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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 12 February 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Improving Access to Public Services

1. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to use technology to improve access to public services. [902714]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting on the Order Paper twice today—it would be a good day for him to buy a lottery ticket. I can assure him that the new digital centre exists to serve Departments and the wider public sector. The Government Digital Service enables Departments to deliver digital public services that work for everyone.

Patrick Hurley: Good public services are dependent on reliable and easily accessible and available underlying data, such as postal addresses. However, address data is complex and expensive for UK businesses to access. Given the importance of that data to public service delivery and economic growth, will the Minister commit to reviewing the terms under which UK address data is made available to support growth?

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Following the privatisation of Royal Mail in 2014, the postcode address file—the definitive list of UK postal addresses—became a privately owned data asset. He will know that this afternoon we have the Second Reading of the Data (Use and Access) Bill, which will be a great step forward for the use of data in the public and private sectors. He will also know that we have committed to creating a national data library, which will use data in a radically new way for the benefit of the country and public sector users.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that people want their public services delivered efficiently and effectively. To that end, what discussions have he and his Department had with the Department of Government Efficiency and Elon Musk in the United States about how we can harness the power of artificial intelligence to deliver better services, and scrutinise Government spending and datasets, to eliminate waste and inefficiency?

Peter Kyle: I think the right hon. Gentleman has been asleep at the wheel since the election—not just when he was in government. Our Government have brought in the Regulatory Innovation Office, which is now up and running and piloting four areas to get innovation through the regulatory landscape without delay. Our Government have brought in the gov.uk app, which will be delivered in June, as well as the digital wallet and the digital driving licence, and a suite of productivity services are already being deployed in the public sector. His Government did none of those things. We are doing them now.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The Government's determination to embrace AI to transform public services and pull through procurement opportunities for British businesses is very welcome, but many public service users and others may have been concerned by the Government's failure to sign the Paris AI summit declaration, which sought to ensure that AI is open, inclusive, transparent, ethical, safe, secure and trustworthy. A Government spokesperson said that there were concerns about progress on global governance and national security. Will the Secretary of State elaborate on that?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee, who raises an important point. Let us focus on what we did achieve in Paris: we signed this week the joint coalition for sustainable AI, which is to be launched this summer; we joined the initial group of countries and multilateral organisations kicking off the collaborative network of AI observatories on work; we co-sealed the statement on cyber-security with France—that also launched this week; and we signed a statement on AI and gender, as part of the global partnership for action on gender-based online harassment and abuse. A lot was achieved this week, but we will always put the national interest first. The House will know full well that this Government will always put national security first—an issue that we wanted to raise at the summit, and which prevented us from signing the overall agreement.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): When it comes to public services, one thing that bugs me, and bugs our constituents, is the difficulty of accessing GP appointments, let alone having to call at half-past 8 in the morning. What progress is being made in allowing patients to book GP appointments online, so that they are not forced to wait on the phone every morning to see a doctor when they need an appointment right away?

Peter Kyle: As always, I am grateful for the exchanges that the hon. Gentleman and I have in this House, which are always constructive. That issue is part of the legacy that we have inherited from the failed Tory Government of over 14 years, but I assure him that the Data (Use and Access) Bill, which has its Second Reading today, will force different parts of the NHS to finally start communicating with themselves and using interoperable data in the interests of patients.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The Secretary of State's plans to improve Government services depend on the cloud. In the light of the Competition

and Markets Authority decision to assess whether Amazon Web Services and Microsoft should be designated as having strategic market status in cloud service provision, what decisions has he made regarding the approach to current and future Government procurement of cloud services?

Peter Kyle: Obviously, I cannot comment on the CMA, which is an independent regulator. I can, however, say that this Government, via the AI opportunities action plan, have committed to fully investing in AI infrastructure so that we can have a sovereign AI infrastructure here, with data stored here and processed here, creating jobs and wealth in this country.

Innovation: Livingston

2. **Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support innovation in Livingston constituency. [902715]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): We have already spent £4 million on projects in my hon. Friend's constituency, including £88,000 on SilviBio Ltd. I am very proud of the fact that we have been able to commit, in 2025-26, to a record amount of money—£20.4 billion—for research and development.

Gregor Poynton: I thank the Minister for that answer. In the Livingston constituency, we have a number of fantastic biotech and life sciences businesses, such as Valneva, which is working on a range of vaccines, including for malaria, and as the Minister mentioned, SilviBio, which is working on sustainable alternatives to peat. Given the failure and neglect of the Conservative Government and the SNP Scottish Government in this regard, what conversations is he having with the Scottish Government to ensure that we create an environment in which the biotech and life sciences industry can thrive in the Livingston constituency and across Scotland?

Chris Bryant: Livingston is a remarkable example of where investment can make a significant difference. I am really pleased that the chief executive of SilviBio recently received a women in innovation award for innovation in science. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that innovation accelerator projects in Glasgow and across the whole of Scotland need the integration between the Westminster Government and the Holyrood Government to be really successful, but that is precisely what we are determined to do. In October last year, he also had another £4 million investment in Livingston by Merck, making it one of the biggest investors in Scotland.

Google Quantum Computing Chip

3. **Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of the development of the Google quantum computing chip. [902716]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): Google's Willow announcement is one of several important milestones achieved by companies developing quantum computers in recent

months, globally and in the UK. The announcement does not change our policy to maintain UK leadership across a range of quantum computing platforms.

Martin Wrigley: Learning from the successful Y2K, or year 2000, prevention of systems failures, what progress has the Secretary of State made in considering post-quantum cryptography to prevent the so-called Y2Q—year to quantum—end of privacy, and what support is being provided for the development of quantum computing in the UK after the recent announcement of the Willow chip?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the hon. Member's question. He will know full well that there are breakthroughs in quantum happening all the time. These breakthroughs are often happening because of the scientific endeavours in our country, of which we should be proud. On encryption, the Government have a set of policies to ensure that our systems and our country are prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the quantum era, and those policies remain active as we speak. On investment in quantum, I was up in Glasgow not so long ago announcing £100 million for five quantum hubs. That is the kind of investment he can expect from this Government to keep our country at the cutting edge.

Access to Digital Services: North-east

4. **Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to make digital services easier to access for small businesses in the north-east. [902717]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): No one anywhere in the UK should have difficulty using Government services, and the Government are committed to ensuring that our online and digital services are as accessible as possible. There are globally recognised standards for digital accessibility, but they are only part of the design of an inclusive service, which is why we will be revising the Government service standards to incorporate requirements covering wider issues of inclusion and looking at extending their scope into the wider public sector.

Emma Foody: Recently, I attended a roundtable of small businesses in the north-east, held at Sage, and a key theme was the need for good connections and digital services to help their businesses to grow. Digital connectivity is of course critical, but this often holds people back. What are the Government doing to ensure that digital infrastructure is strong enough to support local businesses in constituencies such as mine?

Feryal Clark: It is right that not only do we need to have good online access to services, but businesses need to be able to connect to those services, and that is why the Government are committed to delivering nationwide gigabit connectivity coverage by 2030. I am glad to say that over 94% of premises in her constituency can access gigabit broadband, including the businesses that she refers to, but I am of course happy to meet her to talk about what more we can do in this important area.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The Sussex Bookshop is a new bookshop that opened in Chichester city centre in December; it is now February and it is unable to connect to any sort of internet provision, because Openreach is reporting that there are no extra connections for the whole city centre. Does the Minister agree that reliable internet access is essential, especially for small businesses that have to operate both on the high street and on an online platform? What steps is she taking to ensure that those businesses have access now, not in 2030?

Mr Speaker: I think that is linked to the north-east. That is the subject.

Feryal Clark: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. Businesses across the country should be able to connect, especially in this day and age. If the business in her constituency continues to experience problems, my hon. Friend the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms will be happy to meet her to discuss this issue further.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Digital services for small businesses are important across the country—north-east, south-east or wherever you are, Mr Speaker. The latest data shows, however, that only around 15% of UK small and medium-sized enterprises use AI, which is well behind other countries, such as Denmark and Finland. Will the Minister commit to publishing a detailed adoption road map that covers, for example, essential upskilling, data centre capacity and tech vouchers, so that small businesses can deploy AI without being locked out by cost and complexity?

Feryal Clark: The hon. Member will have seen the AI opportunities action plan, which sets out our aspiration for this country, including the opportunities for small businesses. The fusion of AI across the economy is top of the agenda. In the coming months, she will see more activity on how we will do that.

Animal Testing

5. **Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): What steps he is taking with scientists to phase out animal testing. [902718]

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): Our aim is to phase out animal testing as soon as is practicable. We have been working closely, and it was a manifesto commitment of ours. We have been meeting scientists and other Departments, because this area is not the sole responsibility of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. We intend to publish a strategy by the end of this year to make good on our manifesto commitment.

Irene Campbell: I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on phasing out animal experiments in medical research, where Members from all parties can work together to push for scientific experiments that do not rely on animal cruelty and to encourage a focus on non-animal replacements. Will the Minister

meet me and the APPG to discuss future plans and a strategy for the manifesto commitment on phasing out animal testing?

