the Sinti people, gay men, disabled people, political opponents and others. We remember, too, all those affected by subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, of which I will say more, and Darfur.

When it comes to remembering, Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and scholar who has already been quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce), put it best when he said that

“whoever listens to a witness becomes a witness, so those who hear us, those who read us must continue to bear witness for us.”

Yesterday in Portcullis House, thanks to Mr Speaker, many of us did indeed bear witness as we heard the extremely moving testimony of two Holocaust survivors, Yisrael Abelesz and Alfred Garwood. We all know many old soldiers who, quite understandably, never recount the trauma they suffered in the war, often because they have blanked it out and moved on. However, many of those who were not soldiers but survivors of genocide have shown an extraordinary strength and perseverance to keep telling their story, however painful, through a need to keep their memories alive, and they do so again and again. Their testimonies are so direct and so powerful that when we hear them, we become part of that remembering process.

Yisrael Abelesz, now aged 96, was just 14 when he and his family were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where his parents David and Haya and younger brother Aaron, aged just 11 years old, were sent to the gas chambers on arrival. That sense of the history books becoming all too chillingly real jumped out at us yesterday when Yisrael said he was greeted on arrival at the camp by the infamous Angel of Death, Josef Mengele. He said:

“Mengele asked me, ‘How old are you?’ I understood a bit of German, and said, ‘I’m 14, it’s just my birthday’. And he replied, ‘That’s very good, very good’, and sent me to the right side.”

As Yisrael said:

“I didn’t know it at that time, but what he meant was, ‘Very good, you can stay temporarily alive’.”

Alfred’s story, too, should show us all that, while hate is immensely destructive, there is strength in community. He told us how he was a blonde babe in arms carried by his father—a father who saved the life of another inmate in Bergen-Belsen by giving them bread across the barbed wire. It was so moving to hear him recall that, after the war, his father met that same fellow camp mate in the east end of London. It was moving, too, to hear how Alfred became a doctor and a psychiatrist to help other trauma victims, and how he said that hatred, even hatred of those who committed the genocide, was a corrosive force.

That desire to rid ourselves of hatred was echoed by Muhammad, one of the pupils at Falinge Park high school in my constituency of Rochdale, who wrote this in a poem about the Holocaust:

“Revenge is never sweet...

It is a monster willing to prevail”.

Falinge Park high school is a multicultural school that has legacy beacon status as one of the schools under the umbrella of the University College London Centre for Holocaust Education. Two years ago, it hosted Holocaust survivor Ike Alterman to deliver his testimony. Yesterday, those from the school again attended the Greater Manchester Holocaust commemoration, hosted by Andy Burnham.

I am delighted that the Prime Minister has said that it will be a national ambition that every schoolchild should hear the recorded testimony of a Holocaust survivor, and the Chancellor announced a further £2 million for Holocaust education in the Budget. As the Minister said, the Holocaust Educational Trust’s innovative free digital education programme Testimony 360 will allow students to have a virtual reality conversation with a Holocaust survivor long after the survivors themselves are no longer with us.

The prioritisation of Holocaust education in our schools has been praised across this House today, and rightly so, but the prevention of Holocaust denial cannot be left just to passing laws or to education. It must be a cultural or grassroots change that exists alongside formal education. Education does not begin and end in our schools. Some children will go back from a lesson to a home where parents and older siblings fill their heads with misinformation and unchecked sources from social media. Sadly, there is now a depressingly familiar routine of a sharp spike in attacks on synagogues or on mosques whenever news breaks about an atrocity—an atrocity that has no personal connection to the people worshipping inside those buildings. There is a well of simmering loathing that lurks unseen and is topped up by casual racism that formal education alone cannot fix.

As the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) powerfully reminded us, 2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the genocide in Bosnia and the massacre at Srebrenica. The tragedy is that the story of what happened in Srebrenica 30 years ago is not being told in Srebrenica itself. The enclave went into Serbia as part of the peace deal, where denying the massacre is now official policy in and out of schools. The issue was raised by Baroness Helic in the other place, who is a fierce advocate for justice on the massacre. A Srebrenica Memorial Centre report last year identified prominent public figures involved in denial of the holocaust, including Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik, and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, among others.

Last year my former newspaper, the *i*, reported election posters in windows in Republika Srpska with the slogan “Genocide Didn’t Happen”. One billboard praised convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić, the Bosnian-Serb military chief known as the Butcher of Bosnia. His crimes included the massacre of 8,000 Bosniak Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica in July 1995. The bloodbath was the worst episode of mass murder in Europe since the second world war. I am proud to say that my wife was among the Channel 4 news team who exposed those horrific war crimes.

Genocides do not come out of the blue. They depend on what Professor David Feldman has described as the reservoir of hate. He pointed out that the danger in the case of antisemitism is not just the virus of antisemitism that captures the minority of antisemites; the wider danger is

“a widely diffused reservoir of stereotypes and narratives about Jews. This reservoir has accumulated over centuries and has become a part of our common culture.”

That applies to Islamophobia, just as it does to antisemitism. When weaponised by extremists, the legitimate and proud celebration of one community’s identity curdles into the denigration of another’s. History is used and warped; territory and belonging are weaponised into separation and segregation. Dates are cited as battle cries, and the cycle perpetuates.

Anger is a legitimate emotional response to atrocities, but hatred is not. Peace is hard, compromise is painful; violence, and the prejudice it relies on, are easier. But everyday racism can be countered only by everyday engagement, and disinformation by information. The Holocaust was the industrialisation of murder, but the difference was only one of scale from the many pogroms that Jewish communities have had to suffer over the centuries.

In Soho this month, the National Holocaust Centre and Museum has devised a new touring exhibition called “The Vicious Circle”. It links five Jewish communities decimated by violence. Objects are on display to represent co-existence and integration into the host country before five particular pogroms: Berlin in 1938, Baghdad in 1941, Kielce in Poland in 1946, Aden in Yemen in 1947, and of course Kibbutz Kissufim on 7 October 2023. That is history, this is the present. The well, the reservoir, is there and it needs to be drained.

I end, like many others, with another quote from Elie Wiesel:

“Much depends on us, on our sense of justice and integrity, on our dedication to truth, on our willingness to share our innermost memories. And we survivors have promised that we shall try.”

As the number of survivors dwindles, it is on us. It is our duty in this place to follow their heroic example and honour their memory every day.

3.8 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is not often in this House that everyone from every party speaks with one voice, and it is not often that we stand here and do not have political arguments, and that we all listen, nod and agree with all the speakers we are hearing. The Minister who introduced the debate did an excellent job laying out some of the cold, hard facts, and making clear exactly why we have Holocaust Memorial Day. The hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) brought humanity into that with his own family’s story, and we have heard from Members across the House about their personal views, the views of Holocaust survivors and the reading they have done, and about genocides and massacres that have taken place not just in the wake of the second world war but more recently.

It is important that we remember all that. It is important that we use the privileged position that we have here, and the platform we have in this House. We are incredibly lucky that we can stand here and amplify the voices of our constituents. Right now, we have more of a responsibility to do that than ever.

[Kirsty Blackman]

We are seeing the rise of antisemitism. In the wake of what happened on 7 October, we are seeing that on our streets. The Antisemitism Policy Trust has published two reports about the rise of antisemitism online and the inability of AI systems on some websites to find antisemitic posts. I urge the Government to look at those reports, particularly when it comes to the rise of issues on X.

We are seeing the rise of Islamophobia. I am seeing constituents who are refugees and asylum seekers facing discrimination and prejudice that I had not seen in the 20 years I have been supporting and dealing with the public. It is new. It feels like we have tipped into a different world. We are seeing a rise in anti-trans, anti-gay and anti-lesbian hate on our streets as well.

Now is the point when we all have to take action. We all have to recognise that whatever we have been doing to try to tackle this—whatever voices we have used and whatever moments we have taken—we have not done enough. We are not there yet. We have not managed to tackle this. Whether as a group of 650 individuals with a platform we are capable of sorting it out does not matter; what matters is that we try every single day to make that difference.

The hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) and a number of hon. Members have said that a holocaust does not happen overnight. We do not go from having a happy community to mass murder in a couple of days. We go through stages, with a rise in hatred and the dehumanisation and othering of people. We go through a situation—like there was in Germany after the first world war—where the population feels hard done by, their lives are not as good as they could be and they want someone to blame. They have politicians, the media and people standing up and saying, “There are people you can blame for this.” In that case, the population were being told, “The Jews are the people to blame. The Jewish people are less human than you are, and they are to blame for your life being a struggle and for you finding things difficult right now.”

We know that that divisive rhetoric is being used around the world right now. It is being used here. I am sure that all hon. Members have seen a rise in the number of emails to them saying, “I cannot afford to pay my energy bill, and that is because of the number of illegals in this country.” We all need to stand up against that.

It is not just about countering the explicit hate that people come up with and the obvious racism and antisemitism that people send us in emails; it is about countering the people who will say, “Yes, but you have to allow us our free speech. You have to allow us the freedom to say things that dehumanise others.” We must counter that chipping away at the hard-won rights of minority groups. We need to stand there and say not just, “You’re wrong,” to people behaving in a racist way and using racist rhetoric, but, “No. We will not reduce the rights that trans people have. We will not reduce the rights that gay people have. We will not reduce the rights that Jewish people, Muslims and people of all faiths should have to practise their faith.” We should make a stand for equality and the rights that people have as well as against the hatred.

Reduction in those rights is how we got to the far end of the road in Auschwitz. The beginning of the road is reducing rights, taking up a Sharpie and writing that trans people are no longer to be recognised, and saying that people who riot against democracy are fine, cool and should carry on. Many of us are using our platform to say these things, but we are not winning. We need to tackle disinformation and misinformation, online and in person, and the diminution of rights that people have fought for.

This is an incredibly poignant debate. I am proud of all the MPs who have stood up and argued against dehumanisation, and have related their experiences and those of constituents and survivors. We need to do that, and not just on Holocaust Memorial Day. Every one of us needs to work for a better future every single day. There are so many good people out there who care a huge amount about this. We need to mobilise them and take them with us, ensuring that we amplify their voices as they speak in favour of the better future that we all want.

3.15 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): May I say how moved I have been by all the speeches that I have heard this afternoon?

On Monday I will stand in Abbey Gardens in Bury St Edmunds, at a steel teardrop erected as a memorial not only to the 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, but to the 57 Jews slaughtered by their neighbours in Bury St Edmunds in March 1190. I will also the honour the memory of the liberation of Auschwitz precisely 80 years ago.

In East Anglia, Bury St Edmunds, Norwich and King’s Lynn were important centres of medieval Jewish life. However, East Anglia also has a sad role in the history of European antisemitism. It was here that the myth of the Jewish blood libel first emerged when, in 1144, the Jews of Norwich were falsely accused of the ritual murder of a boy named William. That myth persisted for centuries, played its part in the growth of antisemitism in the 20th century, and lives on to this very day. The blood libel stoked hatred in Bury St Edmunds, culminating in that vicious massacre in 1190. In the aftermath, the town expelled all the surviving Jews. Exactly 100 years later, in 1290, King Edward expelled all the Jews from England.

I stand here not only as the first Labour MP for Bury St Edmunds, but as its first Jewish MP. I am a Jew who represents a town that, almost 1,000 years ago, was the first in the country to expel the Jews. History has come full circle. However, sadly, antisemitism is on the rise again in this country. The number of antisemitic hate crimes has reached record levels—more than double the number in previous years. The Community Security Trust reports that damage and desecration of Jewish property rose by 246% on the previous year, which is deeply concerning.

The CST does crucial work to protect Jewish communities across the country, enabled by the support of His Majesty’s Government, for which we are all deeply grateful. Similarly, Holocaust education, promoted through the work of the Holocaust Education Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, is of great significance in this country. This generation is privileged

to know the last few living witnesses of the Holocaust. We must make sure that their stories do not fade into obscurity, but survive in the collective memory of humanity.

I finish with a few lines by the medieval poet Meir of Norwich, written as he fled England in 1190—the earliest Hebrew poetry ever written in this country:

“When I hoped for good, evil arrived, yet I will wait for the light. You are mighty and full of light, You turn the darkness into light.”

3.19 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): *Diolch, Dirprwy Lefarydd.* It is a privilege to be here, hearing words of kindness and joining with others against hate on the day when we remember one of our worst times in history. This year marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the 30th anniversary of the genocide in Bosnia. As we look back and reflect on those horrors, we remember the stories of those who fell victim to unspeakable crimes, and take lessons from history. The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “For a better future”; as we consider what it means to build a better future, we must all look at what can be done to create a future that is no longer blighted by prejudice.

Recent figures show that there is much work to be done to fulfil that promise. Eighty years on from the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, religious hate crimes in England and Wales are at a record high. Home Office statistics show a 25% increase in religious hate crimes in the year to March 2024. In October, the monitoring group Tell MAMA UK said it had recorded 4,971 incidents of anti-Muslim hate between October ’23 and September ’24—the highest annual total in the past 14 years—while the Community Security Trust recorded 1,978 reports of anti-Jewish hate incidents from January to June 2024, up from 964 in the first half of 2023. The rise in these appalling hate crimes is a cause of deep concern, and all those who have been the victim of these crimes deserve our friendship and solidarity.

Among those murdered in the Holocaust was Helene Melanie Lebel. Born to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother in Vienna and known affectionately as Helly, she loved to swim and go to the opera. After finishing her secondary education, she entered law school. At 19, she began showing signs of a mental health condition and was forced to give up her law studies and work, and was later diagnosed as schizophrenic. A year later, she became one of the thousands of mentally and physically disabled people murdered in the Brandenburg killing centre.

After the second world war, many ordinary Germans and Europeans claimed that they were not involved in the events of the Holocaust—that they were bystanders. Their indifference teaches us that passively remembering the Holocaust is not enough. We must continue to learn from and listen to the stories of the victims and the survivors—the Jewish, the disabled, and the gay men and women whose lives were ended because the Nazis decided that they did not deserve to exist.

As we look to the future, it is incumbent on all of us parliamentarians to speak out against genocide denial and distortion. We must forcefully speak out against prejudice and hate wherever it is found, whether here in Parliament or in our communities. Holocaust Memorial Day is a reminder to all of us that the fight against

prejudice and intolerance must never cease. Only by continuing this fight, in memory of Helly and the millions who died as she did, can we secure a better future.

3.23 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I commend the Minister for the way he introduced the debate—the tone and pitch of his speech—and the whole Chamber for how it has come together on such an important subject. It is a lesson we must all learn and remember for a better future.

Last Monday, I had the privilege of listening to Eva Clarke, a survivor. Eighty years on, she still broke down many times while she relived the horrors of losing family and loved ones. I also had the privilege of listening to Smajo Bešo, a survivor from Srebrenica who came to the north-east as a young lad 30 years ago. He told his story—how, having lost his family, he came to this wonderful country, which gives us all hope; how he went to school and hated it, because he could not understand a word and wanted to be with his family; how he was living a life of terror and horror, having lost everyone; how he was in a strange place; how he was put in a different room from the others to learn English, but was made to feel welcome; how, while he was learning English, his classmates were learning his language, to make him feel at home. That is the wonderful country we live in. We will support all communities when they are in need.

Eighty years ago, Europe experienced one of the greatest tragedies in human history: the systematic murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children. As the years progress, we are losing survivors, and the horrors of the Holocaust are passing out of living memory. It is incumbent on each one of us to ensure that their stories are not lost, and that the barbaric treatment so many endured is never forgotten.

Redbridge is the place I call home. It is where I have lived for half a century. Historically, it was home to a thriving Jewish community. Families found a safe and welcoming home in Ilford. Our area was immeasurably enriched by our Jewish neighbours. The beauty of Ilford is not just our diversity, but the respect and love that those in our diverse community show one another; we celebrate one another’s holidays and share each other’s greatest sorrows.

Next Monday, I will be in Valentines Park to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day, as I have been for the last 16 years. All our communities come together—people of all faiths and none—to remember the Holocaust and honour all those so cruelly taken, and the lives irrevocably lost or changed forever. Nazi ideology preached hatred and division. By repudiating antisemitism and standing against hate, we make it clear every single day how much the Nazis’ hateful ideology failed, and always will. The crimes of the Holocaust cast a shadow across the world. Families were destroyed and communities shattered. We still live with the consequences today. Whole families were erased, lineages wiped out, and generational trauma passed on.

Preserving the memory of the Holocaust is our sacred duty to all those who lost their life, and whose future was stolen. Memory does not only work backwards; it has the power to shape our present and our future. The words we say about the Holocaust in this place must translate into action. Every day, we must continue to

[*Jas Athwal*]

work together to fight antisemitism, xenophobia and hate speech across our wonderful country. While we take the time today to reflect on the horrors of the Holocaust, we must also reflect on the people we want to be, and the society we want to live in.

We each have the power to speak up and challenge racism, antisemitism and hate speech, and every time we do, the world gets a little better. We must ensure that atrocities like the Holocaust never happen again, but we must also work to protect and advocate for those who are still suffering from the xenophobia, racism and violence that led to the Holocaust not so long ago. On Holocaust Memorial Day, it is incumbent on us to learn the lessons from the past, to create a safer and better future for all.

3.30 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this incredibly important debate. When I was a little girl, I spent quite a lot of time in hospital, and during one stay I became friends with Paula, the girl in the next bed. Paula and her family had been in a terrible car crash, and her mum had her arm in a sling. One day she was rubbing her arm, and I noticed that on her skin there were several small black numbers. "What are those?" I asked. She explained that as a child she had been in a place called Auschwitz, and the numbers were there so that her mum and dad could find her if they ever became separated. It was a few years later, when I was learning about the Holocaust at school, that I finally understood what those numbers were and what they meant.

Monday will be the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and it was incredibly humbling to hear the testimony of Holocaust survivor Yisrael Abelesz, now 94 years old, at the Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony yesterday. Hearing the accounts of survivors, including Alfred Garwood, who was a baby in Bergen-Belsen, is crucial to ensure that we learn the lessons of history. I would like to thank the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for everything it does to educate, to speak out against Holocaust denial and distortion, and to challenge prejudice. We should all take inspiration from the survivors of the Holocaust who have bravely shared their stories in the hope that genocide and violations inflicted on defenceless people across the world will never happen again.

I also pay tribute to those who liberated the camps and all those from Eastleigh who have served, including in the Balkans. I was at school with several children from the former Yugoslavia, and I often wonder what became of them. This year we also mark the 30th anniversary of the Bosnian genocide, including the Srebrenica massacre, where 8,372 Muslims were killed. It is difficult to understand what drives a human being to murder another, but for all the victims and survivors of genocide, it is vital that we continue to learn about man's inhumanity to man and where hatred and othering can lead.

As we reflect on these atrocities, I am deeply proud of my constituency's long-standing history of providing refuge to those escaping persecution and conflict. During the Spanish civil war, nearly 4,000 Basque children were sheltered in North Stoneham. In the aftermath of the second world war, resettlement camps were built in

Velmore and Hiltingbury to house Polish families, and in 2021 Eastleigh became one of the first authorities in England to house Afghan refugees fleeing the Taliban. These acts of compassion and solidarity remind us that, even in the darkest of times, humanity can prevail.

On Holocaust Memorial Day we honour the memory of those who were murdered in the Holocaust, and in subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. We have a responsibility to learn from the past, to speak out and never to forget. Today we pay tribute to all those who died and all those who survived.

3.33 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): On Monday it will be 80 years since the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. I find this debate quite difficult, so please bear with me. I went with my own family, my father and my two sons, to Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer of 2023. I know that many Members here have been to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and although it is a difficult place to visit, those who have not definitely should. I thank the Prime Minister for his recent visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

When you are there, you can imagine the industrial scale of murder that happened there. You see many skulls, shoes and clothes. You see the cabins where people had to live. You go through the killing stations where the Nazis murdered millions of people: Jews, the LGBT community, the Gypsy Roma community, trade unionists and others they decided had to be removed in their genocide—in our Holocaust. That really commits you to wanting to see the future education of generations on this subject.

I have also been to the POLIN museum in Warsaw, which documents the history of Jews in Poland. It has a significant section on antisemitism in that country, which I will come to later in my speech. When you visit such places, you can better understand the rise of antisemitism and how things could get to that point.