Chris Bryant: I did not know that my hon. Friend had taken over the APPG; it is a good thing that it exists. We will work very closely with the APPG. Whether I am the right Minister or whether there is a more intelligent Minister—or a more charming one, perhaps—who might be of more assistance to her, I will make sure that she gets all the Ministers that she needs.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In my constituency of Huntingdon, I have two sites that form a key component of pre-clinical animal testing. Labcorp, where the testing takes place, and Marshall BioResources, where the beagle puppies are bred and then tested on. Almost none survive the testing process. While I do not support animal testing, I recognise that it is currently a necessary element of the pre-clinical testing process and cannot be phased out until non-animal methods have sufficient scope. The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation wrote to me in September outlining the Government's approach to phasing out animal testing, but will the Government publish a timeline of what tests will be phased out via the work of the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research and when?

Chris Bryant: I cannot provide the hon. Gentleman with that timeline now. We are working at pace trying to put together a practicable policy and a strategy which, as I said, we will publish by the end of the year. He makes a perfectly good point about the complexities. It will not be easy for the MHRA to meet its international commitments and our manifesto commitments. We are happy to work with the sector as well as with other Departments to deliver this, and I am happy to have a conversation with him if that would help.

Online Pornography: Regulation

6. **Jess Asato** (Lowestoft) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the regulation of online pornography content is aligned with offline regulation. [902719]

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): I thank my hon. Friend for the campaigning work she does on this subject as an MP and as co-chair of the important all-party parliamentary group on commercial sexual exploitation. The independent pornography review is a wide-ranging and thorough piece of work to assess the effectiveness of pornography legislation, regulation and enforcement, including online and offline regulation. The review has concluded and the final report will be published in due course. I put on the record my gratitude to Baroness Bertin for her hard work.

Jess Asato: Online pornography sites are awash with content that depicts sexual activity with children. Adult performers are made to look like children through props such as stuffed toys and school uniforms. Popular search tags include “homework”, “pigtails”, “teen” and “barely legal”, and the content is often particularly violent. Videos that depict incest such as sex between fathers and daughters and between brothers and sisters are also prevalent. Child protection experts warn that

this content, which is illegal offline, sexualises children and is driving demand for child sexual abuse material. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need urgent action following the pornography review to equalise online and offline content regulation, to tackle violence against women and girls and shut down a gateway to paedophilic content?

Peter Kyle: Of course, I agree with my hon. Friend. Additional powers will be coming online via the Online Safety Act 2023. I wish that those powers had come into force earlier; that was a legacy of the previous Government. We have done everything we can to expedite those powers as quickly as we can. From March onwards, there will be powers that make extreme pornography illegal and that require sites to protect children from accessing pornography. Child sexual abuse and its related activity should not be called pornography—it is rape, and it should be called what it is—and we should do everything we can to keep it offline.

AI Growth Zones

7. **Lauren Edwards** (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): What progress he has made on setting up AI growth zones across the country. [902720]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): As detailed in the “AI Opportunities Action Plan”, artificial intelligence growth zones will help to secure the UK’s position as a global leader in AI, ensuring that benefits are felt across the whole of the UK. My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that on Monday we invited local and regional authorities along with the industry to come forward with potential suitable sites for hosting AI infrastructure.

Lauren Edwards: Rochester and Strood, positioned between London and mainland Europe, is well placed to help drive the UK’s AI economy. We have: several net zero energy projects ready to go, with further plans for a data centre and battery storage; a council that is already using AI and which created an AI accelerator programme to support local businesses; and three university campuses that are driving innovation. Will the Minister meet me to discuss my constituency’s potential as a future AI growth zone?

Feryal Clark: I thank my hon. Friend for strongly advocating for her constituency in Medway to become an AI growth zone. She will well know that the “AI Opportunities Action Plan” outlines the steps we are taking so that the UK can build the cutting-edge computer infrastructure needed to lead in AI development and deployment. I eagerly look forward to reading expressions of interest from hon. Members’ constituencies. I will be more than happy to meet her to discuss this in detail.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The Minister will be well aware that the growth of AI across the country depends on a ready supply of data and other content on which models can be trained. She will recognise that much of that content comes from our creative industries, and she will know that they are profoundly troubled that they are not being properly treated by the companies currently scraping their data without their permission or without proper compensation.

I know that the Government will want to resolve that, and she will know that the Data Bill saw amendments made in the other place to address that. Do the Government intend to resolve this issue by means of the Data Bill or by other means? If by other means, what other means and when?

Feryal Clark: The right hon. and learned Member will know that there is an ongoing consultation looking at clarifying the copyright and AI issues. There will be a speech this afternoon on the Data Bill that will cover the issue in more detail. As he will also know, the consultation ends on 25 February, after which we will review its responses to see what we need to do.

Topical Questions

T1. [902742] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): Britain is leading the world when it comes to embracing AI. I have just got back from the Paris AI action summit; the companies that I met there were genuinely excited about our AI opportunities action plan and optimistic about how we are using AI to build a smaller, smarter state. The new Government Digital Service that I launched last month will harness the power of technology to deliver efficient, convenient public services designed to work for working people.

Patrick Hurley: In recent months it has become obvious that some social media companies’ algorithms are run not in the pursuit of a commercial imperative but in the service of the political interests of their host country. Can those politicised social media firms be treated as such, to protect the national interest?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s question and for the leadership that he has shown in his community in Southport during extremely difficult times. The Online Safety Act 2023 applies to all users and includes measures to tackle misinformation peddled by foreign states. He has a specific challenge in his community, and I am very willing to meet him and members of his community to hear directly of the impact that these issues have had.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): The Conservatives secured a £450 million investment from AstraZeneca to expand its Merseyside vaccine factory. When the Chancellor wrecked the deal, AstraZeneca tried to save it by increasing that investment to over £500 million. Why did Labour still walk away, handing jobs and investment to our competitors?

Peter Kyle: The deal that the hon. Gentleman says the Conservatives secured was announced in March. The general election was in July. Where was the deal, the funding or the written agreement? There was nothing.

Alan Mak: When Labour negotiates, Britain loses. AstraZeneca is investing more than £4 billion in Singapore, the US and Canada. It could have invested in our country too. What is Labour doing to bring back the deal that it destroyed?

Peter Kyle: There was a deal by WhatsApp that was never followed up by the Treasury or Ministers. [*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 285.] (Correction) There were no meetings between AstraZeneca and the Conservative Government. Their Government let Britain down every time, which is why the country turned to Labour, and Labour is delivering.

T2. [902743] **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): The payment systems regulator found that more than half of bank transfer scams recorded in 2023 originated on Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp. What progress has the Secretary of State made to ensure that tech companies are held to account for fraud originating from their platforms?

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): My hon. Friend makes a good point. We need to look at that specifically at the Committee stage of the Data (Use and Access) Bill. Perhaps he will sit on the Bill Committee.

T3. [902744] **David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): The Prime Minister has just held talks for a UK-EU defence and security partnership, in which the development of artificial intelligence will have been a key theme. However, last night, the UK chose not to join EU countries in signing the international agreement on AI. Will the Secretary of State please explain the dissonance in the Government's approach?

Peter Kyle: First, let me congratulate President Macron on laying on an incredible summit in Paris which brought together Governments, tech companies and investors. Britain's voice was heard loud and clear, which is why we are delivering such extraordinary investment into this country. The Labour Government signed up to and fully engaged with most of the aspects that were negotiated. In a few areas, we will put Britain's interests first. A couple of other countries did not sign, either, but I did not hear the hon. Gentleman criticising them.

T4. [902745] **Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): In Ilford we have worked with Queen Mary University to launch a new satellite campus to teach medicine and dentistry. Given the growing importance of education in science, engineering, technology and mathematics, what specific steps is the Secretary of State taking to increase educational opportunities in London and across the country?

Peter Kyle: The Government are working to develop a world-leading science and technology skills base that will drive economic growth and opportunity for all. We are committed to expanding access and participation in science and technology education, and we are partnering with universities to build the skills and workforce across the United Kingdom.

T6. [902747] **Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): A month ago, the Prime Minister said that countries will be either AI makers or AI takers. Does the Secretary of State agree that by not attending the AI safety summit, the Prime Minister has given a clear indication that the UK will be an AI taker?

Peter Kyle: This Prime Minister has delivered the AI opportunities action plan; this Prime Minister is deploying AI technology and productivity tools across Government;

and this Prime Minister has brought in £30 billion in investment into digital and AI infrastructure since taking office. At the same time, this Prime Minister is sorting out the mess left after 14 years of Tory rule.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— **Engagements**

Q1. [902727] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 12 February.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): This week, we progressed our Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill to deliver counter-terrorism style powers to bring vile criminal smuggling gangs to justice. We announced a further £350 million to get Britain building and deliver 1.5 million new homes that our country desperately needs, including more affordable homes. We have also slashed the red tape that holds businesses and working people back, creating 10,000 more apprentices.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Imran Hussain: I am proud to have played my part in helping to draft what has become the Employment Rights Bill. A new poll shows that three quarters of the British public back the stronger workers' rights in the Bill, including better sick pay, yet that lot over there—the Tories and Reform—disgracefully voted against it. In fact, the Leader of the Opposition does not even believe in maternity pay or the living wage. Our statutory sick pay is ranked as one of the lowest in Europe; it needs to be brought in line with the living wage. Will the Prime Minister back my campaign to strengthen the Bill further so that sick pay is at a level that will finally stop punishing workers for being sick?