This year the theme of Holocaust Memorial Day is "For a better future", which is uplifting. My own grandparents returned to Poland and Lithuania after the Holocaust. Following the Yalta agreement, they were very different countries from what they were before the war. My grandparents hoped to rebuild their lives, as did the few members of my family who survived the camps and ghettos, but it was still very difficult after the war.

When I visited Warsaw with my father, he took me to the tower blocks where he grew up and told me stories of how, as a child, he received antisemitic abuse and bullying from Polish children after the war—this was after everybody knew about the Holocaust and the camps. Unfortunately, that was the reality for Jewish people. The state authorities had antisemitic attitudes too, which in the end resulted in the mass emigration of 13,000 Jews—almost the entire remaining Jewish population of Poland—in 1968. That was just 23 years after the war, which was very much in recent memory for those people. All of this made attempts to rebuild lives in eastern Europe very difficult, not just in Poland but in other countries. My own parents emigrated from eastern Europe in the '50s and '60s, and in the end arrived in Leeds in the 1970s. Similarly, thousands of Jews came out of communist and post-communist countries, found homes and contributed economically, socially and culturally to their new countries.

I want to tell a story about two of my former constituents—they are no longer with us—who were very close family friends. When I was growing up, I spent a lot of my time in their house, and they certainly contributed a lot to my own Holocaust education. Yanina Bauman was a Holocaust survivor, having escaped the Warsaw ghetto with her sister and mother. Like other Jews, they were hidden by amazing Polish families in the countryside. Yanina and her husband, Professor Zygmunt Bauman, came to Leeds in the 1970s, and he worked as a professor of sociology. He was one of the most decorated sociology professors in the world, and his books are world class and outstanding. His literature discussed the theoretical effect of the “Holocaust mentality”, and he came up with the theory of “liquid life” as part of post-modernity. I do not want to get into a sociology lecture, because the Chamber is not the place for that, but people who are interested in those subjects should certainly look up his work.

Yanina, who survived the ghetto, wrote two books about her own life and history; one was about her life in Poland before the war, and one was about her experience during and immediately after the war. Those books are recognised as part of a very important canon of literature on the Holocaust. I am really proud that Yanina and Zygmunt both lived.

Dawn Butler: I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful speech, which shows just how important it is that living memory is passed on and why we should continue to have this debate in Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Take your time, Mr Sobel.

Alex Sobel: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Professor Zygmunt Bauman died in January 2017. He was a great supporter of mine and always had placards outside his house when I stood for election, but unfortunately he never got to see me elected to this place. I want to record my thanks to the Baumans.

This debate is about a better future for people from conflict and post-conflict zones, and for those who have suffered genocide. All the subsequent genocides recognised by the United Kingdom happened in my lifetime, including Cambodia, Rwanda and the regime of Slobodan Milošević and the Serbs. Since I became a Member of Parliament, we have had the atrocious murder of the Yazidis by Daesh and, looking at Syria now, I am afraid that genocide is probably not yet concluded. We need to act on that today so that they can have a better future for tomorrow.

I have met victims of Slobodan Milošević’s regime in the Balkans—people exactly the same age as me, with similar backgrounds and experiences, who witnessed and experienced the most awful and traumatic events. I have seen some of the exhibits from the Milošević regime’s genocidal actions, and many of them reminded me of what I saw in Auschwitz-Birkenau, including single shoes and items of clothing belonging to children who were disappeared and whose fate is unknown—they never found the bodies. Obviously, the genocide in the Balkans was different from the Holocaust, but we recognise it as genocide nevertheless. After the conflict, people in those countries are still suffering, and they still do not have stable countries. Bosnia is still experiencing tensions.

The Minister for Housing and Planning, who is no longer in his place, made an excellent contribution on issues in the Balkans, and I hope we can have a further debate with the Minister for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), on the contemporary situation in the Balkans, and particularly Republika Srpska.

I am planning to visit the Balkans again this year, and we all have that duty because the Balkans are very near, and those events happened in the political lifetime of some of those in charge of Serbia—some of them, including the President of Serbia, were involved in the regime of Slobodan Milošević. The events are still very close. For the better future of people in the Balkans, these issues are not yet resolved. We need to work on them in this place, not in an historical or educational way but in a very real and political way.

It is our duty as a country to support a better future for everyone who has suffered in conflict and post-conflict zones.

3.43 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is an honour to speak in this debate. I pay tribute to all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed today, with powerful, moving and, in many instances, personal accounts.

In the UK on Holocaust Memorial Day we remember the 6 million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, alongside the millions of people murdered under the Nazis’ persecution of other groups. We also remember the more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, as well as others who have suffered atrocities since world war two.

Yesterday, I had the privilege of attending the Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony in Portcullis House and I heard the moving testimonies of Holocaust survivors Yisrael Abelesz and Alfred Garwood. I will not be the only person in this House who was deeply moved by their testimonies and, among those who listened to Radio 4 earlier in the week, by the interview of 92-year-old Holocaust survivor Ivor Perl, who was just 12 years old when forced into a cattle truck to Auschwitz, where he lost most of his family. What struck me about Ivor was how, despite everything he had seen and endured, he retained his capacity for love and his belief in the power of love. However, I was also struck by his sense of pessimism about the future and his feeling that the world today increasingly resembles the world of the 1930s. I am sad to say that I share that concern.

We have seen a growth across Europe of a politics that unashamedly demonises minority communities and presents them as aliens in our midst, to such a degree that people become inured to their plight or ill treatment. The Holocaust shows us where that toxic combination can lead. The Nazis’ attempt to rid Europe from what they saw as an alien presence in their midst did not happen overnight. They first had to dehumanise the Jews, depict them as an alien culture, subject them to antisemitic conspiracy theories that they were part of a global conspiracy to manipulate global events, and strip them of their citizenship rights.

In his recent film “Occupied City”, the director Steve McQueen shows how that unfolded in one city, Amsterdam, where the bulk of the Dutch Jewish population lived. His film chronicles the measures the Nazis took.

[*Iqbal Mohamed*]

They sacked all Jews from public sector jobs, banned them from all public places, closed down all Jewish schools, forced Jews to wear a special badge to demarcate them from everybody else, prevented them from marrying non-Jews, subjected them to daily humiliation and physical abuse and ultimately rounded up every Jew they could find and deported them to death camps.

The film chronicles the most tremendous heroism of ordinary Dutch people to resist those measures and show solidarity with their Jewish neighbours. However, it also shows that antisemitism had taken seed in Dutch society, where years of antisemitic propaganda had rotted the foundations of that society and many ordinary people collaborated in the persecution of the Jews and betrayed their neighbours. A Jewish community that numbered around 80,000 at the start of the Nazi occupation was reduced to 16,000 by the end of it. That picture was repeated in city after city across Europe. But those words do nothing to capture the sheer terror and horror of what the experience must have been like for the many millions of people unfortunate enough to have experienced it. The generational trauma that it has left in its wake resonates with every Jewish family to this day.

The Holocaust embodies the reality of fascism in power. Unfortunately, the ideas at the core of fascist ideology—racist narratives, wrapped up in ethno-nationalist fantasies—are on the rise. In Germany at present, we see the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland*, a party with neo-Nazis in its ranks, on track to be comfortably the second largest party in the German Parliament. In Austria, the far-right *Freedom party* recently won a third of the popular vote with an election pledge to remigrate citizens with migrant heritage.

A similar dynamic is well under way in France, Italy and other countries where the far right has significant electoral footholds. These are not fascist parties of the classic type, but they are walking on that ground. When Members—I am sorry to say—of this House demonise and talk about deporting immigrants, and the President of the United States commits to deporting millions of immigrant families, with the richest man in the world cheering him on while giving fascist salutes, it should send shivers down everyone's spines. There is more than a whiff of the 1930s in the air.

Holocaust Memorial Day also pays tribute to the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur and Bosnia. We have already heard from the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) and others about the genocide in Bosnia that resulted in the deaths of 100,000 men, women and children, with 8,000 murdered in the Srebrenica massacre.

I wish to mention the other genocides that are commemorated on Holocaust Memorial Day. In the genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s, the Khmer Rouge sought to create a communist utopia, forcing urban populations into rural camps. Intellectuals, professionals, religious leaders and ethnic minorities were targeted. Approximately 1.7 million to 2 million people—about 25% of Cambodia's population—were killed through executions, starvations and forced labour.

In Rwanda in the '90s, over the span of 100 days, an estimated 800,000 to 1 million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred. The genocide was fuelled by deep ethnic tensions, propaganda and political instability.

In Darfur, where the atrocities continue, Government-backed militias have carried out mass killings, rapes and displacement in response to an uprising by rebel groups. The conflict is characterised by ethnic cleansing, with hundreds of thousands of people killed and millions displaced. Unfortunately, violence and instability continue in the region. There are more recent examples, such as Myanmar.

As we remember on this 80th anniversary all those affected by the Holocaust, the Bosniaks killed in Srebrenica 30 years ago and the victims of the genocide that I have just mentioned, we should also remember all those who, in their day-to-day lives, have suffered atrocities in approximately 285 distinct armed conflicts since the end of the second world war. Let recommit to never allowing the politics of hatred, racism and demonisation, which contributed to the awful reality of fascism, to take hold in our society ever again.

In his interview, Ivor Perl said that

“the world has not learned anything, it gets repeated all over again”.

He is right. We have heard from Members across the House that we have failed to fulfil the promise of “never again” in these 80 years—never again for every single human being who walks this planet. However, there is nothing stopping us from fulfilling it from now for all people of all nations, all abilities, all faiths and none, and setting an example for the people of our country and the wider world to follow.

3.53 pm

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): May I start by saying what a privilege it is to follow the incredible speeches that we have heard across the House today? It has been especially powerful hearing the testimonies of people descended from the families of Holocaust survivors. I wish to pay tribute to several Members before I begin the substance of my speech today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) has been referred to countless times, and rightly so. His family history is a powerful reminder. I am certain that his family will be proud of him, because he has come to this place and shared his story from the Government Benches. I am incredibly grateful for that. In exactly the same vein, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) gave a powerful account. He and I have known each other for many years, before either of us made it to this House—he got here in 2017, so he is a veteran by most standards; I have been here for six months—but I have never heard him speak in that way about his family history. It was a privilege to be here as he did so, and I thank him for it.

We have heard other great speeches too. I give special thanks to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who set out in great detail the opportunities that were missed to potentially prevent the Holocaust, or at least mitigate some of its impacts. Despite studying history, I have often wondered what could have been done to prevent this catastrophe from taking place. I really appreciate his insight into what the allies could have done sooner to prevent it from happening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) made an excellent short contribution. I am so proud that he is the first Labour MP to represent that constituency in this House.

He has made many good contributions—I found listening to him in today's debate particularly powerful, as I have in other debates.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) talked about the ceremony that we attended yesterday in Portcullis House. It was especially powerful to hear from Yisrael and Alfred, two Holocaust survivors, because, as the hon. Member and many others have stated, the window to speak to survivors and hear their first-hand testimony is shrinking. I am especially grateful to Mr Speaker and his office for arranging that event.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce) set out exactly why we need to be vigilant to the terror and the spectre of antisemitism that haunts Britain's streets today. He spoke far more powerfully and summed up the issues much more succinctly than I could, but we know that Jewish people are less safe on Britain's streets today than they were before 7 October. That cannot be right, and I thank him for highlighting it. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh), whose speech was incredibly powerful. I always enjoy listening to his testimony, especially since he is a former newspaper columnist. That certainly came through in his contribution.

Monday 27 January will mark a sombre day of reflection and remembrance. Eighty years after the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, this year's Holocaust Memorial Day is an important anniversary that we must all observe. In November, I had the privilege of joining the European Jewish Association's delegation to Auschwitz and Krakow. In Krakow, we talked about the spectre of antisemitism and what needs to be done to prevent it, and to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again. I talked about my experience as a maths teacher in a secondary school before I made it to this place, and the role that I thought Holocaust education had to play in preventing such tragedies in the future.

The most important part of the visit, however, was our visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau. We laid wreaths and paid tribute to the millions of victims of the Holocaust. To stand in that place, where human beings committed the most evil acts imaginable, was a harrowing experience. I cannot share all the details today, but something struck me while I was there. I was standing in the field just past the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and I was stunned by the scale and size of the camp. I never imagined it being as large as it was—murder on an industrial scale. Most of the accommodation—I use that word knowing it does no justice to the terrible conditions that people were kept in—that was built for the camp's inhabitants was made of wood, so it has long since perished. However, the chimneys of the accommodation were built from bricks, and they still stand. I was taken aback by an enormous field of chimneys stretching as far as I could see—the worst of humanity on display for all. But it is so important that the camp stands as a lesson and stands in history forever so that all of us can learn about the horrors of the Holocaust. It will stay with me forever. While liberation brought an end to the horrors of Nazi extermination and torture, it came too late for 6 million Jewish people and all the other victims of the Holocaust. We owe it to all of them to ensure that “never again” means never again.

Some of the people who survived Auschwitz and the Holocaust have shared their stories with us, and I referred to some of them earlier. Powerful lessons can always be learned from those testimonies. I would like

to pay tribute to one of those survivors today. Iby Knill was a Leeds resident for most of her life following world war two. However, in her youth, Iby fled to Hungary to escape Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, but sadly she was still captured and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to read a little of Iby's testimony. Please understand that any references to “you” are just taken from her testimony. This is what she wrote about arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau:

“When we arrived, men in striped pyjamas opened the doors and told us to leave the sick, the old and the children. Men and women were separated. I and four other women—two of them doctors—linked arms and moved past”

the doctor.

“We had arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau. We were told to strip, had the hair shaved off all over our bodies and were then pushed into showers. Normal practise included, at this stage, the registration and tattooing of each persons' identity number on their left arm, but there were so many of us that the ink run out and I was not tattooed. We were given some clothes and taken into the camp. Two hundred and fifty women went into each hut.”

The people

“(in charge of my hut) were Czech; I could speak to them and got a slightly larger ration of watery soup and also a slightly larger piece of blanket. There was so little room we had to sleep squashed up like spoons. Every morning, midday and evening...everyone was counted, this could take three or four hours. You had to strip and hold your clothes above your head. If you swayed or stumbled you were taken away and never seen again. We were taken to be showered once a week. If anyone was taken ill they were taken to the hospital hut and usually then to the gas chambers. Worse than hunger was the thirst. It was summer and there was no water at all... On 26th July”

the doctor

“asked for volunteers. I, with the two doctors and the two nurses who had come together to Auschwitz had realized that if we stayed there we would eventually die. We therefore volunteered and went with a slave labour transport of five hundred and thirty Hungarian women to”

Germany.

“We spent overnight in another hutment, where a twin I knew from Szekesfehervar asked me to tell the world what I had seen because twins were being experimented on by

a doctor

“and they did not believe that they would survive. We left on 27th July.”

Iby's testimony is incredibly powerful. She knew that if she stayed in that camp she would die, so she took the opportunity to go to Germany—an opportunity that few had—until she was liberated while on a death march on Easter Sunday 1945. She married, came to England and lived in Leeds. She was later supported by the Holocaust Survivors' Friendship Association based in Leeds. The association now runs the Holocaust Centre North, a museum in Huddersfield devoted to telling a global history of the Holocaust through the local stories of survivors and refugees like Iby.

Iby spent the remainder of her later life telling the story that I have just shared with the House. She wanted to educate future generations about the horrors of the Holocaust. I pay tribute to her and all the survivors. They have given their accounts so that we can learn the lessons and ensure that it never happens again.

Members have spoken about the theme of this Holocaust Memorial Day, which is about taking action for a better future. Given the rise of antisemitism in the UK and

[Mark Sowards]

across Europe, we must prioritise action to stop that evil. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak set that out in clear terms. I welcome the Government's allocation of £54 million for the Community Security Trust to continue its vital work to protect the Jewish community. I also welcome the fact that the Prime Minister took the opportunity at Prime Minister's questions a few weeks ago to reiterate his commitment to that funding.

Education is key. As a former teacher, I know the power that education has to inspire understanding. The Holocaust must never become a footnote in history, especially as we approach the era that I spoke about, when we will no longer be able to hear survivors provide their testimony in person. I put on record my gratitude to the Holocaust Educational Trust, which does an incredible amount to educate teachers and provide high-quality material to schools. I am also pleased that the Government have maintained the cross-party consensus on properly supporting and funding Holocaust education. We have pledged an additional £2 million to support the crucial work of the Holocaust Educational Trust. We are also committed to building a new Holocaust memorial and learning centre. I welcome the fact that Holocaust education will remain mandatory in the national curriculum.

On that point, let me speak about the trials going ahead to see how we can further expand Holocaust education in schools. We need to ensure not just that it is embedded in the curriculum, but that it stays with our young people beyond school. While I was in Poland for my visit, I spoke with a journalist—a young man from Gildersome in my constituency—who was asking me about the post office that was under threat. I told him where I was, and he said, “Oh yes, the Holocaust. We had a few lessons on that in school, but not much more.” That struck me, because if he is saying that—someone who is switched on, interested in politics and becoming a journalist—there are bound to be other students who are left behind. That is why it is so important that the trials going on at the moment are used, and, if successful, rolled out to the wider national curriculum. We all must continue to learn the lessons from humanity's darkest time.

Before I conclude my remarks, I pay tribute to the Jewish community in Leeds for the events that they always organise across Leeds for Holocaust Memorial Day. This Sunday will see the civic remembrance event at City Varieties, which I have attended before. It will remember those murdered in the Holocaust, as well as in subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. I was very pleased to hear those genocides mentioned by Members across different parties. There will be readings and candles lit by representatives of all those who were persecuted, including Holocaust survivors. We will come together as a city to remember those we lost, as we do every year and always will.

All of us in this House have a duty to use our voices to uphold the memory of the Holocaust, its victims and its survivors. We owe it to everyone who died. We will never forget them. The words “never again” will stand for all time. I know that everyone in this House will work towards that end.

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

4.9 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a privilege and an honour as a shadow Minister, but also as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Jews, to close today's debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. I share the very complimentary observations of many Members about the Minister's opening speech. He was very clear in restating the importance not only of recalling in particular the Holocaust that took place in the second world war, targeted at 6 million Jews and people from all kinds of minority backgrounds, but of ensuring—this has been reflected in the many contributions from Members across the Chamber—that when we debate these issues, we think about the lessons we can learn from what happened then, from earlier tragedies and from events since, in order to ensure that as far as possible, we are doing what we can to make sure those kinds of events are never repeated.

There have been many moving and impactful speeches. The hon. Members for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky), for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) and for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) and my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) all made contributions—as did every speaker—that I will try to reflect in my closing speech, in particular where the points they made relate to lessons that we need to learn for the future.

It is incredibly important to hear the testimony of survivors, and I join colleagues in paying tribute to people such as my constituent, Paul Sved. He is one of those Holocaust survivors who travels the country with the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, speaking about what he experienced as a child and the impact it had on him, his family and his wider community. These are all reminders of the human stories that make the level of inhumanity that was shown in the Holocaust even harder to comprehend. It is also an opportunity to reflect that even in the midst of all that darkness, there are examples of humanity—of people in difficult situations taking steps to preserve the lives of their neighbours, and sometimes of strangers in their community.

I had the opportunity to visit the Wannsee villa, a beautiful lakeside house on the outskirts of Berlin—a place like my constituency. That house was the command centre for the Holocaust; it is where the committees of Nazi politicians, police and military met to manage the logistics. Today, it is a museum, displaying the records that were kept of all the meetings that took place. The thing that I found very striking about it as a visiting politician was the banality of that evidence and those records. It was like reading the minutes of the planning committees that I saw in a local authority. They list who attended and what they discussed, but instead of recording the details of people's extensions and changes to the design of their home and their neighbours' views, they record in detail the planning and execution of a Government-level strategy of mass murder. That emphasises the importance of learning from history. When we see the statue at Friedrichstraße station—the memorial to the Kindertransport—we can recall that at the end of world war two, when the Russian forces arrived in Berlin, they found 1,700 Jewish people living in that city who had been sheltered by a combination of city authorities and neighbours. Even in those dark places, there were those who were willing to help.

It is important to remember that antisemitism has much older roots. I was very struck by the contribution of the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), who talked about the blood libel. In a world that often seems very polarised, it always seems to me a great irony that even further back than that, the Islamic caliphate that ruled Spain—with which much of Christian Europe was at war for centuries—was the one place of safety in Europe for Jewish people for a very long time. Antisemitism is something that has deep roots, and it is incumbent on us to be aware of those roots if we are to deal with it effectively.