The Prime Minister: Our plan for change delivers the biggest upgrade in workers' rights in a generation through our Employment Rights Bill, ending exploitative zero-hours contracts and the scandal of fire and rehire and expanding statutory sick pay to 1.3 million employees. Of course, that is on top of the pay rise for 3 million of the lowest paid. I would have thought the Leader of the Opposition might support the protection of day one employment rights, given where she is going, but she thinks maternity pay is excessive. Our plan is pro-worker and pro-growth.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): The Conservative Government established the Ukraine family scheme. In total, more than 200,000 Ukrainians—mostly women, children and the elderly—have found sanctuary in the UK from Putin's war. However, a family of six from Gaza have applied to live in Britain using this scheme, and a judge has now ruled in their favour. That is not what the scheme was designed to do. This decision is completely wrong, and cannot be allowed to stand. Are the Government planning to appeal on any points of law, and, if so, which ones?

The Prime Minister: Let me be clear: I do not agree with the decision. The Leader of the Opposition is right that it is the wrong decision. She has not quite done her homework, however, because the decision in question was taken under the last Government, according to their legal framework. However, let me be clear: it should be Parliament that makes the rules on immigration; it should be the Government who make the policy. That is the principle. The Home Secretary is already looking at the legal loophole that we need to close in this particular case.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister did not answer the question. If he plans to appeal, the appeal might be unsuccessful, and the law will need to be changed. If he does not appeal, the law will definitely need to be changed. He talks about a decision made under the previous Government, but it was not made by that Government; it was made by the courts. The issue we are discussing today is about judicial decisions. We cannot be in a situation where we allow enormous numbers of people to exploit our laws in this way. There are millions of people all around the world in terrible situations—we cannot help them all, and we certainly cannot bring them all here. Will the Prime Minister commit to bringing forward that new legislation or amending his borders Bill?

The Prime Minister: I have already said that the Home Secretary has already got her team working on closing this loophole. We do not need to wait for that; we are getting on with that, because we are taking control. The Conservatives lost control of immigration: we had nearly 1 million people come into this country; we had an open borders experiment. On Monday this week, they voted against increased powers to deal with those who are running the vile trade of people smuggling. Same old Tories: open borders, empty promises.

Mrs Badenoch: If the Prime Minister was on top of his brief, perhaps he would be able to answer some questions. Given this crazy decision and so many others, new legislation is needed to clarify the right to a family life in article 8. *[Interruption.]* I am not talking about what he just said; I know Labour MPs do not understand much of what they are saying. The Prime Minister literally wrote a book on the European convention on human rights. This is a situation where we need to put our national interests before the ECHR. Does he agree that we should legislate, even if lawyers warn that that might be incompatible with human rights law?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady complains about scripted answers; her script does not allow her to listen to the answer. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] She asked me if we are going to change the law and close the loophole in question one—I said yes. She asked me again in question two—and I said yes. She asked me again in question three—it is still yes.

Mrs Badenoch: The right hon. and learned Gentleman did not listen to question one. I asked if he would appeal the decision. He did not answer that. He is not listening; he is too busy defending the international human rights law framework.

This case has arisen because a Palestinian came to the UK from Gaza in 2007. He is now a British citizen. This is precisely why we need to break the conveyor belt—from

arriving in the UK to acquiring indefinite leave to remain and then a British passport, and now a right to bring six family members here as well. Just last week, the Prime Minister bizarrely claimed that a British passport was not a pull factor for those coming to the UK. Will he now support our plans to toughen the process on indefinite leave to remain and make getting a British passport a privilege, not a right?

The Prime Minister: The Conservatives presided over record high levels of immigration. It reached nearly 1 million. It was a one nation experiment in open borders. The right hon. Lady was the cheerleader; she was the one campaigning for more people to come and thanking her own side when they supported her campaign. So, before she lectures us, she needs to reflect on her own record.

Mrs Badenoch: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is the Prime Minister now. The people out there want to know what he is going to do about the situation. He needs to spend less time whining about the last Government and do his job.

I thought the Prime Minister and I agreed that Israel had a right to defend herself, yet the judge in this case noted that the family were facing a humanitarian crisis “as a consequence of the Israeli Government’s indiscriminate attempts to eliminate Hamas”,

and Government lawyers accepted that. Is the Prime Minister allowing lawyers to change the position on Israel, and was that because of advice from the Attorney General? If not, why on earth did Government lawyers accept the argument that Israeli actions were “indiscriminate”?

The Prime Minister: Government lawyers put the complete opposite argument. The right hon. Lady talks about being on top of her brief; she has no idea what she is talking about. I will tell her again: we need to change the law. That is why the Home Secretary is already closing the gap. I know the script does not allow any adaptation, but this is getting tedious.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister has not read the judgment. I suggest that he does so. Very serious questions are now being asked about the Attorney General, the Prime Minister’s personal friend and donor. Even Labour Ministers are concerned. One Labour peer, Lord Glasman, has called him

“the absolute archetype of an arrogant, progressive fool”.

If we are serious about protecting our borders, we need to make sure that we appoint people who believe in our country and everything we stand for. It is not clear that the Attorney General does.

The Government are now recruiting a new chief inspector of borders, who lives in Finland and wants to work from home. This is not serious. Why should the British public put up with it?

The Prime Minister: The individual in question was appointed in 2019 by the last Government to a senior position. He then worked for five years from Finland. We have changed that, and he will now be working from the United Kingdom full time. It was Finland under them.

The Leader of the Opposition talks about the Attorney General; she sat round the Cabinet table with an Attorney General who was later sacked for breaching national security.

Q2. [902728] Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Long-standing traders in the CPS Centre in Culcheth were devastated to receive eviction notices giving them just 28 days to vacate the premises, entirely out of the blue and on spurious pretexts from the new owner, the shell company Shivat Haminim Capital. So far, the owner and its legal representatives have failed to hear tenants' concerns and mine, and to negotiate a way forward. Does the Prime Minister share my concern about this situation, and will he set out our plans to protect independent businesses that are the heart of our high streets and communities?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an issue that is obviously of real concern to businesses in her constituency. We expect landlords to meet their obligations to make buildings safe, and we support robust enforcement action from the regulators if they fail to do so. I will ensure that my hon. Friend secures a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss what steps can be taken in this particular case to support the businesses on which her constituents rely.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Eighty years ago this week, the allies began a pincer movement against German forces between the Ruhr and the Rhine. British and Canadian troops attacked from the north, Americans from the south. British, Canadian and American soldiers were fighting shoulder to shoulder to defeat fascists. Eighty years on, President Trump seems to have forgotten all that. His tariffs against steel and aluminium will hit Canada the hardest, but they will also hit jobs and the cost of living in our country. In reminding President Trump who America's true and long-standing friends and allies really are, will the Prime Minister also prepare a plan for tariffs in return, starting with tariffs on American electric cars?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to refer to our history and the 80-year anniversary. We were fighting alongside the Americans, and that is among the reasons why we have a special relationship.

British steel is an essential part of our heartlands and we will not abandon our skilled workforce, but a level-headed assessment of the implications is needed, and that is what we are going through at the moment. However, we will always put our national interests first, and steelworkers first.

Ed Davey: It seems to me that, given the way in which President Trump and his ally Musk are operating, they need to hear of strong measures and hear strong words even from their allies.

Let me move on to the subject of Ukraine. If it is forced to surrender its own sovereign territory to Russia, that will be the greatest betrayal of a European ally since Poland in 1945, but President Trump says Ukraine may end up Russian, and he wants American money back. I think we all fear where this could end, and the dangerous implications for our defence and our security. Can the Prime Minister reassure the House that he and

other European leaders have given sufficient support to President Zelensky so that he cannot be bullied by Trump and Putin into accepting a deal that would effectively hand victory to Russia?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I met President Zelensky in Kyiv just a few weeks ago—it was my eighth meeting. The position since the outbreak of this conflict has been a united position across the House of supporting Ukraine, and I was able to reiterate my position, which is that we must put Ukraine in the strongest possible position. That matters now just as much as it mattered at the beginning of the conflict, and I did discuss with him what more we and our allies can do to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position.

Q3. [902729] Kim Leadbeater (Spenn Valley) (Lab): Two years ago, from the Opposition Benches, I published my "Healthy Britain" report, recommending a cross-departmental approach to improving health and wellbeing. Now that we are in government, I am delighted that Ministers have hit the ground running—because running is obviously very healthy. Will the Prime Minister confirm that last week's announcement of an increase to the public health grants, which will help local services to focus more on prevention and early intervention, is just the start of a long-term strategy that will make Britain healthier, happier and more productive; reduce pressure on the NHS; and promote growth?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the important role that local communities play in supporting healthy lifestyles. I am delighted that we are providing almost £4 billion for the local health services that people rely on—things like health visitors, stop smoking services and drug abuse treatments. I will make sure that she meets the relevant Minister to discuss this issue.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): Prime Minister, I get it: nobody wants to get into a trade war. But, unlike Peter Mandelson, sometimes you have got to stand up for what you believe in. My friends in the DUP have learned nothing from their mistake of backing Brexit, and think that tariffs are a laughing matter. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need to stand up for ourselves, we need to back our workers and we need to back our businesses—not just in Lagan Valley but, indeed, across the UK?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. The US and the UK share a strong and balanced trading relationship. We invest hugely in each other's economies, and we will continue to work closely with President Trump to boost growth and to create jobs. I reassure the hon. Lady that we will always act in the best interests of businesses and working people across the whole of the United Kingdom, including, of course, Northern Ireland.

Q4. [902730] Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I was baffled on Monday when, given the chance to support legislation, backed by the National Crime Agency, to crack down on criminal smuggler gangs and secure our borders, Conservative and Reform Members linked arms in the voting Lobby to vote against it. The Conservatives spent three years and £700 million on their ludicrous Rwanda scheme, and

saw four volunteers returned. Does the Prime Minister agree that there is only one party that is serious about repairing our broken immigration system?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and let me remind Reform and the Tories what they voted against earlier this week in our borders Bill. They voted against making it an offence to organise the buying, selling and transport of small boats, against making it an offence to endanger lives at sea, and against powers to arrest suspected people smugglers before the smuggling takes place. They voted against. They voted for open borders—both of them.

Q5. [902731] **David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Last week, the Prime Minister gave yet another threadbare excuse for why he and his north London lawyer friends are giving away the Chagos islands. This is his decision, and he must own it. More importantly, he cannot tell us, British taxpayers, how much this is going to cost. Is it £9 billion? Is it £18 billion? Is it £52 billion? *The Times* has called this botched deal “insane”, members of his own Cabinet reportedly think it is impossible to understand, and one of his own MPs thinks it is the worst thing that the Labour party has ever done. Can the Prime Minister tell us which word he thinks best describes this deal?

The Prime Minister: I set out the position in relation to the Chagos islands last week. I also offered the Leader of the Opposition a high-level briefing on this matter. She still has not taken me up on the offer of that briefing. The Conservatives are asking questions without wanting to know the facts. It is extraordinary that someone who wants to be Prime Minister does not want to know the facts, even when she is offered a high-level briefing. The hon. Gentleman would be better informed if she took me up on the offer of a briefing.

Q6. [902732] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The Prime Minister will, I am sure, want to congratulate Newcastle United on reaching the league cup final after Arsenal's exit. In National Apprenticeship Week, will he also congratulate the 600 apprentices learning trades, from welding to quantity surveying, as part of the Tyne bridge restoration programme? While I know that he cannot confirm bridging the funding gap left by the Tories, will he confirm that he is looking forward to seeing the Tyne bridge restored in time for its 100th birthday in 2028?

The Prime Minister: I am going to struggle to sound delighted with the result of that particular football match, but it will be a special day for Newcastle fans. The Tyne bridge is an iconic north-east landmark and I congratulate the apprentices who are helping to restore that vital piece of infrastructure. As usual, the Tories made empty promises that they had no intention of keeping, including £2.9 billion-worth of transport commitments that were never funded. We will look at the capital projects around the spending review and let my hon. Friend know as soon as we can.

Q7. [902733] **Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): My constituents Peter and Maureen have been married for 70 years. Peter is 93 and for the past few weeks has been

stuck in a hospital ward waiting to go home because a care package has not been arranged. Peter is missing home and missing Maureen. Will the Prime Minister reassure my constituents the social care crisis will be tackled this year?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this issue and the particular case of her constituents. I also know that this is deeply personal to her and, if I may, I extend my deepest sympathies to her and her family for their loss. We have taken immediate action on social care. We have already delivered £3.7 billion of additional investment. We are working on the first ever fair pay agreement for the sector and, of course, we are boosting carer's allowance. I invite her and everybody to work with the House on the longer-term reform that we need.

Q9. [902735] **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): James Rennie is an outstanding specialist school in the heart of my constituency. Having converted every spare corner into classrooms and exceeded its published admissions numbers, and already having 43 applications known for this September, it is bursting at the seams and cannot expand any further. What is clearly needed is a new specialist school for north Cumbria. What assurances can the Prime Minister give my constituents that his Government will put children before ideology and allow local authorities to tackle the shortage in special educational needs and disabilities provision?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this vital issue. It is not the first time it has come up. We are supporting mainstream schools to increase SEND expertise while also establishing dedicated SEN units, because we need to make sure that special schools can also cater for those with the most complex needs. We are working on this. It has come up time and again, but we are taking those vital initial steps.

Q8. [902734] **Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): Dorothy House is an amazing hospice supporting terminally ill people in Frome and East Somerset and their families, including my good friend Lisa. Next year, Dorothy House will be looking forward to celebrating 50 years of service, but it will also face an additional cost of £422,000 thanks to the increase in employers' national insurance contributions. Will the Prime Minister commit to meeting me and representatives of the hospice sector to hear at first hand about the impact of the increase in NICs, and to working to find a solution?

The Prime Minister: Everyone deserves high-quality and compassionate end-of-life care. The hon. Member knows that we inherited a £22 billion black hole in our public finances, and that is why we took the difficult but right decisions to invest in our public services. I do recognise the pressures that hospices are facing, and that is why we are investing £100 million into hospices, with an additional £26 million to support children and young people's hospices. I will make sure that she gets a meeting with the relevant Minister.

Q14. [902740] **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): A significant part of the dreadful legacy left by the previous Conservative Government is the chronic underfunding of transport

infrastructure, especially in the north-east, as we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah). Does the Prime Minister agree with me and the North East Mayor, Kim McGuinness, that redevelopment of the disused Leamside line would reconnect Gateshead with north Durham, and that increasing the capacity on the east coast main line would help to bring the Metro to Washington in my constituency, bringing much-needed jobs, growth and opportunities to my region?

The Prime Minister: Both my hon. Friend and the North East Mayor are dedicated campaigners on this issue. The Conservative party left us with a host of unfunded promises, and public transport is in dire condition. Expanding the Metro network has huge potential to drive growth and unlock new housing. I am pleased that progress is being made on the business case.

Q10. [902736] **Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Earlier this week we learned that the Prime Minister's close friend, the Attorney General, has in the past advised Caribbean nations on seeking trillions of pounds in reparations. He has been a key player in the surrender of the Chagos islands and the related fiasco, which will cost taxpayers up to £18 billion, and he has even advised Gerry Adams, who is standing in line to get compensation from the British Government in Northern Ireland legacy payments, the quantum of which could cost up to £2.7 billion. Given the Attorney General's track record, does the Prime Minister have faith in his motives, and does he have confidence that his best friend represents good value for the British taxpayer?

The Prime Minister: We have long had the principle in this country that everybody is entitled to legal representation, which means that lawyers do not necessarily agree with their clients. Conservative Members used to believe in that principle. If they now disagree, they should go to see the victims of very serious crime, including sexual crime, and tell them that, under their provisions, a lawyer who disagrees with a perpetrator would not be able to represent them, meaning that victims would be cross-examined by perpetrators. That has never been the Conservative party's position. If it is now, it should say so.

Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): Allergy school, launched this week by the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation, is a free programme to support children with food allergies. Allergic disease is a growing issue in this country, with more than 20 million people in the UK affected. For this reason, it has never been more important for us to have a national allergy strategy and an allergy tsar to drive and co-ordinate action. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming this programme, and will he meet me and the foundation to talk about how we can work together to drive this forward?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this really important issue. Hospital admissions for allergies have risen sharply in the last two decades. I welcome the work of the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation. We will respond to the recommendations

of the national allergy strategy group in due course, and I will make sure my hon. Friend gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss it.

Q11. [902737] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): My Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage has seen a 35% population increase in the last 20 years. My constituents recognise the need for affordable housing, but the current planning system is not delivering the GP surgeries, dentists and transport options they need. Will the Prime Minister restore faith in the planning system and, as well as focusing on housing numbers, deliver the local targets for health services and wider infrastructure that growing communities need?

The Prime Minister: We are, of course, delivering 1.5 million homes, but we are also creating communities for the future. The hon. Gentleman is right that that must include good schools, GPs and reliable transport links, which is what makes a good community. Just today we have announced an additional £350 million to deliver more affordable homes so that more people can realise the dream of home ownership.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): This week is National Apprenticeship Week. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for apprenticeships, I can tell the Prime Minister that employers are very pleased to see this week's announcements, which will make a real difference both to completion rates and to the flexibility around apprenticeships. Does the Prime Minister agree that schools should be promoting apprenticeships alongside A-levels and other options? And can he tell us what more he will do to support more young people into apprenticeships?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has raised this issue, and that we will be able to give employers more flexibility on maths and English requirements. This is really important, as many young people did not get the maths qualification they wanted but are very well suited for the future and want to play their part. They can now get an apprenticeship under our changes. These 10,000 extra apprenticeships are delivering for them, giving them a chance to contribute to our economy.