Members have spoken about the need to spot examples of similar human behaviour in more recent years. Srebrenica was described; many Members spoke movingly of their experiences of it, and insights from it. As the displays at Mr Speaker's event yesterday set out, what happened in Rwanda was one of the most hideous genocides of the modern era. Many of us will recall seeing that tragedy unfold on the TV news, or hearing about it on the radio. That ties in with the theme of today's debate. Rwanda is now a modern, democratic nation working with countries across Europe and the United Nations—for example, to resettle refugees. It is a good example of the fact that when terrible things happen, people may not always progress quickly to a perfect situation, but they can learn, identify lessons, and seek to make amends.

As well as an opportunity to recall what happened, this debate is an opportunity for us to reflect on what the nation and Parliament need to do in policy terms. It is important to acknowledge, for example, our nation's commitment, through our Government, to the European convention on human rights. It expresses fundamental and ancient British values to do with the rule of law and due process, and applies to 46 nations, many of which chose to enshrine those values because they wanted to learn from the events that led up to the Holocaust, and to ensure that it never happened again.

There is always scope for debate on whether treaties and conventions are fit for the modern age, but our nation must continue to work alongside the UN, and to value international law and agreements—from those of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to those of the International Maritime Organisation—that enshrine the rules on how we treat people, such as refugees in small boats who find themselves in distress at sea. They have a bearing on how we work with other countries, as a leading nation and a leading voice in the international community, to encourage others to share our values of liberty and democracy.

When we recall, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, my constituency neighbour, did in such historical detail, the events leading up to world war two, it puts into context our debates in the Chamber about defence spending. We can debate the figures, but there is clearly a broad commitment to moving towards spending 2.5% of GDP on defence. As my hon. Friend set out, however, we had commitments to others across Europe in 1939 that we simply could not meet in practice. Our country was able to defend itself, as the battle of Britain showed, but we should all ask ourselves—my hon. Friend posed this challenge—what would have been different if we had learned lessons and acted sooner. Would we have been able, in smaller or greater measure, to prevent the tragedy that unfolded and took so many innocent lives?

The United Kingdom is not a global policeman any more—the years of the Victorian *pax Britannica* are clearly long gone—but there remains scope for free nations to work together, and many of them have an honourable history in this respect. The Minister and I have talked a lot about Grenfell Tower, given our portfolios. Grenfell was sent to deal with the consequences of atrocities in the Sudan that caused serious concern across the world in the Victorian era. British troops, British forces and British diplomacy were frequently deployed, as in Benin, because of concern about the large-scale loss of life and atrocities that were destabilising communities.

Looking around our modern world, we see the Russianisation of deported Ukrainian children, who were taken from their families to another country to be changed into citizens of a different place with a different outlook. We look at what has happened to the Uyghur people and the Rohingya, and we look at the unfolding tragedy in Gaza and Israel. We may not be able to intervene directly and put a stop to those things, but the combined forces of the international community can be extremely powerful. We may not always be able to intervene early enough to prevent the worst of a tragedy, but we still have the scope to make a difference.

Many of us will be conscious of the impact of these issues on our constituents; I have heard Rabbi Aaron Goldstein at the Ark synagogue in my constituency speak about that movingly. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) joined me in a visit. It is twinned with synagogues in Ukraine, and holds services together with people whose homes are being bombed and whose synagogues are under attack. The Holocaust that we are talking about is an historical event, but its consequences and the attitudes behind it are very much alive, not just in Europe, but elsewhere in the world.

I add the Opposition's thanks to organisations that do incredibly important work on this issue, particularly in this era of heightened tension and heightened fear of antisemitism. I applaud the fact that the Government have, through cross-party work, carried on providing the necessary finance to the Community Security Trust, which has a visible presence around synagogues in my constituency. It provides reassurance to our Jewish citizens, and their friends and neighbours, so that they can freely practise their faith and associate with members of their community without fear.

Notwithstanding some of the debate around marches in central London, I welcome the fact that in most of our communities, relationships remain good. In particular, relationships that were built up during the covid era, when people of all faiths came together with Churches and community organisations, have stood us in good stead, and people have not allowed themselves to be divided. I thank the Metropolitan police, and police forces across the country, who have responded to issues robustly, but with sensitivity. Since 2016, there has been not only long-standing, cross-party support for funding for the CST, which provides security assistance for synagogues and our Jewish community, but funding to ensure that our Muslim community enjoys additional security and protection.

All those who have testified about their experience of coming here from Holocaust-blighted Europe for a new start have described the importance of being in a place

[David Simmonds]

where freedom applies to everybody, and is not the preserve of a few. It is enormously important that the work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, and the educational programmes that sit alongside it, continues, so that our children and future generations have the opportunity we have had to hear the testimony of those who have been through those dark periods, and the opportunity, which many Members described so movingly, to learn from history and ensure that we do not repeat its worst mistakes.

4.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): It is an honour to speak in this Holocaust Memorial Day debate, and I am grateful to hon. Members from all parts of the House for their powerful and moving contributions to this important debate. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who responded to the debate, and to my ministerial colleague, the Minister for Housing and Planning, for opening it.

This year, Holocaust Memorial Day marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is an especially poignant occasion, because as Members have highlighted, it is the last major anniversary when we can expect to have significant numbers of Holocaust survivors able to share their testimony. We have heard from many hon. Members of the impact that listening to first-hand witnesses has had on them. Indeed, I think of my experience and the impact it has had on me.

We have listened to personal reflections on the lasting influence of visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau and other camps across Europe. Some hon. Members have spoken bravely about their family members' experience of the Holocaust, and the trauma and suffering experienced by their family. This debate is about remembering the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered during the Holocaust: the most horrific of war crimes ever committed. Remembering the Holocaust is a human rights imperative.

The Holocaust stands out as one of the defining moments of history that has shaped the conscience of humanity. The debate has highlighted that the past few years have not been easy for British Jews, with antisemitism on the rise across Europe and the UK. It has also shown that contemporary antisemitism revolves around the Holocaust, with some blaming the Holocaust on Jews, or suggesting that Jews focus on that tragedy to gain advantage.

As well as Holocaust denial, we see the growing use of Holocaust distortion, as has been pointed out by hon. Members, and intentional efforts to excuse or minimise the impact of the Holocaust. Today, Holocaust denial and distortion move instantaneously across social media, and are amplified by algorithms that drive anger, hate and division. As we mark the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, it is right to be reminded of what unchecked behaviours and violent bigotry can lead to.

We all have a duty and a role to play in rooting out antisemitism where we see it, and the Jewish community can be assured that the Government will stand shoulder to shoulder with them. The message is clear: we cannot remember the victims of the Holocaust without fighting antisemitism and hate today. That is why we remain

determined to create the UK national memorial and learning centre in Victoria Tower Gardens. The proposed Holocaust memorial and learning centre's exhibition will address the impact of antisemitism.

I echo the many tributes paid today to Karen Pollock, the chief executive of the Holocaust Education Trust, who, along with her team, does inspirational work for our country. I also pay tribute to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and its chief executive officer Olivia Marks-Woldman. I pay tribute, too, to other Holocaust remembrance, education and survivor organisations that enrich the work that we do, including Jewish Care's Holocaust survivors' centre in Golders Green; the Wiener Holocaust library; the Association of Jewish Refugees; the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in Newark, Nottinghamshire; Holocaust Centre North at Huddersfield University; and University College London's centre for Holocaust education.

As has been pointed out, we are all aware that the number of Holocaust survivors is dwindling. We will rely on their children and grandchildren to share their testimonies. That is why I pay a special tribute to organisations such as Generation 2 Generation, the Holocaust education charity established to empower second and third-generation Holocaust survivor descendants to present their family histories to a wide variety of audiences. Through the use of survivor testimony, G2G aims to keep Holocaust stories alive, so that we never forget.

Let me speak to the powerful, inspirational and moving speeches made by hon. Members—I will call them my hon. Friends—across the House. I begin with my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky). A number of hon. Members referred to the powerful story of his father as a Holocaust survivor, and the struggles and heroism of Maria. Across the House we are all proud to see my hon. Friend speaking and representing his constituency in this Parliament. We must make sure that children and the next generation continue to learn from stories such as his family's, to fight intolerance and hatred anywhere across our country and the world. He works passionately, alongside other colleagues, to campaign against intolerance and hate in our country and elsewhere.

I also pay special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for his incredibly powerful speech. Over the years I have heard him speak in this debate and in others about his family's history and their struggles. It is so important that we hear these testimonies, because of the connection that it creates. The trauma that generations face after a genocide never diminishes. It is right that as fellow citizens and friends we support each other, whatever our faith and background, and act in solidarity.

I thank the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for his opening speech. He spoke powerfully, as did other Members, about the genocides that, sadly, have taken place since the Holocaust, in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur. There are many other examples of human rights violations in our country, which the hon. Gentleman referred to. In opposition, I campaigned for many years against the persecution of Rohingya Muslims. I am incredibly grateful to the British Jewish community, and many others of different faiths and of no faith, for working with me on

that campaign to secure the referral of the Myanmar military to the International Court of Justice, precisely on the matter of genocide.

I am grateful for the support of prominent lawyers such as my great friend Philippe Sands, who wrote the book “East West Street”, which documents his own family’s story and the stories of Lemkin and Lauterpacht, the architects of the modern-day international legal framework as we know it. It also documents the enormous contribution of the Jewish community in the post-war period, which continues to influence our international legal system, particularly on human rights and genocide.

Paul Waugh: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s own personal fortitude in standing up to hate, particularly at the last general election when she, along with many other Labour candidates, suffered abuse on the doorstep. There is a lot of talk today about combating hate, but many candidates turned a blind eye to their own supporters who used the phrases “genocide enablers” and “child murderers” in the last election, which was utterly disgusting. Will she join me in condemning that?

Rushanara Ali: It is important that we all ensure that we are peacemakers at home. If we want to see peace and security both here at home and elsewhere in the world, we have to work together in solidarity and be fellow citizens. We have to practice what we preach. It is important that we keep our democracy safe, and that those of all backgrounds who stand for public office locally and nationally can stand for our democratic system, free from hatred, intolerance, bigotry and hostility, whichever party they belong to. That is how we will protect our democracy.

I also draw the House’s attention to the speech made by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), who reflected powerfully on her experience of joining delegations to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Along with other hon. Members, she talked about the work of those delegations and their visits to Yad Vashem. I, too, have had the opportunity to make visits over the years on delegations to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories with Members across the House.

I draw attention to a Member in the Lords with whom I had the opportunity to visit the Occupied Palestinian Territories, who was a child of the Kindertransport and who went on to become a Labour Member of Parliament and then a Member of the House of Lords: Lord Dubs. It is because of the heroism of British hero Nicholas Winton that Lord Dubs was able to survive the Holocaust. We had the opportunity to visit the Occupied Palestinian Territories together. As we all know, he continues to campaign for child refugees, and has campaigned with many of us over the years for peace in the middle east. There are many others in our country who benefited from the heroism of those who acted to get children out during that period through the Kindertransport.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole talked about the importance of Holocaust education. I am incredibly proud of the fact that this Government, building on the work of the previous Government, continue to be committed to bridging divisions between communities, challenging hatred and working closely with community groups, charities and public sector partners to build that solidarity. This Government are

actively exploring more integrated and cohesive approaches to tackling hate crime, and we will share more information in due course. We have allocated £54 million for the Community Security Trust to continue its vital work providing security to schools, synagogues and other Jewish community buildings until 2028. We have also committed to reversing the previous Government’s decision to downgrade the recording and monitoring of antisemitic non-crime hate incidents.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) reflected on the harrowing case of her constituent’s mother, who was kidnapped in Gaza, and talked powerfully about the importance of working together to tackle antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia, and the need to come together, building on the theme of creating a “better future” for all. A number of other hon. Members talked about the importance of the theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day.

My friend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has never since his election in 2010 missed one of these debates, spoke powerfully about the importance of tackling antisemitism, and spoke about the origin of the Holocaust and the escalation of antisemitism. He also spoke powerfully about the Holocaust Memorial Bill and the education centre. He raised some important questions about the work on lessons from Auschwitz. The Department for Education, along with our Department, supports the teaching of Holocaust education by funding two programmes—one, as he referred to, for 16 to 18-year-olds—and creating the opportunity for young people to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau. We will continue to work together to ensure that we support the education effort. The Department for Education set out an ambitious plan to enable students to have the opportunity to hear recorded survivor testimony. The autumn Budget committed £2 million to support that work. The Department is also exploring how it can support schools to fulfil that ambition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) also talked about the importance of Holocaust education, as did a number of Members, and the vital need to ensure that we continue to invest in Holocaust education. I have seen how powerful that is in schools in my constituency, including with, along with the organisations I mentioned, the Anne Frank Trust UK and many others.

The hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) raised a question about resourcing. Over the past 20 years, the UK has committed more than £2.5 million of funds to projects dealing with the aftermath of the Srebrenica genocide, including towards the funding of the construction of the Srebrenica-Potočari Genocide Memorial centre.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Jon Pearce) highlighted the increase in antisemitic attacks since 7 October. As I said, we are taking action to provide support and protection for synagogues, schools and other important institutions. Any form of racism and racial hatred is completely unacceptable in our society. We have allocated £54 million up to 2028 for the CST to continue its work of providing security to institutions that feel at risk and under threat. The CST recorded a total of 325 university-related incidents over the two academic years covered by its report, with 53 incidents in 2023 and 272 in 2024. That 117% rise, from a total of 150 campus incidents recorded from 2020 to 2022, is

[*Rushanara Ali*]

completely unacceptable. We know that we must act to ensure that protection is available. We will do all we can to support students, and to ensure that students from different backgrounds and faiths can come together and not be allowed to be divided by forces that seek to divide people from different communities, particularly in the British Jewish community and the British Muslim community.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) talked about the critical importance of tackling disinformation and extremism. The Online Safety Act 2023 was introduced by the previous Government and this Government have committed to implementing it. The online space has become more and more problematic, and we must tackle the underlying causes as best we can to protect people against antisemitism and other forms of hate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), like other hon. Members, made an incredibly powerful contribution. She drew attention to her great-grandfather and her Jewish heritage. I found it incredibly moving, as I did not know about her great-grandfather and his story. I pay tribute to her for the tireless work she has done throughout her career to fight for those who are suffering globally, and in particular for her work on humanitarian issues in conflict zones and her work with Medical Aid for Palestinians. She is an inspiration to so many of us in the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) talked about the Holocaust Memorial Day “80 Candles for 80 Years” project, which the Deputy Prime Minister took part in. He also referred to the UK being a signatory to the Stockholm declaration, the UK’s presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and the contribution that the UK is making.

The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) talked powerfully about the need to guard against the demonisation of Jews, Muslims and refugees and to constantly fight intolerance and hatred. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) spoke powerfully about the importance of recognising and remembering the Srebrenica massacre and the genocide in Bosnia. It was a genocide, as has been confirmed by the international courts, and we must never forget the victims. The UK has consistently urged all political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region to reject hate speech and to condemn any glorification of the perpetrators of genocide and war crimes. Over the past 20 years, the UK has committed more than £2.5 million of funding to projects dealing with the aftermath of the Srebrenica genocide.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) highlighted the unity across the House in this very important debate, and I hope we can maintain that. When it comes to fighting intolerance, antisemitism, anti-Muslim hatred and hatred towards other minority groups—those with protected characteristics, those with disabilities and many others—I hope that we can find common cause and that it is not only on days like this that we come together; I hope we can work consistently against hatred, intolerance and demonisation.

I turn to the interventions that this Government, building on the work of the previous Government, are making to protect the British Muslim community. After the

7 October terrorist attack, and in the light of the war in Gaza, anti-Muslim hatred and intolerance has grown in our country. This year, the Government have made up to £29.4 million of protective security funding available to British Muslim community organisations, to protect institutions from being targeted. We have sadly seen examples of the targeting of mosques, faith schools and other organisations. We have also committed more than £1 million to support victims of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) talked powerfully about the history of antisemitism through the centuries and the stories of blood libel in the 11th century. It is a great source of pride to see him in this House, as the first representative of Jewish heritage and Jewish faith for his constituency; we are incredibly proud to have him here.

Other Members have spoken powerfully about a range of issues. I will not be able to refer to each one of them, but their contributions today have been inspiring and powerful. It is incredibly heartening to hear about their leadership roles in their communities, because, regardless of whether someone is a local representative, or a national representative as a Member of Parliament, the need to constantly fight intolerance wherever we see it must guide and influence our work in our everyday lives. That is the vital and painstaking work of Holocaust education charities in our constituencies. In my own constituency, I have seen at first hand the way that such organisations bring together different communities, and children and adults of different faiths and none, to learn from the history of what happened in the Holocaust and make sure that we do not allow such atrocities to happen again.

This year’s national ceremony will be filmed and broadcast on BBC One at 7 pm on Monday 27 January. At 8 pm, there will be a “light the darkness” moment, when iconic buildings across the United Kingdom will be lit up to remember the Holocaust. They include the Houses of Parliament, Cardiff castle, Edinburgh castle, Belfast city hall, Tyne bridge, Clifford’s Tower in York, the London Eye, Stormont and the Royal Liver building. We can all play our part by placing a candle in our windows at 8 pm. It is our responsibility to inspire future generations to stand up against hatred, prejudice and evil. The lessons of the Holocaust are not Jewish but universal, and they remain relevant today.

As my hon. Friend the Minister of State said in his opening remarks, the long-awaited ceasefire in Gaza began on Sunday 19 February. We saw the release of three hostages taken on 7 October, including the British-Israeli hostage Emily Damari, and the release of hundreds of Palestinians. Across this House, we all hope that these first tentative steps will lead to a lasting peace in which Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace and security.

On a personal note, I pay tribute to the British Jewish community in my own constituency, where they have had a presence for many generations. In particular, I recognise the contribution that they made in the Battle of Cable Street, when they stood up with trade unionists and many others to fight Oswald Mosley’s fascists. Throughout the generations, and in working with others across our society, the Jewish community made places such as the east end of London safe for people like me

and for those from the British Catholic community, the British Muslim community and many others. That is the spirit of our country: different communities coming together to support each other and to create a safe space for us to fight against intolerance.

I would like us to take a moment to remember all the Holocaust survivors who shared their testimonies and are no longer with us. I pay tribute to them for the work that they did over many decades.

The theme of Holocaust Memorial Day 2025 is “For a better future”. As others have said, it is an opportunity for people to come together, learn about the past and take action to make a better future for all. There is much we can all do to create a better future. We can speak up against Holocaust and genocide denial and distortion. We can challenge prejudice. We can encourage others to learn about the Holocaust, the other victims of the Nazis and subsequent genocides. In remembering the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust and the millions of the Nazis’ other victims, let us all vow to work together in unity and solidarity for a better future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day.

PETITION

County Council elections in West Sussex

4.55 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I hope the Government will pay heed to the strength of feeling across West Sussex and my constituency that elections should never be cancelled opportunistically under the guise of local government reorganisation. It leads to the disenfranchisement of voters and further erodes trust in politics and politicians.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that the County Council elections meant to take place in May 2025 should not be postponed indefinitely.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the County Council Elections in West Sussex take place in May 2025.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003036]

High Streets: Autumn Budget 2024

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

4.56 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is an honour to secure this debate on the autumn Budget’s impact on high streets as my first Adjournment debate, not just because it is such a vital topic but because it is a topic dear to my heart. In my maiden speech, I shared the story of helping my mum on the shop floor, and it seems only fitting that my first Adjournment debate is on our high streets.

Every night after school, and most weekends, I helped out in my mum’s gift shop. I remember chatting away to the staff, the customers and our neighbouring businesses. I remember late nights sorting out items to donate to the local charity, and the summer when I offered to run the shop myself.

I also remember what happened when the economy turned, having to pack away stock and move to smaller premises because it was that or closure. I remember helping my parents with the mortgage as a teenager, gleefully buying broken biscuits as a family and only now, later in life, realising how much work my parents put in to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table.

After many successful years, during which several premises were opened, the cost of retail and business rates, the competition from online giants and the decline in consumer spending was too much. My mum could not beat them, so she joined them and took her business online. In many ways, it was a relief for the family. It was a simpler way of continuing the business, but it was hard to see the store close 30 years after she first set up shop.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): My hon. Friend is right about how sad it is to see high street shops close, such as the one in which she used to help. We have seen local councils invest in Cullompton’s high street, but this is sadly offset by the shop closures. Will my hon. Friend make some recommendations on what the Government could do to prevent some of these shop closures?