Q12. [902738] **Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Yesterday, the farming Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), told a conference of farmers that farming is

"not high on the pecking order"

for this Government. Given the heartless family farm tax, will the Prime Minister say if his Minister is correct—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Farming is top of the agenda, as far as I am concerned. That is why we put £5 billion to support farmers in the Budget—[*Interruption.*] The Conservatives failed to spend £300 million on farming on their watch. We have set out our road map, which has been welcomed by the National Farmers Union, as the hon. Lady very well knows. It was described as "long overdue"; I wonder who did not do it before?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Dewhurst, I am sure you do not want to be leaving today—it is not the best day for it.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): As a graduate of the Croydon Youth Philharmonic Orchestra, the Prime Minister will know that youth services can broaden a young person's horizons beyond what they could ever imagine. With national spending on youth services having declined 73% since 2010, will the Prime Minister outline how this Government will bring youth services back into our communities, will he look at giving them the statutory protections they deserve and will he visit Croydon East to see at first hand the vital role youth services play in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: My days with the Croydon Youth Philharmonic Orchestra were a long time ago now, but we fully recognise the importance of youth services. They save lives and help young people to live safe and healthy lives. We have been developing our plans for the new national youth strategy, to bring power back to young people and help every young person realise their potential.

Q13. [902739] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Every 22 minutes, a child in this country loses a parent or a loved one. That is 40,000 children every year facing a trauma that many of us here know can last a lifetime. Charities such as Winston's Wish do a fantastic job providing support for young people, particularly when schools are closed or there is no one else to turn to. However, at the moment there is no simple way for the children to know about those charities or for the charities to contact the children. Will the Government back my private Member's Bill this summer to enable that to happen? Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss how we can ensure that another generation of children will not have to face that trauma?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her ongoing work and campaign on that important issue. The cross-Government bereavement group continues to look at how we can improve access to the support that children and young people need at those difficult times. Of course I will ensure that she gets the meeting she wants with the Minister to discuss this further.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): Yesterday marks the 20th anniversary of the launch of the Make Poverty History campaign and of a fantastic speech, remembered by all of us who were there, delivered by the late, great Madiba. That campaign inspired a generation of campaigners and a great Labour Government to deliver unprecedented action to tackle global poverty, lifting millions out of poverty. Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to some of those campaigners and commit to doing all he can to ensure that Britain plays its full part in helping to eradicate global poverty today?

The Prime Minister: It is a really important issue. We pay tribute and, of course, we continue to play our full part.

Q15. [902741] **Alex Brewer** (North East Hampshire) (LD): Basingstoke hospital, which is used by residents of half of my North East Hampshire constituency, has had its rebuild delayed by 15 years, despite no ministerial visit to see the worsening conditions. It is estimated that maintaining the hospital for those 15 years will cost almost as much as the rebuild itself. Will the Prime Minister explain the logic of making taxpayers pay twice?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady's constituents are right to be frustrated about the empty, unfunded promises that were left behind by the Conservatives—a point made by her and by my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy). Under the previous Government's plan, a new hospital in Basingstoke would simply not have been delivered because it was unfunded: it was a promise without anything behind it. We have put in place a funded, deliverable plan that will see the hospital built, and we will work closely with the trust to ensure that it is.

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): The Government's devolution plans are a welcome progressive development to shift power and resources from Whitehall to our communities. There are discussions now about the process and the realisation of benefits for our communities. Will the Prime Minister assure my residents in Worthing West, and those in all constituencies starting priority devolution programmes, that Sussex devolution will give us meaningful control of our local priorities, including housing, transport and social care?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising devolution, which will see her constituents in Sussex get meaningful control over local priorities. The devolution priority programme will see a wave of mayors elected next year, including in Sussex. I believe that those with skin in the game make the best decisions about their communities.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Andrew Mitchell.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The Prime Minister will be well aware of the global vaccination fund, Gavi. One of the United Kingdom's great success stories, it has vaccinated from deadly diseases more than a billion children under five, it presents real value for money to British taxpayers and more than 80% of our constituents support it. Will he give the House an undertaking that Britain will continue that leadership and make a decisive pledge at next month's replenishment conference?

The Prime Minister: This is a really important issue, as the right hon. Gentleman rightly points out. I have long supported it and will continue to support it, and I will share details with him just as soon as I can.

Energy Infrastructure: Chinese Companies

12.36 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero if he will make a statement on the potential security implications of the involvement of Chinese companies, including Mingyang, in energy infrastructure projects.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing the urgent question to the House.

The protection and security of the energy sector is an absolute priority for this Government. We have a range of effective measures in place that give the Government powers to balance an open investment environment to facilitate growth with protecting the areas of our economy that are most sensitive to national security.

The Government firmly believe that the biggest risk to our energy system and energy security is remaining dependent on international fossil fuel markets, controlled by petrostates and dictators. That is why we have a mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower to end that dependence. We have a world-leading offshore wind industry in the UK and international investment plays a crucial role in supporting jobs across the country. As part of that mission, my Department engages in discussions with a wide range of investors, including those from other countries. We are also clear that alongside that, the growth of UK supply chains is critical. That is why we have set out plans for a clean industry bonus to drive investment in manufacturing, as well as setting up Great British Energy and the national wealth fund.

The Government will not hesitate to use our powers to protect national security whenever we identify concerns, and we will take a consistent, long-term and strategic approach to managing the UK's relations with China, rooted in UK and global interests. The Government will co-operate with China where it can, compete where it needs to and challenge where it must.

Christine Jardine: I thank the Minister for her comments and general reassurances, but there are specific concerns at the moment. China can produce what is useful to us for the development of renewables, particularly in the North sea, and we can benefit from those investments. China also needs access to our markets. However, security issues involving companies working in offshore renewable development have become apparent in recent weeks and have been raised numerous times.

It has been reported that the Chinese company Mingyang is interested in producing turbines for a new project in the North sea. Around £60 million of Scottish Government funding has been earmarked for a wind turbine factory near Inverness, in addition to a potential £27 million for Orient Cable to provide subsea cables for island communities. That is despite the European Union bringing anti-trust cases against China and the Norwegian Government blocking Mingyang from its green infrastructure projects.

Will the Minister reassure the House that the Department will follow the same rigorous processes to assess those risks as the previous Government, which ultimately

blocked Huawei from the 5G network? This must include an assessment of any opportunities for remote access to the turbines, as the software will normally remain in the control of the manufacturers even once commissioned, leaving them vulnerable to being switched off. We need local control.

Will the Department reassure the House that discussions are ongoing with the Scottish Government to ensure that no public money is invested before this risk assessment has taken place? How will Ministers work with the Scottish Government and Cabinet colleagues to ensure that offshore and undersea infrastructure is safe?

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Lady raises important concerns that we are very much alive to. As I said in my first answer, energy security is critical to the Department's work and that is why we have the clean power mission to end our dependency on fossil fuels. International investment is a crucial part of that and helps to support growth and jobs across the country. As part of that, we have discussions with a wide range of international investors, but we absolutely recognise that this needs to be balanced against national security implications. We work on that constantly across Government with input from a number of Departments, and I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Minister for Security from the Home Office here for the urgent question.

The Government have to consider both those aspects together: the need for investment and for greater capacity in our supply chains, and the security risk. While I cannot get into the details of the individual case, given the nature of the ongoing discussions, I reassure the hon. Lady that we are taking these factors into account. We do want to make sure that the most robust processes are followed as we look at the details of this particular issue.

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

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I was pleased to hear the Minister confirm the importance of our energy security, in contrast to what we saw under the previous Government. [*Interruption.*] Opposition Members can groan all they want, but that is the reality of what was inherited in July last year.

As we extend energy infrastructure in this country, can my hon. Friend the Minister confirm how this Government will ensure that we have control of the operation of that infrastructure? Does she agree it is vital that through the industrial strategy we see a renaissance in our manufacturing and greater resilience in our supply chain, all of which adds to the energy security of this country?

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that dealing with capacity issues in our supply chain is a crucial part of getting this investment into infrastructure. It is one of the reasons why, through the national wealth fund, we invested in lithium in Cornwall last week. Through the critical minerals strategy, we want to maximise the natural resources that we have, where we can. As I have said, we want to make absolutely sure that security concerns are addressed as well when we look at which investors invest in our new economy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The indication that Mingyang will get the green light from the Treasury to supply wind turbine technology to the Green Volt wind farm in the North sea is concerning. Indeed, alarm bells have been sounded by officials in the Minister's Department and in the Ministry of Defence. This green revolution will come with a "made in China" label. The Government, in collusion with the Scottish National party in Holyrood, are determined to see Chinese companies reap the economic reward.

The Minister's party says again and again that the transition to renewable energy will reduce our reliance on hostile regimes. Chinese-controlled technology embedded in our critical energy infrastructure is evidently a threat to our security. Can the Minister assure us that she is taking this threat seriously? Can she explain how using wind turbines made by Mingyang reduces our reliance on foreign states?