Victoria Collins: The heart of this debate is about making sure we look after those businesses and the many more that could open.

My story shows why this debate is so important to me. I know that the story of our high streets is the story of our local communities.

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

Victoria Collins: I will make a little progress.

Both for the families behind the doors, and for the families and local people who shop there, our high streets are truly at the heart of the community. I have the honour of representing seven high streets across Harpenden and Berkhamsted, and I am grateful to the local businesses that responded to my survey ahead of this debate. Today, I am sharing their voices, as well as the impact the Budget will have on their businesses, their livelihoods their families and our community.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Responding to my small business survey, a local business in Street said that high employer national insurance contributions is one of the major challenges and that it could force them to cancel some of their investment plans. Does my hon. Friend agree that the measures being proposed do not encourage growth and could instead push more high street businesses to close, significantly impacting the already fragile rural economy?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely. Sadly, the desperation that came through in my survey shows that a lot of businesses are very worried about their future.

Jim Shannon *rose—*

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call on Victoria Collins to stand so that she can take Mr Shannon's intervention.

Victoria Collins: I will take the hon. Gentleman's intervention.

Jim Shannon: From 1959 to 1979, my mum and dad had a shop in Ballywalter, and they had a shop before that as well, so there is a history of having shops. I will take the example of today's high street in Newtownards. National insurance contributions, wages, theft and attacks on shop staff are all issues now being faced there. Does the hon. Lady agree that the high street needs help today like it has never needed it before?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely; that is very much in line with the feedback I had from businesses. Indeed, it is with much disappoint that I share the impact of the autumn Budget on my local businesses. It is no secret that the Conservatives left our economy in a mess, and many of our businesses are still reeling from that. That is exactly why it is important for the Government to get this right.

Many of the proposals in the autumn Budget will not lead to growth on our high streets. I would like to have faith that Labour intended to do the right thing and that these are unintended consequences. I hope that the Government heed some of the warnings and take action to mitigate the impact and change course. In the words of one director in my constituency,

"it is a disaster...all planned investment has been cancelled, expansion plans cancelled. Prices will go up on 1st April by at least 10%. And we're looking at ways to reduce staff count."

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the high streets of Tiverton and Minehead, as well as those of every other constituency in the country, will be hurt by this Government's decision to lower the amount of relief offered to retail, hospitality and leisure businesses from 75% to 40%? Does she also agree that they should instead be looking to replace business rates with an entirely new commercial landowner levy, rather than tinkering around the edges and making an already bad system worse?

Victoria Collins: That is one of the main topics that came up. Businesses shared with me that after facing the impact of Brexit, closures during covid, cuts to local infrastructure following Conservative cuts to local government and the soaring costs from the cost of living crisis, the combination of measures in the autumn Budget, which includes the rise in national insurance contributions, the change in business rates that was just mentioned and the increase in the minimum wage, as well as proposed changes that could impact family businesses, means that they are now reaching crisis point.

Businesses that I speak to are largely supportive of an increase in the minimum wage. I want to highlight that because they want to support their staff. However, it is the combination of all those factors, after such a difficult time, that is devastating. The knock-on impact of that combination has also seen pre-emptive cost rises across supply chains and worries about consumer confidence, as consumers ultimately spend less on our high streets. Although the GfK consumer confidence index in the UK rose by one point last December, confidence levels remain subdued and retail sales in the UK unexpectedly declined 0.3% month-on-month last December, in a moment in the calendar that is often the most critical time for retail and hospitality on our high streets.

Coming back to national insurance contributions for employers, this is a pre-profit cost increase. Not only does that need to be managed, but for businesses that are just about breaking even or making a loss, it will tip them over the edge and drastically cut the cash flow that is often key to investment. The well-loved local Lussmans restaurants in Hertfordshire have been serving local people for 22 years and face around £250,000 off the bottom line, leading to reduced investment in our local area. Temptation Gifts will see similar, if not higher, costs and says that for the first time in 42 years, it will be shortening opening hours as part of its cost-saving measures. It is having to make difficult staffing decisions in a business that the family has built over decades.

My constituent, Charlotte, managing director of the oldest family-run jewellers in the UK, says that the mix of higher national insurance contributions and higher minimum wage costs means that they will not hire any more staff, and that anyone who leaves will not be replaced. Almar in Tring, where Carolyn and her husband already work long days, says that the national insurance contributions will be a big issue in their running costs and that they do not know how they will cope working even longer days.

Chiltern Opticians in Tring highlights the barriers that small businesses face in hiring staff. It says that it is very different for big corporations, which have large human resources teams to handle staffing issues, and that

"we just don't have the budget for it".

These are resilient businesses—or they have been—and they want to continue to build those businesses and to employ local people. Indeed, I see their pride in supporting local staff, often calling them "family". Jordan from G. Grace & Son in Tring says:

"We are more like a community centre at times, providing essential services to the community."

In that, I hear my mum's voice who so often did the same. Our pubs, restaurants and cafés in Harpenden and Berkhamsted cover 197 hospitality venues that

employ more than 6,000 people and generate nearly £143 million in revenue. These businesses are the backbone of our economy and community.

The Government say that they are protecting small businesses, but these are the small businesses of which they talk. Indeed, the official definition of a small or medium-sized enterprise is a company with fewer than 250 employees. They are growing, local, often family-run businesses that are nowhere close to being the international giants that have started to dominate retail or hospitality. These local businesses are happy to pay their way. Andrei says:

“I have no issue with tax rises, but these are positioned poorly. The vast majority of the high street are SMEs and they will be hit the hardest.”

Sadly, the desperation is clear. These small businesses are worried that the Budget will be the final straw. Participants in my local survey said:

“What is the point of a small business? The high street is dying.”

Therefore, when it comes to national insurance contributions, will the Government consider mitigations to support the local businesses on our high streets? These could include a lower rate of NICs for earnings of between £5,000 and the £9,100 threshold, or a lower rate for lower earning taxpayers who work part time—perhaps fewer than 20 hours per week. As we have heard from many local businesses, this would help get more people working and support our local economy. At the very least, will the Government consider delaying implementation to give businesses time to adjust and consider their own mitigation?

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): I wonder whether the Minister will consider what I am about to say. I have been asked to go to the Isle of Skye on Saturday for a crisis meeting. There is a group of hotels, which are family-run businesses, not big multinationals, and they face an awful combination of increases across the board, including heating price increases. Their No. 1 issue is national insurance contributions and minimum wage costs. They think that, on average, their costs will go up by between £40,000 and £70,000. They are in a very poor state indeed. Can the Minister give me any encouragement that I could pass on to them on her behalf?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr MacDonald, your intervention was on the Member, so the question goes to her, and she can insist on the Minister responding.

Victoria Collins: My hon. Friend mentioned the rise in energy costs, which I have not covered in my speech but which have been mentioned by many of my local businesses as a matter for consideration. I am sure the Minister will also consider the other comments that he made.

When it comes to business rates, there is a similar story of despair. The Robin Hood pub says that its business rates will double. G. Grace & Son says:

“Our business rates are already a huge cost overall to the business, which seems disproportionate given that our premises are relatively small. And increasing them will put even more strain on our already stretched budgets.”

Mark from Tabure restaurant in both Harpenden and Berkhamsted said:

“There will be yet another increase in the national minimum wage—this time above inflation. Alcohol duty will increase on 1 February. Business rates are set to increase in April, along with various increases in national insurance contributions. And this Budget is devastating.”

Will the Government consider abolishing the broken business rates system and replacing it with a commercial landowner levy? Furthermore, will the Government consider delivering the maximum discount allowed by the Budget to support hospitality or smaller high street businesses?

I wish that I had the time to dive into all the issues raised by local businesses, but I will focus on just two more. Many are worried about high street services such as parking. With the Conservatives having cut local council funding again and again, many services such as parking and investment in our high streets have had to be cut as well. Given the Government's commitment to local communities, will they ensure that investment in local councils compensates for the increase in national insurance contributions that councils will have to pay, to help them to invest in our high streets and related services?

Several family businesses have highlighted the devastating impact of the proposed changes to inheritance tax. Mike and his wife have worked week in, week out for over 40 years, and in their 70s are still working full time to support the business and their employees. They say that they have taken low dividends and looked after their staff, and hope to hand over the business to their children, but the proposed changes mean that the business may have to be pulled apart. For Charlotte's family business, the removal of the 100% business property relief will mean that it will not be able to stay in the building that it has been in for two centuries. Will the Government carry out a proper impact assessment on inheritance tax for family businesses, notably where the assets will stay within a business that supports the local community?

I once again thank all the businesses that contacted me; I am sorry that I could not mention them all. Similar issues are highlighted by local charities, healthcare providers and, indeed, businesses beyond the high streets in Harpenden, Berkhamsted, Tring, Redbourn, Flamstead, Markyate and Potten End. I suggest that the Minister meets, or continues to meet, with such businesses up and down the country. Carolyn from Almar has invited the Chancellor to come and see at first hand the challenges of running a high street shop, and pleads with the Government to look at measures to mitigate the impact and help our high streets to thrive.

I will end with a message of hope. I would like to envisage a day when people can head to their local high street in Harpenden, Tring, Redbourn or anywhere in the UK; when there is proper public transport investment, so it is easy to pop on the bus; when there is investment in our walkways and cycleways, so people can get down there easily; and when people can perhaps even find a parking space. A day when the high street is a vibrant place, full of thriving local businesses; when people can drop their kids off nearby at the local creche, easily head to the doctors, and relax with friends and family after a busy or sunny day—that is, when the sun comes out in the UK. A day when our high streets up and down the country are a real experience; when they have been invested in, and local businesses are thriving; and

[Victoria Collins]

when the beating heart of our community is alive, thriving and no longer on life support. With the right investment and incentives, and with adjustments to the autumn Budget, we must start that journey.

5.12 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) on securing the debate and thank her for sharing her story of working in her mum's gift shop. It was very moving to hear that she has had direct experience of working in a shop on the high street. I also thank her for her survey of local small businesses on her seven high streets, which is an impressive number. She outlined very well the importance of the businesses there; I think she said that there are 197 retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, employing some 6,000 people. I thank her for sharing those statistics, and the feedback from those businesses.

I share the hon. Member's passion for the regeneration of our high streets. I think it is a concern for Members across the House. High streets are focal points of economic activity, but most importantly—she said this in her speech—they are often a key part of the unique character of our communities. We know that high street businesses are contending with a range of challenges. She listed some of them, but I will list a couple: changing consumer shopping habits and the rise of online shopping, and a series of economic headwinds, including the pandemic, which we know was particularly difficult for small, independent businesses on the high street.

The Government are committed to reforming Britain's economy to bring about a decade of national renewal. Creating an environment in which our high streets are able to flourish is critical to that commitment. In her speech, the hon. Member recognised the Government's dire economic inheritance from the Conservatives, none of whom are in the Chamber. We had some very difficult decisions to make in the Budget, but it was necessary to wipe the slate clean to deliver the economic stability that high street businesses need.

Mr MacDonald: Will the Minister say why taxes were put on poor, struggling organisations, such as high-street shops and hotels, rather than the massive online businesses that are emptying our high streets? Why did she not consider imposing a higher rate of corporation tax or income tax, rather than hitting the poorest businesses in our society?

Emma Reynolds: The hon. Member pre-empts my next sentence, so I thank him for that. We have committed to reforming business rates, because we need a fairer system, fit for the 21st century. That important part of our reforms and plans will, I hope, benefit the businesses that the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted spoke about.

Rachel Gilmour: In recent weeks, I have been working with an excellent organisation called Family Business UK. Before Christmas, it did some research on the impact of agricultural property relief and business property relief on family businesses, and it is about to do another

round of research. Do the Minister's officials want to avail themselves of the results of that research, so that they have better context?

Emma Reynolds: Ministers are always happy to hear from hon. Members. I suggest that the hon. Member writes to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury with that feedback. I should note that this is not my policy area; the Exchequer Secretary is visiting small businesses as we speak, so I am standing in for him, but I am sure that he will welcome that feedback from the hon. Lady.

I have listened carefully to the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted and tried to note down all her questions, but if I do not get to all of them, I am happy to write to her after the debate; I hope that is helpful. She asked whether there were any mitigations, and I think she asked us to cancel some of the plans in the Budget. I am afraid that I cannot give her that assurance. The changes to national insurance will come into force on 1 April. As I said, we had to make difficult decisions, and that was one of the most difficult.

The hon. Member asked whether we were meeting small businesses. The Exchequer Secretary is meeting a range of small businesses, as are Treasury officials, before formulating our plan to reform business rates, which I will talk about briefly. She asked questions about inheritance tax; I will write to her on that, to ensure she gets the right answer. She also asked about local government. I was not entirely sure about the question, so perhaps we can clarify that, and I will write to her on that as well.

Turning in more detail to the hon. Member's points about national insurance, one of the toughest decisions we took in the Budget was to raise the rate of employer national insurance contributions from 13.8% to 15%, but we recognised the need to protect the smallest businesses. The Federation of Small Businesses asked us specifically about that, which is why we have more than doubled the employment allowance to £10,500. That means that more than half of businesses with national insurance contribution liabilities will either see no change at all or be taken out of paying national insurance contributions. As I said, that was a key demand from small businesses.

To support businesses, including those on the high street, the Budget honoured the manifesto commitment to not raise corporation tax; it set out the tax road map for this Parliament, in which we will not change corporation tax, which means we have the lowest rate in the G7. All that will support businesses, from restaurants to retailers, to invest. On the high street, we announced at the Budget major support for pubs; we are cutting alcohol duty on qualifying draught products, which make up approximately 60% of the alcoholic drinks sold in pubs. That represents an overall reduction in duty bills of over £85 million a year, and is equivalent to a 1p duty reduction on a typical pint.

The hon. Member raised concerns about the business rate system; let me address those in more detail. We very much believe that for too long, the business rates system has placed an unfair burden on high-street retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, as she mentioned. To support those sectors, we intend to introduce permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure properties with rateable values of less than £500,000 from 2026-27. That will allow us to provide stability after the ongoing

uncertainty of the one-year retail and hospitality leisure relief, which has been extended year by year since the pandemic. That tax cut will be sustainably funded not by increases in taxes on working people, which we promised not to introduce, but through a higher tax rate on the most valuable 1% of business properties in the country. That will capture the majority of large distribution warehouses, including those used by online giants, as well as other out-of-town businesses that draw footfall away from high streets.

Those business rates reforms provide the certainty that businesses need to invest while protecting the public finances. The Government have already introduced to the House primary legislation that will provide the underpinning of those reforms, and the exact rates for the new multipliers will be confirmed later this year in the autumn Budget.

Sarah Dyke: Many rural town centres in Glastonbury and Somerton, and the businesses within them, are really worried about business rates. Will the Minister consider implementing a fundamental business rates overhaul for small businesses in rural areas?

Emma Reynolds: We need to treat all small businesses equally. I understand the hon. Lady's perspective, but I do not think that it would be fair or easy to have a business rates system that distinguished between rural and non-rural. What is rural? I know the constituency of the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted rather well because I live not too far away. Tring is a town there, but other places in her constituency would be quite difficult to categorise as rural or non-rural, so I do not think that we can go down that route, although I understand why the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) is trying to tempt us down it; I do not think that would work.

Victoria Collins: The Minister talks about business rates and mentioned Tring in Hertfordshire. A problem that a lot of local businesses have mentioned is that the rateable value is high because property costs are high, even if what they sell is of lower value. The difficulty is that they are paying a lot when they might not have high turnover. Will the Government consider mitigations for those running businesses in areas with high property costs?

Emma Reynolds: I am here in my ministerial capacity, of course, but I also represent High Wycombe in the south-east, so I understand her point, and promise to take it back to the Department, and to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury.

Levelling the playing field for the high street is just the start, and we are committed to transforming the whole system in the longer term. As we set out in the "Transforming Business Rates" policy paper that we published alongside the Budget, the Government will create a fairer business rates system that protects the high street, supports investment and is fit for the 21st century. It is important that we work in partnership with high-street businesses to get the reforms right. I thank the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted for bringing the voice of small businesses in her constituency to our proceedings.

Government officials have undertaken a series of roundtable events to understand from businesses across all sectors and sizes how they think reform of the system can best be delivered. Over 200 businesses have already given their feedback at those roundtables. The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is leading that work and engaging with a broad range of high-street businesses, as are officials in my Department.

Richard Foord: I appreciate that it is perhaps the Exchequer Secretary who would know this, but will the Government make sure that the reform of business rates that they are proposing is not negative for those small businesses with a very small rateable value that do not currently pay business rates at all?

Emma Reynolds: Indeed. The point of the reforms is to better protect small businesses. As the hon. Gentleman says, there are already small businesses that are protected, but we want to ensure that those small businesses that are above the current thresholds are also protected, and do not pay the rates that they pay at the moment. We want to make sure that small businesses on the high street are better supported—that is the whole point of the reforms—so I can reassure him that it will not get worse for small businesses. It may be the Exchequer Secretary's area, but I know that much, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to respond to that question. We look forward to further engagement with businesses over the coming months on delivering a business rates system fit for the future.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted again on her first Adjournment debate in the House—it is also the first Adjournment debate that I have responded to as a Minister—and thank her for raising this important issue. This Government have delivered the economic stability that high-street businesses need to thrive, and we are committed to delivering the business rates reforms that will support high streets up and down the country.

Question put and agreed to.

5.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 January 2025

[SIR DESMOND SWAYNE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

International Day of Education

1.30 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the International Day of Education.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond.

Tomorrow, Friday 24 January, we mark the United Nations International Day of Education. As we do so, we will be reminded of the transformative power of education. It is the cornerstone upon which societies are built, economies are strengthened and individuals are empowered. Education is not merely a privilege; it is a fundamental human right. Article 28 of the UN convention on the rights of the child enshrines that right.

However, as we reflect on our global commitments, particularly sustainable development goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, we must confront the stark reality that progress has been uneven and significant challenges remain if we are to reach SDG 4 targets. In considering the progress towards some of the SDG 4 targets, I will focus first on target 4.1:

“By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.”

Since the adoption of the 2030 agenda, strides have been made in expanding access to education, and enrolment rates in primary education have increased globally. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2024, 110 million more children and youths have entered school since SDG 4 was adopted in 2015, and there is a growing recognition of the importance of quality education, with 40 million more young people completing secondary education today than in 2015.

However, those achievements mask deep disparities. According to UNESCO, approximately 251 million children and youths are still out of school worldwide, which means that since 2015 the out-of-school population has reduced by only 1%. Some 33% of out-of-school children and youths are from low-income countries, in contrast to only 3% from high-income countries, and over half of all out-of-school children and youths are in sub-Saharan Africa. We have also seen the terrible impact of the policies of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which have deprived girls of their right to education. Urgent action must be taken by the international community to ensure that these regional disparities are urgently addressed if we are to meet the SDG 4.1 target.

Crises such as conflicts, natural disasters and public health emergencies pose formidable barriers to education. In 2016, 75 million children did not have access to quality education due to forced displacement, humanitarian crises

and climate change events. Nine years later, that figure has trebled to 224 million. Even children who do have access to school are not learning the basics, with over half those children—127 million—not meeting the minimum standards of literacy and numeracy.

There has been a regression in meeting both SDG 4.5, which is about eliminating all discrimination in education including for children in vulnerable education settings, and SDG 4.6, which is about ensuring all youths achieve a minimum standard of literacy and numeracy. That is deeply worrying, with UNICEF reporting that 70% of children in low and middle-income countries are unable to read a simple story by the age of 10.

The root cause of these crises, which disrupt education, needs to be tackled by the international community. UNICEF estimates that climate change alone disrupts the education of nearly 40 million children every year. In countries affected by emergencies, children lose access to safe drinking water, healthcare and food, alongside their education. Schools, which should be sanctuaries of learning, are often the targets of attacks. Between 2015 and 2019, attacks on education were reported in 93 countries. More recently, in Gaza ongoing conflicts have devastated educational infrastructure and left more than 1 million children in Gaza in dire need of educational support.

In Sudan, more than 17 million children are not in education, and schools are often used to house displaced children. In the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, more than 1.3 million children are out of school because of an escalation of violence, and children also risk being killed, maimed, abducted, abandoned and recruited into armed groups. Closer to home, the impact of the war in Ukraine has also had a devastating effect on children's education.

Organisations such as Education Cannot Wait have been instrumental in addressing those challenges. As the global fund dedicated to education in emergencies, Education Cannot Wait works to ensure that children in crisis settings receive uninterrupted education. Its multi-year resilience programme and emergency first responses have reached millions of children worldwide.

Adequate financing is pivotal to achieving SDG4, yet education often receives less than 3% of humanitarian aid. According to research by UNICEF, children-focused overseas development aid fell by 56% from 2016 to 2022; in the UK, it fell from 11% to a shocking 4% over the same period. The International Parliamentary Network for Education estimates that the annual financing gap for achieving SDG4 is £100 billion.

The funding gap is exacerbated by the debt burdens of low and middle-income countries; in some cases, the interest owed to private creditors is more than those countries' entire education budgets. Christian Aid's report “Between life and debt” found that 25 African countries spend more on repaying debt than they do on their education budgets, including in Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zambia and Malawi. Unless there are international structural changes to tackle unsustainable debt, education in low-income countries will never get fixed, and that will hamper efforts to provide quality education, particularly in low-income countries and crisis-affected regions. Education is one of the most underfunded areas of humanitarian law, receiving only approximately 3% of international humanitarian funding. That is clearly not enough.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

One of the central tenets of achieving SDG4 is teachers. There is a global shortage of teachers: the National Education Union estimates that roughly 44 million additional teachers will be required, 15 million of those in sub-Saharan Africa, to meet sustainable development goals for education. To achieve that ambition, we need a new global teacher strategy to train, recruit and retain qualified teachers in the global south.

In many low-income countries, there are huge pressures on teachers, including with regard to working conditions, class sizes and equipment. Teachers are also often the victims of attacks, and in some instances they are denied regular pay. The UN has recognised this as an important issue, especially in low-income countries with fragile economies. A key recommendation of the UN high-level panel on the teaching profession was the creation of a global fund for teachers' salaries, so that children can continue to receive education during crises.

I have a number of questions for the Minister before I conclude. The first relates to international education aid. Will the Government bolster their financial contributions to global education initiatives and ensure that funds are directed towards the most marginalised and crisis-affected children? That would include supporting organisations such as Education Cannot Wait and UNICEF, which are on the frontlines of delivering education in emergencies. Breaking down barriers to opportunity was one of the Labour party's key missions. Will the Minister confirm that as aid funding for education aligns with that mission, education will receive the priority it deserves?

I also want to ask the Minister about advocacy for safe schools. As I mentioned earlier, a significant factor in children's not receiving education is conflict. Can the Minister advise me whether the Government will champion the protection of educational institutions in conflict zones? By supporting the safe schools declaration and advocating for the adherence to international humanitarian law, we can work towards ending attacks on education.

As I mentioned earlier, teachers are the backbone of education systems. Providing them with adequate training, resources and support, especially in emergency contexts, is crucial, as is ensuring they are paid for the work they do in very difficult circumstances. Do the Government support the creation of a global fund for teachers' salaries to help pay for teachers in conflict areas?

Finally, on the promotion of inclusive education, children with disabilities are doubly disadvantaged in receiving education in crises. Can the Minister advise whether the Government will support programmes that target providing education for children with disabilities in crises?

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond.

One of the key barriers for all children, particularly children with disabilities, is inadequate access to water and sanitation. Some 200 million children do not have a toilet at all in school, and that issue affects 50% of schools in sub-Saharan Africa. Does he agree it is also

important to look at the other sustainable development goals, including SDG6 on water and sanitation, to ensure that efforts are joined up?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. SDG4 should not be seen in isolation. We need to target a number of SDG goals to make sure children receive the education they need. Water and sanitation is clearly one of the top ones that we need to target. I thank my hon. Friend for making such an excellent point.

I conclude by saying that education is a beacon of hope in the darkest of times. It is the key to breaking cycles of poverty, fostering peace and building resilient societies. As we mark the UN International Day of Education, let us reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that every child, regardless of their circumstances, has access to quality education. The challenges are immense, but with a collective will and concerted action, we can turn the tide. The UK has both the responsibility and the capacity to lead in this endeavour. Let us seize the moment to make a lasting difference in the lives of millions of children worldwide.

1.43 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (*Bambos Charalambous*) for securing this debate.

Education is what we think of when we want to invest in the future. So much of what we discuss in Parliament is about conflict, aid and the present, but education is investment in the future. As we mark the United Nations International Day of Education tomorrow, I want to highlight the case study of Sudan.

The United Nations has warned that over 19 million school-age children lack access to education in Sudan. To put that into context, we have about 14 million children in the UK, most of whom are receiving some sort of education and most of whom are in school. The 19 million who are not receiving education in Sudan makes this one of the worst education crises in the world. Schools there have been destroyed, teachers have fled and classrooms have become shelters for displaced families. According to UNICEF, 171 schools are now being used as emergency shelters.

The conflict has also brought on the awful concept of the child soldier, and child recruitment into armed groups is rife. An entire generation is growing up without education. The war in Sudan, like many other global conflicts, will have some lasting consequences. These ongoing attacks, some of which are on children, persist, as warring factions violate one of the most basic principles of the law of armed conflict: protecting children. With schools often targeted or repurposed, learning is being disrupted not just for those who are child soldiers or involved as combatants, but for others. The loss of education will have profound, long-term repercussions for those individuals, including reduced incomes, poorer health outcomes and limited opportunities. For the society of Sudan as a whole, it will lead to cycles of poverty and instability in the future.

According to the United Nations, the education crisis in Sudan is "the worst education crisis in the world".

When schools close, children become vulnerable to various risks, including exploitation, forced recruitment and abuse. The psychological toll leaves many children unable to resume their normal schooling, even when schools reopen. As of December 2024, over 14.8 million people have been displaced in Sudan—11.5 million of them internally displaced. This is the largest displacement crisis in the world, and over 53% of those displaced individuals are children. With school buildings converted into shelters, children have now gone 22 months without education. The educational facilities themselves have been attacked; they have been destroyed, looted or occupied. Children who once attended school every day are instead working in markets, polishing shoes and performing manual labour to survive. That forced separation from school, as well as from their fellow school pupils, is making it increasingly unlikely that they will return to school even when the conflict abates. The chance that these children who are exposed to violence go on later to perpetrate violence themselves is greater, and, even if they do not do that, they are more likely to underachieve or drop out.

I will focus on the work of a small charity because I want there to be a note of optimism in this otherwise pessimistic window on what is going on in Sudan. Windle Trust International has operated in Sudan since 1999. It provides educational opportunities for refugees and internally displaced people. Before the current war, the organisation ran eight schools in Khartoum and two for Ethiopian refugees. It supported 426 refugees from Chad, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Yemen, Somalia and Syria, and partnered with 42 universities to offer higher education scholarships. It provided 558 university scholarships, supported more than 68,000 girls to stay in school, and trained nearly 9,500 teachers.

The effect of the war on Windle Trust International is that it has had its offices in Khartoum looted, its staff scattered and its operational funding curtailed. This has caused the closure of programmes and the ending of staff contracts. None the less, it is still able to operate a presence in Blue Nile State, where a smaller field office supports Ethiopian refugees in a camp that hosts approximately 12,000 people, 58% of whom are of school age. Windle Trust International does receive some funding from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, but that is barely enough to cover two schools, teachers' salaries, uniforms, education materials and training, so it is a pretty dire circumstance for a small NGO operating in-country.

The Sudanese Government at federal and state levels can no longer adequately sustain their own education system. Teachers have gone unpaid for 22 months and reports indicate that 10,000 children have been recruited into armed groups. Education in conflict zones is their way out. Beyond imparting academic skills, schools can provide routine, security and hope. Where education is withheld, children suffer harm, lose future opportunities and lose the recovery prospects of their country as a whole. If Sudan fails to educate a generation of its children, its path towards development—and, ultimately, a growing economy—will become increasingly difficult.

I want to close by thinking about financial support for organisations operating in country, and education that is provided through what was the Department for International Development and is now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. We have had

a cut in the development budget in the UK from 0.7% to 0.5% in the last few years, and that is currently being exacerbated by the use of official development assistance funding. The UK's Independent Commission for Aid Impact, or ICAI, has oversight of that funding, and it has pointed to how £4 billion of it is being spent on asylum hotels, for example, when it could go so much further if it were spent in country on such things as education. The purchasing power that we would have by spending overseas as opposed to in the UK would be so much greater. Other countries do not do things this way; Sweden limits its in-donor refugee costs to a maximum of 8% of its aid budget, and Austria and Luxembourg declare no asylum costs as official development assistance. This is a choice that the UK Government are making right now.

In any comprehensive response to Sudan's crisis, education must be prioritised as long-term development, not just the conflict aid we think of, such as food, shelter and healthcare. Small NGOs like Windle Trust International are doing their very best to facilitate that, but they could do so much more if the west—and the UK Government, for example—were to step up in support.

1.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) on setting the scene and giving hon. Members the chance to participate in this debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond—I think this might be your first time chairing Westminster Hall, and if it is I wish you well for the future, but if it is not, I apologise for not being here whenever you were here before. I am not quite sure how that could have happened, but that is by the way.

It is a pleasure to speak about this massive issue. Education is the cornerstone of our society—a vital tool that empowers individuals and strengthens communities. As we mark International Day of Education, I wish to focus—it probably will not come as a surprise to hon. Members here—on the role of freedom of religion and belief, and the policies we have implemented in Northern Ireland. I will focus on what we do in Northern Ireland and how it affects education in other parts of the world; in my constituency of Strangford, it is basically all done through the mission societies, mission groups and churches. In Northern Ireland, we promote equitable access to education and foster community wellbeing globally, because we believe that is what we should be doing.

Education is not merely the transmission of knowledge; it is also, very much so—as the Minister and other Members will be aware—the foundation of human dignity and freedom, and it is therefore vital. All hon. Members' contributions today will be excellent—I never doubt that. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) outlined some of the countries across the world where the problems are now, and I want to focus on them too, when I get the chance. Around the world we see how education serves as a cornerstone of development, fostering equality and creating opportunities for millions. That is the purpose of education.

As a grandfather, I am now watching my two youngest grandchildren—Freya, who is four, and Ezra, who is two and a half—learning in nursery classes, and seeing their thirst for knowledge. That is just at my house for

[*Jim Shannon*]

about three days a week whenever I am home, but I see through them what others across the world would wish to achieve. That is why this is important.

In some regions, children are deprived of their right to education, simply because of their religious identity or beliefs. Denying education based on those grounds violates not just human rights, but the very principles of humanity and fairness. On this International Day of Education, we have an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that every child—irrespective of their religion, ethnicity or gender—has access to a quality education. Through this debate, we also champion freedom of religion or belief, standing against all forms of discrimination that threaten the right to learn—a very basic request, but a priority that we must all focus on.

In Northern Ireland, we are very proud of our charitable giving, which is the highest per capita in the whole United Kingdom—and I believe that, compared to the rest of the world, for a population of 1.9 million, it is probably the highest anywhere. It is deeply rooted in our Christian faith, reflecting our values of compassion and stewardship. The Bible is very clear: one tenth of our earnings should go to the Lord's work. I am not better than anybody else—I never will be or try to be—but I try to adhere to that biblical rule, as many others do.

Much of our generosity is directed towards supporting children and young people in health and education, both locally and globally. Faith-based charities and local churches play an instrumental role in supporting feeding and educational programmes worldwide. These initiatives bring hope to some of the most vulnerable communities, offering not just education, but nourishment, safety and the promise of a better tomorrow.

The Eden church in my town has a mission. It goes to Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Malawi, and every year, the Swaziland choir comes over—every one of the children in that choir has, unfortunately, been affected by AIDS, which in most cases they contracted through their parents while in the womb. They have a most incredible talent for singing; I do not—whenever I sing the rain comes on—but whenever they sing, it transports me. That is one of the charities that the missions support: helping young children with AIDS, who, without these missions, would probably not have the hope of an education, health or a future at all.

Eden church is not the only one that does that—there are many more. I am very blessed in my constituency of Strangford to have many churches that are all committed to the very same thing. I understand they do work in Sudan, Congo, South Africa, and Nigeria, which I mention because I have had the chance to visit it.

Everyone has mentioned the international gaps filled by charitable giving, but I cannot help but mention the disparity—I will make this comment but it is not for Minister to respond to at all—between per capita funding for Northern Irish students and other UK students.

FORB—freedom of religion or belief—is the universal human right that guarantees individuals the freedom to have, adopt, change, or leave a religion or belief, as well as to manifest it without coercion. In other words, people can practise that freedom in the way that they so

wish, whether they are a Christian, of another religion, or none at all; that is what I believe in. This freedom is closely intertwined with education. Children and young people must be free from discrimination based on their religion or belief, or that of their parents. Faith-based organisations often lead the way in advocating for those principles, ensuring access to education for marginalised and vulnerable communities worldwide.

When the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth mentioned Sudan and Congo, he reminded me of Nigeria, where I was around two or three years ago—time goes so quick. I remember meeting some Christians from a north-east state of Nigeria who were displaced to the central plateau, and some Muslims who were displaced as well; education, even in those displaced camps, was still important. Who drove that? Governments were helping, but it was mostly the charitable groups, the NGOs and people outside of Government policy or strategy who were actually doing it. The volunteers were teaching at a rudimentary level, but it was an education and it was so vital.

I also think of whole schools of young girls in Nigeria who have been kidnapped by Boko Haram and Daesh, and some have never been freed. Unfortunately, as so often happens at an early age, they are abused by their captors and they end up with children as well. One such example is Leah Sharibu, who was kidnapped about seven years ago and never been returned to her parents. She is now a mother of two children, according to the information that has come out. Even now, when she is a lady and no longer a school pupil or teenager, we think of her in captivity, as we think of all those young girls who are eager to be reunited with their families.

The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth was right to mention what is happening in Sudan, but unfortunately the same thing is happening in other parts of the world. I have been fortunate to visit Pakistan on two occasions, and I have seen the rudimentary housing in which Christians live. I always remember my first visit, when we saw two or three volunteer teachers teaching children of all ages, from four to 16, in one massive class, and they were all getting the education that was coming through. Again, education is so important to give children opportunity and chance, as well as hope, which is also important.

Pakistan sets aside 5% to 6% of jobs for Christians. However, for young Christians—I mention this because they were the people I was speaking to—those job opportunities can come only if they have the education to become a nurse, a doctor or a teacher and to move on. The last time we were there, we met the archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church in Pakistan, who outlined what they were doing with their schoolchildren to give them opportunities. Personally, it gave me heart to hear what was happening, but there are many people who fall outside that.

Again, education is so important, and we need to do a whole lot to make it happen. It is about opportunity, equality, human rights and somebody having the same chance to go for a job as somebody else who just happens to be a Muslim or a Hindu. Religion is not important; it is about a person's ability to do the job, so the opportunities should be there for them.

Research consistently shows that high-quality early education has long-term benefits, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Expanding access to

early education programmes and ensuring that they are adequately funded should be a priority. As the Minister knows, I am incredibly pleased to see her in her place. She very ably grasps our requests and does her darndest to ensure that our questions are answered, so I look forward to what she has to say. I also look forward to the contribution from the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton). We have fought many debates together, and we have been on the same side many times. We will be on the same side today as well, and I look forward to her contribution. By making early education a priority, we not only support individual children but strengthen families and communities, creating a ripple effect of opportunity and hope, which is so important. We do that at home, and we must also do it abroad.

I have an example from back home of what we try to do in education—it is from my constituency, rather than being a global issue, but it is still part of education. One of the most effective residents' associations in my constituency of Strangford is the Scrabo Residents' Association, which runs projects that build confidence among young men. In Northern Ireland we have a large number of people, including young Protestant males, who have not achieved the educational standards to get them a job or an opportunity or to give them hope. The Scrabo Residents' Association understands their potential and breaks their cycles of unemployment, and the success stories include young people who did not do well in education going on to drive heavy goods vehicles and to work in factories and farming. Their pride in their achievements is inspiring and demonstrates the value of grassroots initiatives. That is replicated by the church groups across my constituency of Strangford, and particularly in Newtownards.

Things such as the Engage programme, the nurture units and community-led projects could be used by church groups, missions, NGOs, and those who have a particular interest and passion for what happens in Africa and across the world. I think of those missionary groups that are committed to the provision of life education—that is just one example. They educate children at primary school level and the whole way through, and get those children to the point where they can have jobs—that is where we need to be. Global education today will lead to jobs tomorrow. The ambitions of young people, such as those in that Swaziland choir, to be teachers, doctors or nurses, or to have their own businesses, start with education.

Taking a step back, we should be amazed by what education does and can do for the future. Education is not just a pathway to personal achievement; it is a collective endeavour that shapes our society and future. By emphasising the role of faith, upholding freedom of religious belief and ensuring equitable policies, we can build a world where every child, regardless of their circumstances, has the opportunity to thrive. That is worth fighting for.

2.6 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing today's debate. As he pointed out, quality education is not just an important sustainable development goal, but an integral part of the achievement of all SDGs. It enhances

individual productivity, fosters economic growth, builds resilient communities in fragile states, develops skills for quality work opportunities, challenges harmful discriminatory values, and promotes peace, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Every child has a right to a quality education, no matter who they are or where they live, yet more than 250 million children worldwide are out of school, and marginalised groups such as girls, children with disabilities and those from remote or conflict areas bear the brunt of that exclusion. For example, in Afghanistan, the Taliban has created the world's most egregious women's rights crisis, with restrictions impacting access to secondary school and higher education for 1 million girls and women.

The provision of inclusive, equitable education is fragile in many more states than I have time to mention. Nigeria accounts for 20% of all out-of-school children in sub-Saharan Africa, and it would take Pakistan at least 50 years at the existing rate to enrol all girls in school. A September report from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency suggests that children's and young people's education in Gaza will be set back by five years, risking a lost generation of permanently traumatised Palestinian youth. With a ceasefire now in place, it is vital that the UK Government scale up the spending on education in their humanitarian response. Satellite images verify that more than 90% of schools in Gaza have been damaged and that no universities are still in place.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) pointed out, the lack of education in conflict and post-conflict zones puts children at further risk. These are traumatised children. Our own experience here in the UK during the pandemic showed that a school fulfils so much more than an academic responsibility; it is the frontline for a child's wellbeing and development.

The UK has been proud to stand as one of the largest donors to global education, and has consistently advocated for the transformative impact of education, but UK funding for global education has steadily declined over the past decade—from 13.5% of bilateral official development assistance in 2013 to just 3.5% in 2023. Of course, that is in part a result of the ODA budget being cut from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income, but education has faced much sharper cuts than other sectors, decreasing by 40%, compared with an average 25% decrease in other sectors. Can the Minister outline what steps the Department intends to take to remedy this disproportionate budget cut to global education in the next financial year? I note that the Government have commissioned three reviews of their international development policy, so I would be grateful to hear from the Minister when those will be published and what commitments will be made on education, including girls' education, for the upcoming financial year.

As we commemorate the International Day of Education, let us be reminded that by investing in inclusive and equitable quality education, we are not only fulfilling a fundamental human right, but paving the way for a more prosperous, just and sustainable future for us all.

2.10 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I echo others in thanking the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing this valuable debate.

[James MacCleary]

Tomorrow, on the United Nations International Day of Education, we must turn our attention to a fundamental truth: education is the foundation of opportunity, equality and progress. This year's theme could not be more relevant as we grapple with the rapid changes reshaping our world. Sustainable development goal 4 is a bold commitment to deliver quality education for all, yet with just five years left until 2030, we are worryingly off-track. Across the globe, nearly half of primary schools cannot cater for children with disabilities, and more than 20% lack basic sanitation for girls. Those are stark reminders that millions of young people are being denied their right to learn.

Conflict has only made matters worse. In Ukraine, more than 7,000 schools are out of action, and millions of children have seen their education upended. And it is not just Ukraine: as my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) said, Sudan has suffered greatly, as have other places, including Syria and Gaza. Education is often a casualty of war, and the future of too many children hangs in the balance.

Closer to home, although there have been some improvements in the global rankings, our own education system faces significant challenges. Teacher shortages, overstretched special educational needs and disabilities funding, and falling programme for international student assessment scores paint a picture of a system that is struggling to meet the needs of today's pupils.