Just last week I, along with many MPs in the Minister's party, was briefed by the Royal Navy on the vulnerability of our subsea communications and energy infrastructure. We have seen a pervasive rise in sabotage attacks on subsea cables in the Baltic, affecting our Scandinavian allies. If Chinese-manufactured turbines are installed, security experts have warned that sensors could spy on British seas, defence submarine programmes and the layout of our energy infrastructure. We would be reliant on Chinese equipment and software, and on Chinese suppliers for updates and maintenance, handing Beijing significant opportunity for interference. In the current international climate, it is unthinkable to disregard the security implications of this decision.

Can the Minister confirm that the Government have scrapped the GIGA—green industries growth accelerator—scheme that we launched to build British supply chains in energy technologies? What discussions has she had with the Ministry of Defence about its concerns over our ability to ensure the security of our energy system? What safeguards will be in place to prevent Chinese maintenance ships accessing the turbines for repairs? What guarantees has she had, if any, from our defence and security agencies that this investment will pose no threat to our national security? If such assurances are not forthcoming, will she revisit this decision and put a halt to the madness of allowing the People's Republic of China to have such a significant stake in our energy system?

Kerry McCarthy: When the Minister—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, I am the Minister now. [*Laughter.*] The shadow Minister mentioned revisiting this decision, but, as yet, no decision has been made. We are undergoing rigorous processes to consider the role of China in our supply chain and in the investment in our critical infrastructure.

Having been in my position, the hon. Gentleman will know why it is so important that I do not provide a running commentary on individual cases, but I have made it clear that we are taking into account the national security considerations as well as our need for investment in the supply chain. Let me touch on the legacy that we were left by the previous Minister: he was perfectly happy to leave our energy system exposed, with the British people paying the price. The retreat—the "under new management" line that he was parroting earlier this week—would leave us even more exposed to those petrostates and dictators. We are getting on with our

clean power mission to end our energy insecurity, and I shall take no lessons from the shadow Minister on energy security given his Government's record.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I am glad to hear the Minister point out that, when it comes to green investment over the past 14 years, the legacy that we were left with was of an absolutely vacant industrial strategy. I urge her to explain further how we might be able to develop the skills and competencies in this country to make sure that we have good, strong and ethical supply chains.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We have launched the clean industry bonus, which will be crucial in protecting our supply chain. We are investing through GB Energy and the national wealth fund—I have already mentioned lithium in Cornwall. Through the global clean power alliance, which we launched at the end of last year, we will bring together our counterparts from other countries, including at the International Energy Agency conference in April, to look at a supply chain mission to deal with these issues. These issues do not just affect us in this country. As other countries seek to decarbonise and increase the role of renewables, we will all need to co-operate and deal with the capacity issues across the supply chain.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for securing this important urgent question. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as the Minister has rightly said, "energy security" has been a key term in this Chamber. There are two ways of looking at energy security. First, it is about generating our own renewable energy to avoid price volatility and exposure to authoritarian regimes, ensuring that we have the jobs here at home for design and construction. Secondly, it is about the national security issues around our energy infrastructure, which is also a form of energy security. A former MI6 chief has warned of the vulnerabilities, either deliberate or inadvertent, posed by foreign-controlled software embedded in our energy infrastructure. Given those serious concerns, can the Minister guarantee that any further investment in Scotland will increase both our energy and our national security?

Kerry McCarthy: As I have said, we are going through the robust processes to try to make absolutely sure that our national security is not compromised by investment from overseas, and we will continue to do that.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): The Grangemouth refinery is a vital piece of Scottish infrastructure, and its economic contribution to the Scottish economy is worth more than £400 million every year. The Grangemouth refinery is also a joint venture between PetroChina, owned by the Chinese state, and INEOS, a multinational conglomerate. Together, they are Petroineos. The refinery is due to close, with thousands of jobs being lost, an unjust transition and Scotland having to rely on importing oil, all at a time of great global volatility. Why are this Government allowing a foreign Government and private capital dictate Scotland's industrial capacity, its ability to produce oil and, overall, our national security?

Kerry McCarthy: We are not allowing anyone to dictate to us. I know my hon. Friend has been deep in conversation for some time with the Minister for Energy over Grangemouth's future. To reiterate, we absolutely need to attract investment to meet our clean power mission, to secure our future energy security and, in the long run, to bring down bills for the British people. We need to balance national security concerns in tandem with that, and neither one takes priority. We need to tackle those challenges together, and that is what we will do.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Whatever the question about energy is, China is not the answer. First, we know the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero have raised objections about the Treasury's push to bring Mingyang Smart Energy into the circuit to bid for this. Secondly, China is determined to involve slave labour in its products. We are investing under this Government in solar arrays, which use a huge amount of slave labour in producing polysilicon. Do the Government not recognise that their tilt towards China to get it to invest runs the real risk of utter dependency on China and serious threats to our security, which have been highlighted endlessly by the security services, and will they now stop?

Kerry McCarthy: I recognise that the right hon. Member has long-standing concerns about the role of China and its investment in our economy. He has been a great champion of raising concerns about forced labour, and he is right to do so. We have set up the solar taskforce, as I am sure he is aware, to look at whether there is forced labour in our solar supply chains. As I have said, a supply chain mission will be launched as part of the global clean power alliance. This is not something that one country can tackle by itself; we all need to be alert to the risks of slave labour. I know that an amendment was passed in the House of Lords last night that means the issue will come back to this Chamber soon, and I look forward to the discussion then.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that developing our economic and trading relationships with other nations is one lever of many that the Government are using to drive growth and investment, alongside planning reforms, public investment and a proper industrial strategy for the people not only of the UK, but my city? At the same time, our work across Departments must always have our nation's security at its core.

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we are using a number of levers. The growth mission and the clean power mission work hand in hand to ensure that energy security and the decarbonisation of our power system contribute to growth in this country, and that means contributing to job creation and, in some cases, overseas investment. We have set up Great British Energy, and we have the national wealth fund and the clean industry bonus, all of which will help us achieve those objectives.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Have Ministers or officials in the Ministry of Defence, the Home Office or the security services raised any concerns with the

Department over the possibility of offshore structures in British waters being used for Chinese intelligence-gathering technology? If there are sensitive matters that cannot be discussed in the House, will she commit to holding a private briefing for Members on the security implications of energy infrastructure from China?

Kerry McCarthy: I cannot comment on the extent of conversations, other than to reassure the hon. Member that, of course, those conversations are taking place and will be ongoing and that we are going through robust processes. Again, because it is not my specific role, I cannot say whether that information could be shared. I do not think that it can be shared on a day-to-day basis, but I will investigate whether we could arrange a briefing with Members to give some reassurance as to the general approach.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I am surprised that Conservative Members seem to have forgotten the time when they were pushing the golden era of the relationship between the UK and China. Some of this is a legacy of their time in government, so they should be careful about how they approach this conversation.

I point out to the Minister the role that Grimsby plays in servicing and supporting operations of offshore wind, not only around UK waters but as far as Taiwan. Those skills, competencies and capabilities exist here in the country, so what additional support will be given to expand those capabilities and support for skills in this country?

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend has been a real champion for Grimsby, and I was glad to see her returned at the recent election, so that she can carry on championing all the potential that Grimsby has to offer, not least in the wind sector. It is important that we link up skills and capacity—that is one of the obstacles. We talk often about how grid capacity and planning issues can hold up the roll-out of clean power, but we have to have the skills base as well. We are working with the Department for Education on how we can train and develop capacity within the existing workforce through things like the growth and skills levy to work on these exciting new projects.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): The Minister speaks about being reliant on the petrochemical states and dictatorships that supplied the fuel needed for our energy system, and yet the vast majority of the processed materials needed—whether we construct things here or not—come from China. We recognise that some of those countries are dictatorships, but will the Minister confirm at the Dispatch Box that a country that uses slave labour, has carried out the most horrendous crimes against the Uyghur population and has sanctioned our own parliamentarians is as much a dictatorship as the countries that she says we want to no longer be reliant on?

Kerry McCarthy: If we followed the approach suggested by the Opposition Front Bench, we would be firmly back in the hands of the petrostates and the dictators. As for our relationship with China, as I have said, we will co-operate where we can, compete where we need to and absolutely challenge if we must. We have been clear

[Kerry McCarthy]

that no company in the UK should have forced labour in its supply chain. That is why we have set up the solar taskforce and are going through robust processes ahead of the decision that we are talking about. I will take no lessons from the right hon. Member because we have had 14 years of being exposed to a volatile energy market, and we are trying to recreate our energy security through this investment.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that, after the real neglect of our energy infrastructure for the past 14 years, setting up GB Energy to help UK ownership of energy production can only be a good thing, and that our investment in critical minerals, particularly in Cornwall, and in the supply chain for floating offshore wind will be crucial for our national security?

Kerry McCarthy: On the one hand, Conservative Members raise concerns about critical minerals being imported from abroad. On the other, when my hon. Friend, who is a real champion for her area, praises the investment that we have put into lithium extraction in Cornwall, they start jeering. We will continue to invest through GB Energy and the national wealth fund.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): To have true energy security, we need home-grown capability at all stages of the development of renewable energy infrastructure, from the earliest research to maintenance and decommissioning. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that we have that home-grown full-lifecycle capability?

Kerry McCarthy: From the hon. Member's question, she may be talking about community energy—I am not quite sure.