Meanwhile, on the international stage, the UK Government's decision to slash bilateral aid for education from £757 million in 2017 to just £336 million last year is deeply shameful. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on what the Government aim to do to address those massive cutbacks, which have affected global education so much.

Education is not just about classrooms and textbooks; it is also a catalyst for progress, prosperity and peace. For the Liberal Democrats, that is non-negotiable. We would reverse the aid cuts, commit 15% of our development budget to education and prioritise support for women and girls. We would also create a UK sustainable development goal tsar to ensure real accountability for delivering SDG4 at home and abroad. Let us not forget that education transforms lives. It is the great leveller, opening doors to opportunity and hope. As we mark the International Day of Education, let us commit to ensuring that every child, wherever they are, has the chance to learn and thrive.

2.13 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global education, on securing the debate. I am grateful to Members for their contributions, and I have to single out the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who, as always, demonstrated his vast knowledge and understanding of international development matters.

As we mark the UN International Day of Education, I am reminded of the inextricable link between education and international development. We see that reflected in

UN sustainable development goal 4, and the work the Conservative Government did to expand access to education, particularly for women and girls worldwide. Remarkable progress has been made, but we must remember the challenges we face around the world. There is of course much more to do, but we are clear that education is one of the best investments we can make.

Since 2015, we have supported 19.8 million children, including more than 10 million girls, to gain a decent education. We know that girls' education, alongside all its intrinsic benefits, leads to safer and more prosperous societies, more effective peacebuilding, gender equality and greater resilience against climate change. In 2023, we launched the international women and girls strategy, which set the approach for the rest of the decade by placing women and girls at the heart of the work of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

To be clear, we do not value boys' education any less highly; on the contrary, only by involving boys and men can we address harmful gender stereotypes and break down the barriers that often hold women and girls back. I have asked the Government before about their plans to build on our work on the international women and girls strategy. I would appreciate a clear reassurance from the Minister that she has no plans to tinker with it, and that she will simply get on with what we started rather than risk the hard-won progress that has been achieved.

As the Minister knows, making progress in education is possible only if we work with the right partners, and that is why in government we were the top bilateral donors to the multilateral education funds: the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait. Together, they reach more than 80 countries, including in the most conflict-affected areas. GPE reports that it has reached 253 million children in partner countries since 2022; and as the Minister said recently, ECW, the global fund for education in emergencies, recruited or financially supported 23,449 teachers in 2022-23 alone. What are her plans for supporting global education funds such as GPE and ECW, and what representations is she making to the Treasury ahead of the spending review?

Education was embedded in our international development work in government. That was reflected in the three Es of the international women and girls strategy: "Educating girls, Empowering women and girls and championing their health and rights and Ending gender-based violence."

Those priority themes represent the areas where the challenges are most acute but the potential gains are greatest, and where the UK is best placed to add value and catalyse progress.

Like the international women and girls strategy, our 2023 international development White Paper is a road map to 2030. In the White Paper, we identified UK higher education and research as important partners in delivering development. Through direct research, international education, student links and scholarships, our education, science and research institutions are part of how the UK builds capacity with development partners.

Both of the first malaria vaccines to be recommended by the World Health Organisation drew on UK science and health expertise. Yesterday—22 January—marked exactly one year since the roll-out of the first malaria vaccine, which has now reached children in over

17 countries. The first, Mosquirix, was developed by GSK, a British company, and the second, R21, at the Jenner Institute at Oxford University. Given that impactful legacy from our time in Government, I ask the Minister how she plans to build on our support for the education and research sectors. I am sure she understands that continuing to leverage home-grown excellence will be crucial in achieving our development objectives.

I will turn to the development review. I know the Minister has received extensive evidence from Baroness Shafik, who has now submitted that independent review to her and the Foreign Secretary. I understand that they are currently considering the findings, and we eagerly await their plan to publish them. I give the Minister the opportunity in this debate to commit to engaging with Members on both sides of the House and to publishing the findings in full. I also invite her to share with us whether the review has considered education, as she will recognise the interest that hon. Members rightly have in that area.

Before I conclude, I will touch on two deeply concerning contexts. First, in Afghanistan, an estimated 3.7 million children are out of school, 60% of whom are girls. The Taliban blocked women and girls from pursuing secondary and higher education over the age of 12, and recently suspended access to medical education following the closure of many other educational routes. Will the Minister update us on the bilateral and multilateral discussions she is having to mobilise action on women and girls' education in Afghanistan?

Secondly, I will mention Myanmar, because we are concerned that 4 million children are currently out of school due to the humanitarian situation. I understand that the Government are taking a highly localised approach to aid delivery in Myanmar, and I appreciate that the Minister will not necessarily be able to speak in detail about local partners in order to protect their safety. However, I would be grateful if she could update us on some of the work that she is doing to help with access to education in Myanmar.

Quality education is an integral part of international development, and, as we mark the UN International Day of Education, let us celebrate our successes while remaining vigilant towards the challenges that we face today. The UK has a key role to play in working with partners and leveraging home-grown expertise to support education worldwide alongside our other international development objectives.

2.20 pm

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Sir Desmond. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) for securing this important debate on the eve of the UN International Day of Education. I am grateful to all hon. Members for the important points that they have raised during our relatively short debate. We have heard some illuminating speeches and I will do my best to respond to the many important points raised.

As many hon. Members have said, although there have been many improvements, such as in the absolute number of children able to access education, we know that education overall is in crisis. Globally, 250 million

children and counting are not in school. As we have heard, poverty, gender, disability and lack of schools or teachers, particularly trained teachers, all play a part in that.

The climate crisis and conflict are now disrupting the education of more than 220 million children and counting every single year. Last year alone, extreme weather events meant that children in low-income countries missed out on 18 days of school. As I discussed with some young people in South Sudan, the children who are flooded out of their schools during the rainy season are the same children who are not able to learn because it is too hot during the dry season. That means that in many of those countries, some children are missing up to a whole month of school. Millions of the children who are in school are not learning effectively, including the 70% of children in school in low and middle-income countries who are still unable to read a basic text by the age of 10.

Young women and girls are disproportionately affected by all that, so I am grateful to the Opposition spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), for raising the situation for women and girls, as she has done frequently. That particularly applies when it comes to access to higher and further education. If we look at sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only 7% of eligible women are enrolled in universities and colleges, compared with the global average of 42%. I am pleased that the right hon. Lady also mentioned the role of the UK's higher education sector in this context, because it is incredibly important to bring in that expertise. We are seeking to build that; I recently met Baroness Smith and other experts to talk about the UK's international education efforts.

When we consider that every additional year of learning provides a 10% increase in later earnings annually, it is clear that education has a key role to play in tackling poverty and supporting resilient, long-term growth. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) ably set out how important education is not just economically, but for so many other things, such as stability, security, healthcare and other outcomes that we need to see. She has considerable expertise in this area, given her previous roles with the British Council. However, we know that the financing gap for education in low and middle-income countries is an estimated \$97 billion every year. More than 60% of that gap is finance that would be provided by the Governments of those countries.

When we look at the overall contribution of official development assistance to education, we see that it makes up 3% of education budgets. As was mentioned rightly by my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green, who is really passionate about this issue, some 3.3 billion people are now living in countries that are spending more on servicing their debt than they are on the health or education that would underpin long-term, resilient and inclusive growth. All of that comes at a time when populations are on the rise in sub-Saharan Africa.

In short, we need the kind of massive global effort that many Members have said is necessary during this debate, to ensure that people are provided with a quality education. Over the last six months, I have been making the case for action around the world, from South Sudan to the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, and at the World Bank in Washington and the

[Anneliese Dodds]

COP29 climate summit in Baku. I also met the young people from across our country who have been championing global education in schools when they came to Parliament—perhaps other Members also met them; they were incredibly powerful advocates.

The UK is determined to work in genuine partnership with like-minded donors, multilateral organisations and countries and communities across the global south, so that we address the global learning crisis effectively and efficiently. Consequently, today I will highlight four areas that correspond to points raised by hon. Members.

First, we are making foundational learning for all a priority. That means using the best available evidence to support reforms and helping Governments to provide all children with the building blocks for their future. That work uses UK expertise to focus on foundational mathematics, and I saw how it made a huge difference when I was in Malawi. It involved moving away from rote learning, which often does not teach children the skills they need. Such work is important not just for numeracy, which I mentioned, and literacy; it is also important for the development of social and emotional skills, so that we can prepare children and young people to navigate a rapidly changing world.

Of course, we also need to target the most marginalised groups, including those living in poverty or conflict, refugees, those caught up in crisis, and girls; we seek to do that. The Opposition spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, mentioned the international women and girls strategy. She will know that where the previous Government aimed to make sensible reforms, my approach and the Government's approach is not to put those plans in a drawer and not enact them. We are determined to make progress speedily. Of course, we must ensure that the strategy is up to date. However, we will not say that the main tenets of those reforms—especially those around education for girls, which we have been discussing—should not be held to in the future. We really want to enact those reforms—it is the key thing for us—and to embed long-term progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green rightly mentioned disabled children, and Myanmar was equally rightly mentioned by the Opposition spokesperson. This morning, I met—virtually, obviously—some education specialists based in Myanmar. As the Opposition spokesperson rightly said earlier, given the regime in Myanmar and how it operates, I cannot go into a huge amount of detail about exactly which organisations are involved. However, I am really proud of the fact that the UK is working directly with local communities and local experts, so that children, including disabled children and children who have had limbs amputated because of landmines or because other problems have befallen them, can access education. That is really a case where, as my hon. Friend said, education is not just a privilege but a right for children, including disabled children.

I should also inform the Chamber that in October, we announced that the UK will launch a global taskforce to tackle sexual and physical violence, and psychological harm, in and around schools. Horrific abuse, both within schools and outside them, devastates lives, and it accounts for about 5% of school drop-outs and lower attainment worldwide. My hon. Friend the Member for

Southgate and Wood Green rightly raised that issue. We have to make sure that schools are safe. We are determined to advocate for that, which is in line with the fact that the UK is of course a signatory to the safe schools declaration. I am grateful to the previous Government for signing up to that declaration; it was right that they did so.

Of course, safety also has to be provided when it comes to freedom of religion and belief. I was grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for raising that issue, which he always champions, and I thank him for his kind words. It is absolutely right, as he said, that education provides dignity, and that a lack of literacy, numeracy and other skills disempowers people and prevents them from being able to make the choices that they might need to make for themselves and their families.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about the schoolgirls abducted in Nigeria. I have talked to schoolgirls in Zambia and I remember that they get up at 5.30 am to clean the place where they live. They were young—some as young as 13—but they do all the cooking for the household. They get ready to learn and they learn all day. They are thirsty to learn; they are determined to learn. We must always ensure that they have the safety that is surely their right, wherever they are in the world.

Secondly, we are scaling up finance for education around the world and seeking to make it smarter. We are sharing our trusted research and evidence to encourage philanthropic organisations to collaborate more and maximise our impact. We are pivoting away from funding education directly and towards helping Governments improve the way they support the sector for the long term, particularly with partners across the global south.

We are making the most of UK expertise and our diplomatic reach to champion innovative new ways to mobilise finance. The UK plays an important role in developing the international finance facility for education, which provides a sevenfold return on investment—it really is an incredible instrument and provides exactly the kind of multiplying effect we need to have on the funding available. We are now calling on others to join us in backing it. Together, we can unlock \$1 billion in additional affordable finance for lower and middle-income countries' Governments. Thirdly, we are determined to ensure that more children are safe and able to learn; that includes those, mentioned by many hon. Members, who live through conflict and in communities affected by the climate and nature crisis.

As Members have also mentioned, even with the welcome ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, the impacts of that conflict remain devastating for education. In Gaza, 95% of schools have been damaged or destroyed. So in addition to our funding for the UNRWA core budget, the UK is contributing £2 million to Education Cannot Wait and £5.6 million to the Global Partnership for Education, to improve access to education for hundreds of thousands of children across Gaza and the west bank as they start to rebuild. I was pleased that the hon. Member for Esher and Walton and many others mentioned that.

The case of Afghanistan was also rightly mentioned. Appalling measures have been adopted by the Taliban—particularly in relation to girls' secondary education, but also medical education and so many other areas in that country where women and girls are seeing their

rights systematically stripped away. The UK Government are determined to play our part. To support girls in Afghanistan, we are ensuring that at least 50% of our education funding is going to support their education; we are determined to ensure that. We are also advocating more generally for girls and women in Afghanistan. I was recently pleased to announce in this Chamber that the UK is now one of the countries that is politically supporting the case when it comes to Afghanistan on the basis of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

In November, we announced £14 million for education programmes in Sudan and for Sudanese refugees, where, as has been mentioned, 17 million children have had no access to education since April 2023. I was grateful for the words of the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) in that regard. In some areas 90% of children are now out of formal schooling in Sudan. The hon. Member, like the Government, has been determined to not just raise the profile of that appalling conflict, which is the worst displacement crisis in the world, but also to advocate for measures that will directly support Sudanese people; he knows that we have doubled the UK's support to Sudan and to Sudanese people who have been displaced. We are using every avenue to push for an end to the hostilities and to ensure that international humanitarian law is upheld. Like him, I pay tribute to organisations such as the Windle Trust that are so critical for the education of children in Sudan. I am very proud that it is based in my constituency. It really does impress me that an organisation based in Oxford is having such an impact all around the world.

The role of faith-based organisations was rightly mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford, because they so often have a huge impact for communities all around the world. I thank him for mentioning that. The use of schools as shelters, which was mentioned in relation to Sudan, was also a problem in Lebanon when there was the crisis there. The UK was determined to ensure that we were playing our part for the children no longer able to go to the schools being used as shelters, and that they would get the emergency education that they needed.

A number of Members raised the issue of funding, including my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green, who asked about overall funding. I confirm that, as well as supporting Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education, we have a number of bilateral programmes that focus on promoting learning. We are currently the top bilateral donor to the Global Partnership for Education, and the second largest bilateral donor to Education Cannot Wait. I had the privilege of being at Education Cannot Wait's annual general meeting. Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister, is a strong advocate for the organisation and is achieving incredible things with it. We are in the middle of a spending review process and we will, of course, bear in mind hon. Members' powerful comments about the importance of education as we develop our allocations and decisions for that spending review, both for the immediate future and the longer term. We will update the House on that as soon as is practicably possible.

There are three reviews at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, one of which, being undertaken by Baroness Minouche Shafik, is specifically focused on

development capability and capacity in the FCDO. It comes after many years of a lot of turbulence around the UK's approach to international development—in particular a huge amount of financial turbulence, which was not helped by the untrammelled growth of in-donor refugee costs in ODA. There was not a consistent approach but we are determined to have a consistent approach for the future. I hope that Members see that in the way that we are facing up to these issues.

On the point about teachers, I am sure that the National Education Union is keen to link its important work with work by Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education. Education Cannot Wait provides a lot of support for teachers, including direct financial support, support around recruitment and psychosocial support when teachers are operating in dangerous environments. There is an over-representation of fragile and conflict-affected states in the countries that receive the UK's contribution to the Global Partnership for Education—60% of our funding to GPE goes to such states. There is a lot of work in this area and I am sure that the NEU will want to engage with it. I would, of course, be very happy to discuss that with the union if that would be useful.

Finally, we are investing to make education systems more resilient to the climate crisis and better able to help students thrive beyond their school years.

Richard Foord: Does the Minister agree with the Chair of the International Development Committee, who called the use of official development assistance for hosting asylum seekers in hotels “a spectacular own goal”?

Anneliese Dodds: I have enormous respect for the Chair of the International Development Committee and I have had a lot of discussions with her and other members of the Committee on this subject. The decision to count in-donor refugee costs within the overall category of overseas development assistance is, of course, a statistical decision taken by the OECD.

Different countries have had far lower levels of overseas development assistance going into those in-donor refugee costs. They have not seen the untrammelled increases that we saw under previous Governments. As I said, the current UK Government are determined to have a longer-term approach to the issue, and to get the costs down. In fact we have been doing so, as has been reflected in the decision taken by the Chief Secretary of the Treasury to increase the yearly ODA just after the new year. Part of that was from the reduction in in-donor refugee costs. It is a priority for the Home Secretary and the whole Government to ensure that we are dealing with those issues, so I am grateful to him for raising that point.

We are investing to make systems for education more resilient. At COP28 in Dubai, the UK helped to launch a new global declaration on the common agenda for education and climate change, through which 90 countries have now committed to action on climate that helps protect education. Ahead of COP30 in Brazil this year, we are working with our partners to prioritise the role of education in combating the climate and nature crises and to secure further action to protect children, including when they are learning, from extreme weather.

[Anneliese Dodds]

In response to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald), who is no longer in her place, I should say that she is right to underline the relationship between education, water and sanitation. That is important because children should be able to do something as basic as go to the toilet when they are at school; it is particularly important when it comes to girls' education, because when there is not access to water that poses a particular problem for menstruating girls.

When it comes to resilience, we must ensure that we join up the UK's strength in artificial intelligence and education technology, and harness their power responsibly so we can support marginalised children, tailor learning to students' needs and boost the capacity of teachers, enabling them to reach children who cannot join them in the classroom. We are determined to ensure that more children can gain the skills they need to make the leap into higher and further education and employment. Once again, many thanks to all Members who have taken part in the debate. It has been an incredibly important one, and I look forward to the closing remarks.

2.41 pm

Bambos Charalambous: This has been a very positive debate, and it is great that there is cross-party support on this important issue. I thank all Members for their contributions and the Minister for her positive response. I look forward to how that investment from the Government is taken forward to build on the previous Government's commitment to education. The Minister is obviously a passionate advocate for education, and will want to see the fruits of the investments and steps the Government are taking to achieve SDG4 as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the International Day of Education.

2.42 pm

Sitting suspended.

Rare Retinal Disease

[DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

3 pm

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

That this House has considered innovation in the field of rare retinal disease.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I very much look forward to the contribution of the Lib Dem spokesman, the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling). I think his contribution will be a personal one and important to the debate. I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), in his place, and I look forward to his contribution. I am also pleased to see the Minister here. I have given both the shadow Minister and the Minister my speech with my highlighted comments, as requested. I thank the hon. Members for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) and for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) for coming along.

I thank the Backbench Committee for granting the debate. I am aware that it is niche, because only 25,000 people across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland suffer from the condition, but it affects 25,000 people and 25,000 families. As one who has tried to promote rare diseases on every occasion, I asked for this debate; the Members in the Chamber today have a particular interest.

As the wearer of glasses since the young age of eight, which was not yesterday, I am thankful that the issues with my eyes are easily diagnosed and treated. My annual appointment with Mackey's opticians in Newtownards keeps me right. It was with their help that I realised I had type 2 diabetes. With diabetes, we have to be a wee bit more careful with eyesight issues.

I remember going to an event in Cambridge, where I got my eyes tested on one of the new machines they had. A guy came up to me and said, "Jim, when was the last time you got your eyes tested?" I said, "I get them tested every year." He said, "Well, here's my read-out. Take it back to your optician." I took it back, thinking I had glaucoma. My dad had glaucoma, so I was rather worried. I was probably a wee bit perturbed because I had been to my opticians a few months before and was not aware of anything. I went to my optician and she said, "Jim, do you want to do the big tests?" We did the big tests up in Belfast. They did everything that they could possibly do with my eyes, and thank goodness I did not have it. The point I am making is that it is really important that eyes are tested regularly.

There is a well-known saying that the eyes are the window to the soul, and so they are, but they also are an indication of overall health and therefore eye care is as vital as any other part of our national health. The hon. Member for Torbay and I talked before the debate. Chris McCausland, who did "Strictly Come Dancing", has a rare retinal disease but look at what that man can do—his sense of humour, as a comedian, and his talent. He whizzed round the floor better than someone with full eyesight. He inspired the nation and rightly won.

Although rare diseases are individually rare, they are collectively common, with one in 17 people affected by a rare disease at some point in their lives. In the UK that

equates to approximately 3.5 million people and 110,000 in Northern Ireland. My interest in rare disease goes back to the Northern Ireland Assembly where I served for 12 years before coming here. This debate today will focus on a niche rare disease, and specifically on rare diseases relating to retinal diseases that lead to sight loss.