Claire Young indicated dissent.

Kerry McCarthy: In that case, I will say that it is important that any investment is place-based, and we need to look at developing the capability, such as the skills and the capacity of the local authorities—that is where community energy comes in. We also need to ensure that the finance goes where the investment is needed. If I have not understood the hon. Member's question, I would be happy to take it up with her afterwards.

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's engagement on this topic. To have meaningful and serious discussions with other major economies is vital for our success. Does the Minister agree that those discussions are key to not only securing our economic aims, but tackling the climate and nature crisis and achieving our wider international objectives?

Kerry McCarthy: Yes, that international co-operation is absolutely crucial. It means talking to countries with which we share a great deal in common and which are signed up to the same objectives, but it also means talking to other countries to bring them with us. That is why we are hosting the International Energy Agency summit in London in April, why we have set up the global clean power alliance, and why the Prime Minister went to the COP climate change talks in Baku last

autumn and showed international leadership, which was very much lacking from UK Governments of previous years.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Clearly, national security concerns are being expressed across the House. Will the Minister ensure that the construction, maintenance and access to software will be carried out by British workers in British shops, and will not be subcontracted to foreign powers?

Kerry McCarthy: As I have said, I cannot comment on individual cases, but there are processes to ensure that our national security is protected as we look ahead.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's reassurance about the Government's rigorous scrutiny of energy projects involving Chinese technologies. I understand the argument that, at the current stage of our transition to net zero, we may need to look further afield to meet our domestic energy needs, but does she agree that the long-term plan ought to be to reduce reliance on Chinese technology in the UK energy sector and to use British-made green technology, about which there can be no national security or ethical supply chain concerns?

Kerry McCarthy: I agree. That is why we are doing all we can to increase capacity through initiatives such as the clean industry bonus, investment from the national wealth fund, the role of GB Energy, and all the other measures that we will take through our industrial strategy to ensure that we keep and create jobs in the UK.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The Minister is all over the place on this. In her opening remarks, she said that the United Kingdom has a world-leading renewable energy industry. If we did, we would not be having this discussion about foreign imported infrastructure. Notwithstanding the Tories' total failure over 14 years to invest in the industrial base for renewable energy manufacturing across the United Kingdom, what is the Government's strategy to get in front of this, not just in manufacturing but in resource supply, enterprise resource planning and intellectual property? What is the big shift that the Government have planned? I just hear jibber-jabber.

Kerry McCarthy: That is not very polite of the hon. Member. As I have said, we are doing all we can to attract investment into the UK, so that we can be as reliant as possible on our own resources—that means our own supply chain and attracting investment and so on. We are doing that through the national wealth fund and through GB Energy. I do not know to what extent he took part in debate on the Great British Energy Bill, but there was much discussion then. As I have said, this issue must be solved on an international level. We are doing a lot of work with our colleagues to make the North sea the green power plant of Europe through the North Seas Energy Co-operation council, and we have set up the global clean power alliance. We cannot act alone—although I know that the Scottish National party prefers that approach. We are working in co-operation but also in the best interests of the British economy.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that her Department's work is entirely consistent with the Government's approach to China: co-operate where we can, compete where we need to and challenge where we must?

Kerry McCarthy: That is exactly our approach, and it is the right approach. Perhaps the Opposition Front Benchers would advocate not co-operating with China, but it is an incredibly important player on the world stage, and we gain nothing from completely turning our back on it and not engaging in dialogue.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Following its illegal invasion of Ukraine, we saw how Russia responded in the global tariffs sanctions market: it tried to use its dominance in the nuclear fuel market to put pressure on Ukraine's allies. We see the vulnerability in our energy supply chain when our enemies, and allies of those enemies, want to use it against us. Former head of MI6 Sir Richard Dearlove says that the Government's target of decarbonising the grid hands power to Beijing. We have enough oil and gas in the UK not to have to rely on dictator states, so why do we not just get drilling and get our own oil and gas out of the ground? I suspect that, in their mad dash to decarbonise the grid, the Government will not do that, but have they undertaken a risk assessment of the strategic vulnerability of our national security in our increasing reliance on Chinese rare earth minerals and battery production?

Kerry McCarthy: I think I have made it clear that there are ongoing conversations about that, and that we take national security incredibly seriously when we consider investment decisions. On what the hon. Member said about producing more oil and gas here for our own use, I think he needs a lesson in how the energy markets work—there is no guarantee that it would be used here.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The issue is the Labour Government's rush to decarbonise by 2030, which means that this country does not have the capabilities to fulfil all the requirements to deliver on these projects. Until we do, we will always be reliant on overseas powers and people, such as the Chinese Government and Chinese manufacturers, to deliver what we need in order to decarbonise. Are the Government prepared and happy to sacrifice our national security and our energy security to reach that 2030 target?

Kerry McCarthy: It sounds very much like the hon. Member is making the case for an industrial strategy

that ensures that we can match demand with supply. That approach was particularly missing from the previous Government.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Almost on a weekly basis, we are lectured by the net zero-obsessed Secretary of State that the race for renewables is necessary in order to give this country a secure future supply of energy. Yet the renewables industry is increasingly dependent on Chinese technology, and on rare earth metals, of which the Chinese control 70%, so we are placing our future energy supply in the hands of a dictatorship that has proved itself willing to use such infrastructure to blackmail the countries in which it is based. Should we not consider the supply of fossil fuels in this country—decades of oil and gas—which we could use without interference from others?

Kerry McCarthy: We believe that the best route to energy security is through our clean power by 2030 mission and further investment in renewables. That remains our stance.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister will be aware that the costly environmental obligations that the Government impose on home-manufactured goods are not adhered to by many other nations, which often prevents UK manufacturers from being able to compete. Does the Minister agree that those considerations, as well as the routine human rights breaches of Chinese business against the Uyghurs, Falun Gong, Christians and other ethnic minorities, should be equally weighted with costs? Human rights and Chinese production will never add up; that must inform any contract offered by this nation of ours.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Member has frequently raised almost every issue that one could think of, but he and I have taken part in many debates about human rights in countries of concern over the years, and he is absolutely right to flag those concerns. As I have said, we have the solar taskforce and the supply chain mission with the global clean power alliance. We are very much alert to those matters. We do not want to see forced labour or any form of modern slavery in our supply chains. We are determined to take action on that.

Prevent: Learning Review

1.8 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the publication of the Prevent learning review into the perpetrator of the attack that tragically killed Sir David Amess on 15 October 2021.

Sir David Amess was a beloved Member of this House. A hugely respected parliamentarian, his popularity extended right across the political divide. To win and keep the respect of those outside one's own party is, as we all know, a rare accomplishment. Over nearly 40 years of service in this place, Sir David fought every day for his constituents. He advanced numerous causes with compassion, persistence and skill, and Members on all sides of the House knew him as a warm, respectful and always fair parliamentarian. His legacy lives on, not least in Southend, which now has the city status he campaigned so determinedly for. He will never be forgotten, and as the motto on Sir David's memorial shield behind me states, "His Light Remains". While this House lost a hugely valued Member on that terrible day, Sir David's wife and children lost a loving husband and a devoted father. They are in our thoughts and prayers today and always.

Together with the Home Secretary, who spoke with Sir David's family recently, I recognise the courage and persistence they have shown in seeking the answers that they deserve. As the House will know, it was a heinous act of violence on 15 October 2021 that took Sir David away from those who knew and loved him. The killer, Ali Harbi Ali—and I will not say his name again—was convicted of murder in April 2022 and received a whole-life sentence. The judge said that this

"was a murder that struck at the heart of our democracy", and he had "no doubt whatsoever" that the nature of this case meant that the perpetrator

"must be kept in prison for the rest of his life."

The perpetrator had previously been referred to the Prevent programme and subsequently to the specialist Channel programme between 2014 and 2016, or between five and seven years before the attack took place. Immediately after the attack, a Prevent learning review was jointly commissioned by the Home Office and counter-terrorism policing to examine what happened in the case and see whether lessons needed to be rapidly learned. It was completed in February 2022.

Last week, I made a statement to the House on the Government's publication of the Prevent learning review concerning the perpetrator of the abhorrent attack in Southport. Today, we are taking a further step to enable public scrutiny of Prevent, and in recognition of the seriousness of the terrible attack on Sir David, by publishing the Prevent learning review conducted in this case, too.

The perpetrator of the attack on Sir David became known to Prevent in October 2014, when he was referred by his school after teachers identified a change in his behaviour. The case was adopted by the Channel multi-agency early intervention programme in November 2014. An intervention provider who specialised in tackling Islamist extremism was assigned to work with him. The perpetrator was exited from Channel in April 2015 after his terrorism risk was assessed as low. A 12-month post-exit police review in 2016 also found no terrorism

concerns. The case was closed to Prevent at that point. There were no further Prevent referrals in the five years between the case being closed and the attack.

The Prevent learning review examined how Prevent dealt with the perpetrator's risk, and how far the improvements made to Prevent since he was referred seven years prior would have impacted on his management. The review considered both the handling of the case at the time and the changes that had been made to Prevent since the referral in 2014. It examined how far those changes addressed any problems identified, and then made a series of recommendations.