Inherited retinal dystrophies—IRDs—is the collective term used to describe inherited sight loss conditions that occur when cells in the retina deteriorate in an unpredictable way. I will talk about research and development because that is really important. IRDs are the most common cause of blindness in children and working-age people in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Although the conditions are rare, with some 25,000 people affected in the UK and 600 in Northern Ireland—some are my constituents, which is why I have introduced the debate—the impact on the people living with them is significant. When I ask people which sense they would not want to lose, they always say sight, because the eyes are the window to the world and to the soul—they help people appreciate what is around them. Although the other senses are also important, when someone loses their sight, they almost entirely lose the ability to know what is happening around them.

People living with rare retinal conditions not only face challenges in their day-to-day life caused by sight loss, but experience the added challenge of living with a rare condition and the impact it has on them and their families. That includes delays and complexity in getting a diagnosis. I know the Minister is always happy to respond positively and I look forward to her comments on how we can hurry up, or make easier, the process of getting a diagnosis.

Living with a rare condition also presents challenges in accessing treatment and specialist care. There is also a lack of awareness of these conditions. Some 95% of rare diseases currently lack an approved treatment and the existing standard of care for rare retinal diseases is equally limited, meaning there is high unmet clinical need. I will go into the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's process at the end of my speech, since it relates to my major request. Others will add their contributions as well.

The dual-pronged burden on patients with rare retinal disease means supporting access to new innovations that can improve the diagnosis, treatment, and care for these conditions. That should be a priority for the Government and their relevant agencies. Sight is the most important sense among adults in the UK, with 88% of people ranking it as their most valuable sense in a recent study published in *JAMA Ophthalmology*.

According to a report by Deloitte, the estimated total cost of IRDs in the UK is £523.3 million, a massive total, showing the importance of the debate. The total includes wellbeing costs of £196.1 million and total economic costs of £327.2 million, of which productivity costs affecting those of working age are £114.1 million and informal carer costs are £84.5 million. Those statistics support the necessity of the debate and highlight the importance of having a ministerial response on the Government's stance on the issue.

New innovations that represent a step change in the standard of care for people living with rare retinal diseases are on the horizon, which we have to be prepared

for. At the centre of this is a shift toward personalised medicine made possible by recent advances in cell and gene therapies, a transformative class of medicines described by the Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation, Lord Vallance, as a “new era of cures”. I hope this is where we are going. CGTs are highly specialised types of treatment that aim to treat the root cause of diseases and disorders by augmenting, repairing, replacing, or regenerating organs, tissues, cells, genes, and metabolic processes in the body. Often one-off treatments, they can deliver potential benefits over the course of a patient's lifetime and therefore represent a step change in how we treat disease. The families, as well as the people who have the retinal disease, are in the middle of that process and experience all the angst that comes with it as well.

Access to new innovations and treatments for rare diseases, termed “orphan medicines”, is a challenge across all healthcare systems. Smaller patient populations along with complex and difficult diagnoses can mean the cost of developing new treatments is higher, compared with treatments for more common diseases, and there can be more uncertainty in the evidence base generated from clinical trials.

In a study on social attitudes to rare diseases, 82% of participants felt that NICE should evaluate the cost-effectiveness of treatments for rare diseases differently from more common diseases, taking into account the additional challenges in developing medicines for rare diseases and, of course, looking at rare diseases overall. It is therefore vital that the regulatory or assessment bodies factor in those considerations when making decisions on whether to approve new treatments or new innovations for rare retinal diseases.

I will now try to develop an argument on one of my other asks. In England, the assessment body for medicine, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, has two medicine appraisal pathways: the standard technology appraisal pathway and the highly specialised technology pathway. That is, perhaps, the central core issue of the debate. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health considers and endorses technology appraisals undertaken by NICE, but, whatever the NICE approvals are here, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Health Department follow its indications and directive—whatever happens here comes to us. We will be the beneficiaries of NICE recommendations in Northern Ireland, so the debate is really important for me both as the DUP's health spokesperson and as a Member representing a constituency in Northern Ireland, where health is a devolved matter.

Treatments for very rare diseases have traditionally struggled to get approval from NICE when routed through this standard technology appraisal pathway, which is not designed to factor in the additional uncertainty associated with rare disease treatments; we have a big ask in relation to that, Minister. It is therefore vital that the higher specialised technology appraisal pathway can enable timely patient access to treatments for rare diseases.

NICE is conducting a review of its HST programme criteria for determining what treatments are assessed by the HST pathway. The aims of the review, which are welcome, are to ensure more consistent, predictable and transparent decisions, but there are definitely concerns that the refinements proposed by NICE in its consultation

[Jim Shannon]

may in fact narrow the number of future treatments eligible for the HST pathway, and, ultimately, risk patient access to future treatments for rare retinal disease. I will have three or four asks at the end, but that will be one of the key ones and it will conflict with the ambitions set out in priority 4 of the Government's rare diseases action plan 2024 for improved

"access to specialist care, treatment and drugs".

Of particular concern for retinal disease today are the thresholds being proposed under criteria 1 and 3. Criterion 1 is that the disease is ultra-rare and debilitating, which is defined as having a prevalence above 1 in 50,000 in England. Criterion 2 is that

"no more than 300 people in England are eligible for the technology in its licensed indication",

and that the technology is not an individualised medicine. Those changes, which tighten the criteria for HST routing, would force more new and innovative treatments for rare retinal disease, as well as other rare diseases, to be assessed via the STA pathway.

To be approved via the STA pathway, treatments are required to meet a significantly lower incremental cost-effectiveness ratio threshold, which is often not possible for many treatments for rare diseases. As a result, innovations might not be approved by NICE for routine use in the NHS, and that is the question I am posing to the Minister.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place; she usually has to answer my queries in debates and she always tries to do so. People living with retinal disease, as well as carers and clinicians, all highlight slowing down the progression or, if possible, reversing sight loss as a top priority for future treatments for IRDs. Delays in access to treatment may result in further disease progression and the deterioration of sight. We need solutions to improve diagnosis, treatment and care for people living with rare retinal diseases. To address the concerns on the proposed refinements to the NICE HST criteria, I would like to ask what discussions the Department of Health and Social Care and Ministers have had with NICE on the potential impact of the changes on people living with rare retinal diseases, and on opportunities for appropriate flexibility? Will Ministers, in the absence of any meaningful change to the HST criteria, commit to exploring a potential "third way"—it is always good to have a third way—for technologies that do not meet the criteria for HST and have a low likelihood of positive recommendations under the STA pathway?

On the support for people living with rare retinal diseases more broadly, the Government's UK rare diseases framework and the corresponding annual action plans have been important in providing co-ordinated action across four areas: helping patients to get a final diagnosis faster; increasing awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals—perhaps those who are not skilled or do not have the necessary training; making the co-ordination of care better; and improving access to specialist care, treatment and drugs. There are four asks in relation to that.

The momentum of the framework and the action plans must continue to deliver improvements for people living with rare diseases, including rare retinal diseases,

which this debate is all about. The current framework is due to come to an end in 2026; what happens afterwards? We hope there will be a clear action plan. I am pleased that the Government have taken the decision to spend £26 billion on the NHS—it shows their commitment to addressing a key issue, which is right, and we all welcome that commitment—but do they plan to publish a new rare diseases framework in 2026? Will they include access to rare disease medicines as a central pillar of the next framework, and keep the issues relating to NICE appraisal of rare disease treatments under ongoing review so that those suffering with the conditions can access effective treatments?

Retina UK, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary, has provided some background to the current situation. I put on the record my thanks to the charity for making that information available; it probably helped all of us who are taking part in the debate. Some 54% of respondents to Retina UK's 2022 sight loss survey were aware of research into their condition, while 20% had participated in that research and 31% could name the gene causing their condition, which was a significant improvement from 15% in 2019. That is a positive step in the right direction, reflecting better genetic diagnosis and education. However, unmet demand for genetic testing and counselling persists, emphasising the need for increased funding and accessibility.

Something that struck me about rare retinal diseases is that 93% of respondents to the survey reported experiencing anxiety, stress or loss of confidence due to sight loss, but only 16% had accessed mental health support. Some level of anxiety, depression, angst or stress often comes with a very difficult disease, particularly retinal disease. Although resources such as Discover Wellbeing offer tailored psychological support and strategies to improve resilience and quality of life, it is clear that more support needs to be offered. For example, perhaps GP surgeries could be given more information to signpost our constituents—their clients—to greater support, which should be available as they navigate their life journey in a completely different way.

It must be noted that 56% of survey respondents prioritised funding research into treatments, compared with 23% who prioritised providing support services and 21% who prioritised raising societal awareness. Improved genetic testing services and counselling are crucial to enhancing patient care and enabling clinical trial participation. Some 39% of respondents had experienced sight loss-related accidents requiring medical attention, so policies to promote access to mobility aids and rehabilitation services are also urgently needed. [Interruption.] A bell is telling me that my time is coming to an end. I am thankful for that reminder—I am on the last page of my speech.

Continued investment in research, infrastructure and inclusive technology will drive significant improvements in the lives of individuals with IRDs, but that requires commitment from the Minister, the Government and this House to increase funding for research. First, we must support funding initiatives for genetic testing, clinical trials and treatment innovation for rare retinal diseases; secondly, we must promote accessibility and enhance the programmes that provide assistive technologies, mobility aids and accessible information to individuals with sight loss; thirdly, we must expand mental health services; and fourthly, we must advocate for early diagnosis and counselling.

I have made a number of requests, but they are positive requests. I hope that, in the response from the Minister and from my Government, we can find a way forward to help those with retinal diseases. We must seek to deliver in a more effective way, and this debate is the first step towards that.

3.21 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. In my time in the House I have written speeches for Westminster Hall that are five, six or seven minutes long, but by time I get here the Chair always tells me that I have a minute, so I only wrote a minute-long speech.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman can go on for as long as he likes.

Shockat Adam: The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, “Do what I do and expand it.” This subject is extremely important, and I am so grateful for the hon. Gentleman for bringing it to this Chamber.

Imagine a mother-to-be sitting on a consulting room chair. Her excitement at becoming a mother has been overshadowed by the news that she has been diagnosed with Stargardt disease. It is literally a race against time: will the child be born or will the sight be lost? Imagine a young boy who has expressed his ambition to become a rugby player for England, only for a cursory investigation at the back of the eye to detect retinitis pigmentosa. Unfortunately for me, that was my reality as an optometrist. I faced such heartbreaking cases regularly in my profession.

Rare retinal diseases such as retinitis pigmentosa, Stargardt disease and Leber congenital amaurosis, among many others, are individually rare but collectively very significant. They devastate and destroy lives. The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned Chris, the victor of “Strictly Come Dancing”; he shows the potential of the majority of people with sight loss, but unfortunately that is not the reality for most—their lives are destroyed, their independence is taken and opportunities at work are limited.

The UK Government have committed to tackling rare diseases through initiatives such as the UK rare diseases framework, which aims to improve diagnosis, raise awareness and enhance the access to specialist care. Additionally, a new action plan is set to be released in 2025, showing promise for further progress. But commitments need to translate into tangible action.

Furthermore, we need regulatory bodies such as NICE to play a pivotal role. I fully appreciate NICE’s work to ensure that the quality and safety of treatments can never be compromised—those principles are non-negotiable—but to encourage innovation, NICE must proactively engage with pharmaceutical and medical companies to work collaboratively to establish best practices. Such dialogue will signal to companies that their commitment to researching rare diseases, which costs millions, will be met with the potential for reward. This will ensure that patients can benefit from cutting-edge advancements without delay. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, short-term investment in research and treatment for rare retinal diseases will deliver long-term financial benefits, to the tune of £600 million. It will also reduce lifelong healthcare costs and empower patients to live independent, productive lives.

The eyes are indeed the window of the soul, but they are also the window to our health. So many health conditions are detected in the eyes, and rare retinal conditions can lead to the early detection of other health conditions, such as Behçet’s disease and so many others. We are thankfully on the brink of transformative breakthroughs. Gene therapies such as Luxturna, which is a virus vector-based medication, along with AI-driven early detection and advancements in stem cell research, offer real hope. By supporting those innovations with funding and adaptable regulations, we can bring life-changing treatments to those who need them most.

This is about not just health but equity and humanity. Without action, we will condemn families to live in the shadow of irreversible loss, because if a person has sight loss, it affects the whole family. With action, we can rewrite their stories and give them hope and vision. Let us act now for that mother, that young boy and the thousands like them. Sight is not a privilege: it is a right.

3.26 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. He rightly highlighted how inspirational it was to see Chris McCausland winning “Strictly Come Dancing” a few weeks ago. Chris McCausland shared three words at the end of that journey: “opportunity, support and determination”. Those play out well in respect of the challenges we face, which the hon. Members for Strangford and for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) unpacked extremely well.

At an event last night hosted by the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment, a gentleman with retinitis pigmentosa told us that when he was diagnosed at the age of eight, his mother was taken aside and told, “This child should be sterilised at a certain age. That is the best way of sorting out this condition.” That is absolutely horrific, and I am heartened that, a little under 50 years later, the world has moved on.

My visual impairment was diagnosed about 45 years ago. I suffer from Stargardt disease, which is one of the two significant areas in terms of inherited conditions. I was deeply upset as a young lad, mostly because I was not able to be a lorry driver; I idolised my father, and that was my aspiration.

Visual impairments have a significant impact on people’s ability to fulfil their aspirations, as colleagues have highlighted, but they also impact opportunities. Twenty-five thousand people across the United Kingdom are affected by such conditions, and 75% of people registered blind are sadly unemployed, so we are condemning people who have drawn from the lottery of life; they are very much more likely to be unemployed than other people in their communities.

I have discovered that the cost of such conditions is £500 million a year, in a number of different pots. That includes not just the cost of medical intervention, but the cost to society of supporting each individual. Some 95% of these hereditary conditions are untreatable, potentially until the not-too-distant future.

The hon. Member for Strangford laid out the challenges for NICE. We are in a perverse situation at the moment—almost an anti-Goldilocks situation—where one falls

[*Steve Darling*]

between two stools: it is a rare disease, but it is a relatively common rare disease, and therefore does not fit within the ultra-rare criteria, so one falls between two stools. I hope the Minister will give serious consideration to the two conditions—retinitis pigmentosa and Stargardt’s—where significant numbers of people will be impacted by falling between those two stools. I reflect again on the words of Chris McCausland: give us opportunity, support and determination.

3.30 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain, and to do so debating a health matter, as we have spoken many times in the past about health issues. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who I call my friend, for bringing forward this debate.

I am equally grateful for the opportunity to serve opposite the Minister. She and I have served opposite one another on many occasions in the past—previously with me on the Government side and her on the Opposition side, but I am getting used to this side of the Chamber now. It is encouraging that she is responding because she engages with these debates and gives genuine answers. The debate will be the better for her being the Minister.

The hon. Member for Strangford has brought forward a hugely important debate, as he so often does. Many important issues rarely get brought before the House, yet we are the poorer for that. This debate might not otherwise have been tabled, but it is right that we debate the issue. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), who is not in the Chamber but has done a lot in the House to highlight the issue in her work with the APPG—it would be wrong not to recognise that in this debate. I also pay tribute to the Royal National Institute of Blind People for its work and to all those who have contributed to raising awareness.

Before I became a Minister in 2018, I was the vice-chairman of the APPG on eye health and visual impairment, so I took an interest in this important issue back then, and it crossed my radar on a number of occasions when I was Health Minister. As the hon. Member for Strangford and the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) set out, while individual rare conditions may be exactly that—they occur rarely, with few people getting them—collectively, rare conditions account for a significant number of the conditions that individuals in this country have.

The hon. Member for Leicester South brought his background and knowledge to bear on the subject, as he does when speaking about these matters. He highlighted the potentially devastating impact that optical and retinal diseases and illnesses can have on someone’s life. A few years ago I did something very trivial; somehow—heaven knows why—a tree branch went right across my eye and cut it. I recovered fully, but for the few weeks that I had the treatment and the cream, it had an impact on my daily life. It was trivial in the great scheme of things—although if untreated, it may not have been—and I can only begin to imagine the impact of some of those conditions, as the hon. Member elucidated.

Shockat Adam: The right hon. Member should not feel bad, as that is the most common reason for eye trauma—gardening is the most dangerous sport for eye health. I have met people who lost their sight from a branch scratching their cornea.

Edward Argar: In which case, I remain very grateful to the clinicians at the Leicester royal infirmary. The hon. Member will be pleased to know that my wife shares his view about the dangers of gardening, particularly when I am doing it.

As right hon. and hon. Members can see, I am increasingly reliant on my reading glasses and my regular eye tests at Specsavers—other opticians are available. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, that is a reminder of the importance of the issue. A regular eye test not only can detect optical and retinal illnesses earlier, but can potentially spot other more serious conditions that are not directly related to eye health, but of very great significance.

Jim Shannon: I had two constituents in Newtownards who came to me complaining of a really sore head and a terrible colour. I said, “Have you been to the doctor?” “Yes,” they said. “Go and see your optician,” I said. On both occasions, they had tumours—one of them was the size of a golf ball; the other was growing. When they got to the A&E at Ulster hospital, they were retained and had emergency operations. With a simple interview and appointment, an optician can diagnose that early on, which can save someone’s eyesight and their life as well.

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He and I have known each other since we came to this House, and he has read my mind, because I was about to say that there are examples of life-threatening tumours being detected through a regular eye test and a referral onwards, which has saved people’s lives. As he set out, an estimated 25,000 or so people in the UK are affected by inherited retinal diseases. As the hon. Member for Leicester South said, the most common, which I will mispronounce, is retinitis—

Shockat Adam: Pigmentosa.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As a professional optometrist, I am sure his bill will be in the post. Inherited retinal diseases can lead to a gradual loss of vision and can have potentially devastating effects.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): My wife lives with retinitis pigmentosa. We have been together for 30 years, and over that time, I have seen how that degenerative eye disease can change the way that we live, adapt and care for each other as a family. Although there is a massive place, as we have talked about, for innovation and research and for access to investigation for treatment, once she got the white cane that she has now, that became a symbol for everybody else. People notice that she has a condition and they are much more attentive to her for that reason.

It is in the period before that where we could make an intervention around inclusion and education. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we could do something at that point to identify to others that somebody has a condition, which they might not be able to see, in order to help them?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. One of the key themes of this debate has been the importance of raising awareness and of societal understanding. Before I was a Minister, I co-chaired the APPG on dementia. I think we are making progress, but a large part of the challenge that we face as a society is raising the awareness and understanding of hidden conditions or things that might not be immediately apparent to people, particularly before there is a diagnosis or some sort of visual sign, such as a white cane, or other measures. This debate will play a small but important role in helping to raise awareness of those conditions.

The next challenge, as was alluded to, is diagnosis and what more can be done to deliver better and earlier diagnosis. Again, real progress is being made, but, as so often in these spaces, we can do more. It is a pleasure to be taking part in this debate, because although we often to and fro across the Dispatch Box or across the Chamber, I suspect that there is a fair degree of consensus today about where we are, what progress we have made and what more needs to be done, which is all to the good.

As has also already been alluded to, when there is a diagnosis, the next challenge is the treatment and what is possible in the way of treatment. In 2019, as has been said, NICE recommended the use of a new gene therapy called—again, I will use the abbreviation rather than the technical term—the Luxturna approach; I am sure that the hon. Member for Leicester South would be able to correct me, if necessary. It was recommended to treat inherited retinal dystrophies that are caused by a specific type of gene mutation. We are seeing real progress with that type of viral vector-based gene therapy. There are also potential new treatments that we have heard about, including further gene and stem cell therapies, artificial vision therapies, electrical stimulation therapies and indeed the use of growth factors and retinal transplants.

I have sat where the Minister is sitting now, so I know that there is always a challenge in this space. One of the great successes of our country is in innovation, including the rapid development of new therapies and new treatments. However, there must always be a process to make sure that they are safe and effective, and we must strike the appropriate balance in recognising that there is no infinite pot of money for any Government.

In August 2024, *Retina Today*, a respected journal, reported that there are currently over 30 gene therapies in development for the treatment of a range of retinal diseases, so we can look forward with a degree of cautious confidence to what is being done in that space. The challenge will always be, of course, how we translate such treatments into effective, deployable and—if I am being honest—affordable solutions for people who have such conditions. The situation is similar with artificial vision technologies, including the implanting of microchips. Therefore, there is reason for us to be hopeful about treatment and research.

I now turn to the UK rare diseases framework, which hon. Members have spoken about today. It was first published in January 2021 and there have been a number of action plans since: there was one in February 2022, with 16 actions; one in February 2023; and one in May 2024. I was encouraged that in December 2024 the Minister's colleague—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne)—reaffirmed the Government's commitment to the rare diseases framework. I am also

encouraged that there is talk of a 2025 refresh. I hope that the Minister can give a little more information on how she sees that process playing out when she speaks.

Some progress was made with those action plans, but if we are being completely honest, it was perhaps not as much progress as we might have wished. There are a range of external reasons for that, but there is now an opportunity for the new Government to continue to take the process forward. From what I see and hear, they are committed to and willing to do that, which is deeply encouraging.

With regard to NICE, I have already alluded to the challenges that it always faces. It has a difficult role to assess the clinical and cost-effectiveness of medicines and treatment, which is challenging because if someone is in need of a treatment—indeed, if they are desperate for a treatment—they will obviously want that treatment to be trialled. We therefore need to recognise that NICE does a difficult job in striking the right balance.

NICE uses the HST—highly specialised technology—programme. As we heard, refinements to the routing criteria have been proposed, including that

“The disease is ultra-rare and debilitating...having a point prevalence of 1:50,000 or less in England...is lifelong after diagnosis with current treatment, and...has an exceptional negative impact and burden on people with the disease”;

that there is the

“aim to encourage innovation and research”,

which is a good thing that we can all support; that

“The technology should be limited to the population in its licensed indication... No more than 300 people in England are eligible for the technology for its licensed indication, and the technology is not an individualised medicine”;

and that there are “no effective treatment options”.

I understand that just before Christmas NICE launched a public consultation, ahead of updating the HST eligibility criteria. That consultation is due to report later this year, following the closure of the consultation on 30 January. As I look at the date on my watch, I can see that hon. Members and other individuals have about a week or so in which to make any representations or put any views to that consultation, should they wish to do so.

I hope that the Minister will be able to update right hon. and hon. Members on each of those aspects—where she sees us going with diagnosis, treatment and access to treatment, and where she sees that research going in the long term. I hope the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) will forgive me for not mentioning him before, but I pay tribute to him for bringing to his role and to this subject—as he does to his other speeches in this Chamber and the main Chamber, and to other debates since he has arrived in this House, not limited to this subject—a measured, thoughtful and knowledgeable approach. The House is all the better for those contributions.

Once again, I am deeply grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for bringing forward this hugely important debate. This House is at its best when Members debate not the to-ings and fro-ings that we all put in our election leaflets, but consensual matters where there are genuine points of interest and where we can make a real difference for people. That is one reason why I was very keen, despite being the shadow Secretary of State, to speak in this debate—but also, of course, because it is a

[Edward Argar]

pleasure to serve opposite the Minister again for old time's sake. I very much look forward to what she has to say and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to speak.

3.46 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhan. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate on such an important issue and other Members for their contributions.

Both the shadow Secretary of State and I are covering for other colleagues this afternoon, so hon. Members can imagine my joy when actual experts walked into the Chamber. The hon. Members for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) and for Torbay (Steve Darling), as has been said, bring great personal and professional expertise to this debate, so it was joyful to see them come in. It was good to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher); the experience he brings through his wife is really valuable. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) has been such a champion of this issue both in her personal experience and since she came to the House. I understand that it is her birthday today, so I hope she is having a good time. She has brought great expertise to this place.

I am going to do my best to answer the questions. I have been billed highly by the hon. Member for Strangford, and I am grateful for that. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne), will write to hon. Members about anything that is outstanding.

I would like to take time to acknowledge the experiences of those living with rare inherited retinal diseases and their families, who I know will be paying attention to this debate. I pay tribute to all those who work tirelessly to raise awareness of rare conditions and bring about change. Although rare diseases are rare individually, their impacts are far-reaching. One in 17 people will be affected by a rare condition over their lifetime; that is around 3.5 million people in the United Kingdom. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, rare inherited retinal diseases affect around 25,000 people in the UK and collectively represent a leading cause of sight loss in working-age adults. We recognise the impact that these conditions have on patients, families and wider society and the need for innovative approaches to tackle these changes.

The Government are committed to improving the lives of people with rare conditions. The hon. Member for Torbay used that quote about providing opportunity, support and determination for people. The UK rare diseases framework outlines four priorities to achieve this aim: helping patients get a final diagnosis faster; increasing awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals; better co-ordination of care; and improving access to specialist care treatment and drugs. In England, our annual rare diseases action plan sets out the steps we are taking to meet those priorities. We continue to make progress and are working to finalise our next England action plan for publication this year.

It is vital that NHS patients with rare diseases are able to access innovative new treatments as they become available. That includes those with progressive retinal diseases, where early intervention is crucial to preserve sight. Under England's action plans, NICE, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and NHS England are working to understand and address the barriers to access for rare diseases treatment. The hon. Member for Strangford asked a number of questions about NICE's approach that I hope I will cover. NICE does a difficult job well, in my view, and we think its approach is appropriate for the evaluation of treatments for rare diseases. NICE recommended 84% of medicines for rare diseases evaluated through its standard technology appraisal programme in 2023-24. That is comparable to its approval rate for medicines for more common conditions. Those treatments are now available for the treatment of NHS patients.

NICE also operates a separate, highly specialised technology programme for the evaluation of a handful of medicines for very rare diseases each year that recognises the challenges of bringing treatments for very rare diseases to market. NICE recommended the gene therapy Luxturna for a type of inherited retinal dystrophy through that route. One of the recipients of that groundbreaking therapy on the NHS has spoken of his gratitude for the positive effects of the treatment on not just his vision, but his confidence and independence.

NICE is also in the process of reviewing the criteria for routing topics to its highly specialised technologies programme, which the hon. Member for Strangford asked about. That review will ensure that future routing decisions are more transparent, consistent, efficient and predictable. As part of that process, NICE has launched a public consultation on its progress. I encourage the rare diseases community and hon. Members interested to continue to engage with that process.

Research offers a way to accelerate access to new and innovative treatments. Through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Government support rare diseases research. There are currently eight active research projects on rare retinal disease funded by the NIHR, with a combined value of over £6 million. The NIHR also invests in infrastructure to support and deliver research studies. The NIHR Moorfields Biomedical Research Centre, which is dedicated solely to vision research, has made significant strides in the field of rare retinal diseases. By harnessing genomic data, the BRC has developed effective treatments, including gene-replacement therapies for inherited retinal disorders. The NIHR is also working closely with commercial companies to bring new medicines and technology to patients.

To connect people living with rare diseases to innovative treatments and sources of support, we need to diagnose these conditions as early as possible. The UK is a world leader in genomic diagnosis. Patients in England have access to whole genome sequencing on the NHS. Advances in genomics mean that new causes of rare retinal diseases are being found every year. As part of Genomics England's generation study, we are harnessing the power of genomic sequencing to screen for over 200 rare genetic conditions that can be treated in the NHS in early childhood to improve outcomes for babies and their families. That includes the rare retinal disease RPE65-associated Leber congenital amaurosis, which can be treated with Luxturna.

A central mission of this Government is to build a health and care system fit for the future. The 10-year health plan will ensure a better health service for everyone, regardless of condition or service area. The plan will focus on our three shifts for a modern NHS: moving from hospital to community, analogue to digital and sickness to prevention. All three offer opportunities to improve time to diagnosis and care for people living with rare retinal conditions. The shift from analogue to digital will enable innovative uses of data to improve diagnosis and measure treatment outcomes, while NHS ocular genetics services' use of video consultations continues to widen patient access to specialist advice, in keeping with the shift from hospital to community. Although many rare diseases are not preventable, early diagnosis, as we have heard, can lead to timely interventions that improve health outcomes.

I will outline the treatment pathway for rare retinal diseases. I am thankful for the role played by high street optometrists, some of them here today, in helping to identify patients with sight-threatening conditions. There is good availability of NHS sight-testing services, with over 12 million free NHS sight tests provided to eligible groups annually, including children, individuals aged 60 and over, and those on income-related benefits. Optometrists are required to refer any patient showing signs of injury, disease or abnormality and integrated care boards have been asked to ensure that there are direct referral pathways in place between community optometry and secondary care. As the hon. Member for Leicester South said, the eyes are the gateway into other health conditions. Optometry has a very important role.

As one of the busiest outpatient specialties with one of the largest waiting lists, we know that ophthalmology is facing huge challenges and we are working hard on how we can help to build capacity. NHS England is looking at how digital connectivity could improve the triage of patients referred between primary and secondary care. That would allow for images to be shared, and specialist advice and guidance could help to keep patients in the community where possible.

We recognise the importance of access to emotional and practical support, especially where treatment may not be available. A diagnosis of sight loss will have a profound impact on any individual, who will be at increased risk of stress, anxiety and depression. NHS England's patient support toolkit for eye care commissioners and providers aims to ensure that patients with ophthalmic conditions or sight loss are supported throughout their care journeys. The RNIB patient support pathway aims to strengthen that and ensure that support and guidance are available to patients from their first eye care appointment through to having a confirmed diagnosis, and then right the way through to living well with their condition. I know that the work of the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment and of other hon. Members will help in giving those people a powerful voice.

As we work towards building a health care service fit for the future, it is vital that people living with rare diseases are not left behind. With the UK rare diseases framework coming to an end in 2026, we will look to build on the progress made over the past five years, which the shadow Secretary of State mentioned. We will work with colleagues in the devolved Administrations, as highlighted by the hon. Member for Strangford.

We have commissioned an evaluation of England's rare diseases action plans through NIHR and will also be undertaking engagement this year to inform future policy decisions. The Government are deeply committed to working across the health and social care system and with the rare diseases community to improve the lives of those with rare conditions.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for raising this important matter. It is good to have high interest, expertise and experience in this place. We want to work with colleagues here and we thank the rare disease community for their valuable ongoing engagement with us to bring about meaningful change.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I will now put—[*Interruption.*]

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Oh, I am sorry; I nearly denied the hon. Member for Strangford his right to sum up. I apologise. I would never wish to silence him.

3.56 pm

Jim Shannon: I know we are all anxious to get away, Dame Siobhain. So am I, by the way—I have a plane to catch.

Can I say a big thank you to everyone who took part in the debate? The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) brought up the personal stories of the mum who was expecting and did not realise that she was going to end up with this disease and of the young boy who wanted to be a rugby star when unfortunately that was not going to happen. Those are reminders of what the disease does and I thank him for that. I note that he is an optometrist; I did not know that he did that before he came here, but now I do and I thank him for it. The Minister was right in saying that the talent and information brought to the Chamber has helped us to move forward. The hon. Member for Leicester South also discussed gene therapy and said that the eyes are the window to health. Again, I thank him for that significant contribution.

The hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) brought us the personal story of his wife, and what they live with every day. Stories of family members are sometimes forgotten; they are doing something for someone and there is a personal story about how the rest of the family is affected.

The shadow Secretary of State was right that the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) brings many things to this Chamber outside of health issues. When he speaks there on the front row, we take knowledge; we are always reminded by that wee bell that rings that he is here. We all know. I thank him for that and for his knowledge, which is so important.

The shadow Secretary of State and I have been together in many debates over the years. This subject is important and interesting and he was right to thank the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). I should have done so; apologies. He is right that she has been a leader and a champion when it comes to eye trauma. By the way, I did not know that the work place most dangerous for the eyes was the garden. That was

[Jim Shannon]

news to me. I will not talk about my endeavours with a chainsaw; they were scary, although I have survived. The shadow Secretary of State also mentioned regular eye tests, early diagnosis, treatment, research, affordable solutions, the UK rare diseases network and the degree of concern.

I thank the Minister. It may come easy or not so easy, but the hon. Lady always endeavours to give a response on the issues, whether her direct responsibility or not. Today she has done that. She referred to this as a far reaching issue and said that the Government are committed to the rare diseases framework, to faster diagnosis and to the new treatment Luxturna. Right away, she was able to tell us that some people have got that and are feeling the benefit. Those are the pluses that come out

of these debates. The Government are committed to research and development and the UK is a leader in genomics. She referred to the treatment pathway and also to ensuring that those with rare retinal disease not being left behind. That is a message we all appreciate. Today the debate has done that, and the Minister has done it well.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I apologise again to the hon. Member for Strangford.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered innovation in the field of rare retinal disease.

4 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 23 January 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Assimilated Law Report

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): Today I have laid a report regarding the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 (REUL Act) before Parliament and published it on gov.uk. This report updates the House in line with the obligations under section 17 of the REUL Act, which requires a report to be published and laid before Parliament every six months detailing all revocations and reforms of assimilated law. This is the third report being laid before the House.

The report today summarises the data on the assimilated law dashboard, providing the public with information about the amount of assimilated law there is and where it sits across Departments. The dashboard reflects the position as of 23 December 2024, showing that a total of 6,901 instruments of REUL/assimilated law concentrated over approximately 400 unique policy areas are on the dashboard. Since the previous update to the dashboard 40 assimilated law instruments have either been revoked or reformed, meaning that 2,395 have now been revoked or reformed in total.

The report gives details of a further 11 statutory instruments using powers under the REUL Act and other domestic legislation, which the Government have laid since the previous report to deliver on their priorities. These include, for example, the Ionising Radiation (Medical Exposure) (Amendments) Regulations 2024, which contain legislative amendments that maximise the efficiencies provided by technological advancements and, in turn, allow for the faster diagnosis of cancers, personalised patient treatment, and a reduction in workforce pressures, all while safeguarding patient safety. These changes support the delivery of the Government's health mission priorities.

This Government are determined to support economic growth, which is why we are working with industry and businesses to deliver our industrial strategy and small business plan to improve economic opportunities. Delivering these strategies requires the right regulatory frameworks to support innovation, economic growth, investment, and high-quality jobs. We will reform assimilated law, where desirable, to deliver that vision, and to deliver growth for UK businesses and citizens.

This Government will also consider the future reform of assimilated law within the wider context of their national missions, plans for change, and commitment to reset relations with devolved Governments and the EU.

[HCWS384]

TREASURY

Loan Charge: Independent Review

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): At the Budget, the Government announced that they would commission an independent review of the loan

charge to help bring the matter to a close for those affected while ensuring fairness for all taxpayers. Today I can set out further details about the review.

The loan charge was intended to tackle historical use of contrived tax avoidance schemes that seek to avoid income tax and national insurance by disguising remuneration as a form of non-taxable payment (typically a loan). Disguised remuneration schemes have been considered by the courts. In the most notable case in 2017, the Supreme Court agreed with HMRC that schemes that redirect earnings and ultimately pay them in the form of loans do not succeed in avoiding tax. In a further decision in 2022, the Court of Appeal confirmed that even where other parties (such as employers or agencies) have obligations to operate PAYE, the liability for income tax is that of the employee.

The Government believe that it is right that those who did not pay the right amount of income tax and national insurance are required to resolve their affairs with HMRC. Accepting otherwise would be contrary to the decisions of the courts and would be unfair to the vast majority of taxpayers who have never used these schemes.

However, the Government recognise that concerns continue to be raised about the loan charge. In particular, there are concerns about the size of liabilities owed by some of those affected and their ability to pay the tax that they owe in a reasonable timeframe.

I have therefore asked Ray McCann, a former president of the Chartered Institute of Taxation, to conduct a review into the barriers that are preventing those subject to the loan charge from reaching resolution with HMRC and to recommend ways in which they can be encouraged to do so.

The objectives of this review are to help bring the matter to a close for those affected; ensure fairness for all taxpayers; and ensure that appropriate support is in place for those subject to the loan charge. The full terms of reference for the review have been published here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-loan-charge.

The review will commence on 23 January 2025 and I have asked Mr McCann to present his final report to me by summer 2025. I will provide a further update to the House after I have received that report.

[HCWS386]

JUSTICE

Infrastructure Planning and Judicial Review Reform

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): My noble Friend, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede), has today made the following statement:

My hon. Friend the Minister of State for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook MP) and I are pleased to announce changes to the statutory judicial review process which will help to streamline and speed up infrastructure planning cases.

The delivery of major infrastructure projects is central to the Government's mission to drive growth and unlock clean power. The largest and most complex of these projects currently require

a development consent order (DCO) under the nationally significant infrastructure projects (NSIPs) regime established by the Planning Act 2008.

The number of legal challenges against DCOs has spiked in recent years, with 58% of decisions being subject to legal challenge. Delays to these major projects have serious implications, including holding back the delivery of essential benefits to the country and imposing considerable additional costs on development.

Despite 30 challenges being brought against major infrastructure projects, only four decisions to approve a project have been overturned by the courts. It comes as research shows that, on average, each legal challenge takes 1.4 years to reach a conclusion and the courts have spent over 10,000 working days handling these cases. Such cases impact upon the use of public money, with major road projects paying up to £121 million per scheme due to delays in legal proceedings. While it is fundamental that the public can challenge the lawfulness of Government decisions, there is scope for rebalancing the judicial review process to improve efficiency and reduce delays to NSIPs.

In October, we published Lord Banner's independent review into the delays to NSIPs caused by legal challenges, which recognised that concerns with the process were well founded and outlined policy options for the Government to consider. Alongside publishing Lord Banner's report, we launched a call for evidence which sought views on Lord Banner's ideas. This closed on 30 December. We thank Lord Banner for his work in delivering the review and all those who engaged with the call for evidence.

The Government today confirm that the current permission stage for NSIP judicial reviews will be overhauled. Instead of the current position where a claimant has "three bites of the cherry"—a paper permission stage, an option to renew to an oral permission hearing and, if unsuccessful, a right of appeal to the Court of

Appeal—the new process will be streamlined. Hopeless legal challenges will have just one attempt rather than three to challenge a development consent decision.

The current first attempt—known as the paper permission stage—will be scrapped. All applications for permission will go straight to an oral hearing resulting in less cost to the parties. Primary legislation will be changed so that where a judge in an oral hearing at the High Court deems the case totally without merit, it will not be possible to ask the Court of Appeal to reconsider. To ensure ongoing access to justice, a request to appeal second attempt will be allowed for all other cases.

In addition, we will: introduce non-mandatory case management conferences to NSIP judicial reviews; formally designate NSIP judicial reviews as significant planning court claims; and work with the judiciary to introduce target timescales for NSIP judicial reviews in the Court of Appeal and in the Supreme Court.

Taken together, these changes will ensure that the right to challenge NSIP decisions is protected, but with more proportionate and effective processes that give developers and investors greater confidence to get building.

The Government response to the call for evidence on this matter will be published in due course. It will set out how the measures announced today will be taken forward and will provide the Government's views on the other options which we have considered as part of the call for evidence.

These changes will avoid needless delay, cost and uncertainty for major infrastructure projects, ensuring we can deliver the infrastructure this country needs to drive growth, cut energy bills over time, cut commuting times, and put more money in hard working people's pockets. These reforms will drive progress of our plan for change by leveraging more investment, supporting more businesses, and getting Britain building.

[HCWS385]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 23 January 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	1085	CABINET OFFICE—continued	
Cyber Security	1087	Plan for Change.....	1085
EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement: Fishing..	1096	Public Procurement: Reform.....	1098
Fraud: Public Sector	1097	Public Services Reform	1096
House of Lords Reform	1092	Relations with the EU	1089
Infected Blood Compensation Scheme: Payments.	1093	Topical Questions	1099
Ministerial Travel: Cost	1095		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 23 January 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	35WS	TREASURY	35WS
Assimilated Law Report	35WS	Loan Charge: Independent Review.....	35WS
JUSTICE	36WS		
Infrastructure Planning and Judicial Review			
Reform.....	36WS		

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 30 January 2025**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 23 January 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1085] [see index inside back page]
Minister for the Cabinet Office

Agricultural and Business Property Reliefs: OBR Costing [Col. 1105]
Answer to urgent question—(James Murray)

Attorney General's Office: Conflicts of Interest [Col. 1114]
Answer to urgent question—(The Solicitor General)

Business of the House [Col. 1121]
Statement—(Leader of the House)

ECO4 and Insulation Schemes [Col. 1141]
Statement—(Miatta Fahnbulleh)

Holocaust Memorial Day [Col. 1155]
General debate

Petition [Col. 1205]

High Streets: Autumn Budget 2024 [Col. 1206]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
International Day of Education [Col. 417WH]
Rare Retinal Disease [Col. 436WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 35WS]