The reviewer found that

"from the material reviewed, the assessment in terms of" the perpetrator's

"vulnerabilities was problematic and this ultimately led to questionable decision making and sub-optimal handling of the case during the time he was engaged with Prevent and Channel."

It identified that the vulnerability assessment framework was not followed, with the perpetrator's symptoms being prioritised over addressing the underlying causes of his vulnerabilities. The reviewer ultimately found that, while Prevent policy and guidance at the time were mostly followed, the case was exited from Prevent too quickly.

The reviewer identified six issues: the support given did not tackle all of the vulnerabilities identified; record keeping was problematic and the rationale for certain decisions was not explicit; responsibilities between police and the local authority were blurred; the tool used for identifying an individual's vulnerability to radicalisation was outdated; the school that made the referral to Prevent should have been involved in discussions to help determine risk and appropriate support; and the tasking of the intervention provider was problematic, with a miscommunication leading to only one session being provided instead of two.

The reviewer then examined how far changes in the Prevent programme since 2016 had addressed these issues. The reviewer recognised the significant changes that had been made to Prevent since the perpetrator was managed, in particular the introduction of the statutory Prevent and Channel duties under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. The reviewer concluded that over the intervening period there have been considerable changes to policy and guidance for both the police and the wider Prevent arena, including Channel.

While a number of the issues in the perpetrator's case would most likely not be repeated today, there were still a number of areas that could be considered as requiring further work to mitigate future failures. The reviewer made four recommendations for actions to further strengthen Prevent. These were to improve the referral process, strengthen the initial intelligence assessment process, update the tool used to identify vulnerability to being drawn into terrorism, and to not reduce data retention periods.

Since the report, the Home Office and counter-terrorism policing have fully implemented all four recommendations. First, a single national referral form was launched to encourage a consistent approach to referrals, building this into new training packages and mandating its use via statutory guidance. Secondly, training has been delivered to police staff to strengthen the initial intelligence check stage, ensuring their understanding of Prevent is robust. Thirdly, a new Prevent assessment framework was rolled out in September 2024, which replaces the

tools previously used to assess all referrals and cases in the Prevent system. Fourthly, data retention periods were fully reviewed in 2023, and a joint decision was taken by the Home Office and counter-terrorism policing to maintain retention review periods at six years, or six years after the 12-month review for Channel cases.

In addition to the publication of the Prevent learning review, we recognise the significant concerns that remain over the way in which Prevent dealt with the perpetrator, as well as the need to ensure that the recommendations it suggested for improving the scheme have been properly implemented. Last week, I set out to the House a series of new reforms instituted by the Government to strengthen the Prevent programme, recognising the vital work done by officers across the country to keep people safe. That included the creation of a new independent Prevent commissioner. I can today inform the House that the Home Secretary has asked the Prevent commissioner to review the Prevent programme's interactions with the perpetrator in this case, and ensure the implementation of all relevant recommendations. We will ensure that the Amess family have the support they need to engage with the Prevent commissioner in this work, so that they can have confidence that it will get to the truth about any failings in the scheme.

Two further important issues have been raised that are relevant to this case—local policing and Members' security. On local policing, concerns have been raised by the Amess family about the way in which Essex police handled this case. A complaint has been made, and referred back to the local force by the Independent Office for Police Conduct for consideration. That process must be allowed to follow its course. However, I can inform the House that the Home Secretary has written to the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner of Essex police asking them to set out how the investigation will be conducted, and to be kept updated as the investigation progresses.

Members' security is something the Home Secretary and I care deeply about, and I know it is a matter to which Mr Speaker attaches the utmost importance, as will all Members across the House. A review of security measures for MPs commissioned under the previous Government has concluded, and all the recommendations have been implemented. We must ensure that the learnings from this case have been properly implemented.

I take this opportunity to thank Mr Speaker for his continued leadership on these matters. The Speaker's Conference is specifically considering what reforms are necessary further to improve MPs' security and safety, which is another important step. The Leader of the House, the Home Secretary and I look forward to working closely with Mr Speaker and all Members to ensure that the facts of the appalling murder of Sir David are properly considered as part of the Speaker's Conference's work, and that the Parliamentary Security Department implements the recommendations it made following the review it conducted in the aftermath of Sir David's death.

I am also grateful to previous Home Secretaries and Security Ministers for their efforts in this area. Our democracy is precious, and this Government will defend it against any and all threats, not least through the defending democracy taskforce, where we are mounting a whole-of-government response to combat these threats, including ensuring that elected representatives can perform their duties safely and without fear.

To conclude, I pay tribute once more to Sir David. He was a giant of this House and we miss him dearly. In all that he did, Sir David epitomised public service at its best. It is beyond a tragedy that we can no longer seek his advice or rely on his wisdom. We can, though, follow his example and devote ourselves every day to the task of building a better, safer Britain. That is our shared challenge, and under this Government, nothing will matter more. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.21 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I start by thanking the Security Minister for providing advance sight of his statement and advance sight of the Prevent learning review into Sir David Amess's tragic murder. I thank him for the courtesy and collegiality with which he has conducted our discussions on this topic in recent days.

Let me add my words to those of the Security Minister in remembering our colleague, Sir David Amess. All of those who served with him in this House held him in great affection and the highest regard. He was a colleague who was loved, and is remembered fondly, across the House. His particular form of charm, kindness and good humour is something that everybody who ever met David will remember. Every day, I walk into this Chamber and see his shield up there on the wall opposite—I see Jo Cox's, too—and I remember David and the loss that we, everyone in his constituency and most of all his family have suffered.

I spoke earlier today to Sir David's wife, Julia, and I pay tribute to her and her daughters for the courage and fortitude they have shown over these past few years in campaigning to get the answers they need. I also thank the former Member of Parliament for Southend West, Anna Firth, who has been supporting Julia and her family throughout this difficult time. I thank the Home Secretary, as well, for meeting Lady Julia recently. I am grateful to the Home Secretary for taking the time to do that.

Turning to the Prevent learning review, which I recently received and which I believe is about to be published, I noticed that it is a redacted version. I would be grateful if the Security Minister confirmed that nothing material has been redacted. I am sure that it has not, but it would help to have that clarified.

We heard in the Security Minister's statement—and I thank him for the thoughtful and considered way in which he made it—that the Prevent learning review identified a number of failings in the way that Prevent handled the murderer of our late colleague, and that there had been opportunities for further intervention. While I welcome the fact that the report has been published, and that the new Prevent commissioner will conduct a further review, there are still questions relating to this case and others that perhaps merit a more formal inquiry to ensure that we get to the bottom of it.

There are other cases where there are questions around whether perpetrators of violence either encountered Prevent and could have been better identified and interdicted, or encountered mental health services. Those that may merit further inquiry include: the case of Ahmed Hassan, where 50 people were injured on a tube train following the detonation of a device; the case of

[Chris Philp]

Usman Khan on London Bridge; the case of Khairi Saadallah, who murdered three men in Reading; and, the Southport case that we have discussed in this House recently. It strikes me that there are systemic issues, both with the failure of Prevent to identify and stop potential perpetrators and, associated with that, with the operation of the mental health system and whether more could be done. Because these are systemic issues, I think a more formal inquiry is merited, and I would welcome the Security Minister's views on that.

On the more systemic issues, there are two things on which I would be interested to hear the Security Minister's response. I mentioned them to him individually a few days ago. The first is that in the past 26 years, 94 out of 101 murders committed by terrorists in the United Kingdom since 1999 were committed by Islamist terrorists. That is 94%, yet for the most recent figures available, only 13% of the Prevent caseload relates to Islamist extremism. That strongly suggests on the face of it that Prevent is under-engaging those with Islamist ideologies who go on to commit serious offences. I know that the Shawcross review in part addressed that issue, but it is so serious and the disparity so stark that I would appreciate the Security Minister's views on that. That is a topic that a further inquiry might address.

The second area, which the Security Minister and I briefly discussed on Monday evening, concerns the Mental Health Bill currently making its way through the House of Lords. Many of the cases entail extremist terrorist ideology, but many also touch on mental health issues and whether better treatment should be given or, indeed, whether people should be sectioned and detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 to protect the public. That consideration is relevant, of course, to the Valdo Calocane case, as well as to some of the other cases I have mentioned.

The Bill as drafted, for reasons that Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care have set out, makes it harder to detain people under the Mental Health Act. I am concerned that that might inadvertently have adverse implications for public safety, if people who should be detained under the Mental Health Act to protect the public might now not be detained. That is a matter of concern. I know that the Security Minister will want to respond specifically to that issue.

This matter started from a terrible tragedy. Sir David was more than just a loved colleague: he was a husband and father who lost his life in the course of doing his duty as a Member of Parliament. It is testimony to him—and a memorial that will last forever—that Southend is now a city, but let us also learn the lessons and take the actions needed to ensure that this does not happen again.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for the points he has raised and for how he has approached the statement. He mentioned—I am pleased that he did—that he had spoken to Lady Amess this morning. Let me take the opportunity to reiterate how courageous the Home Secretary and I think that the Amess family have been in pursuing answers about Sir David's murder. They, entirely understandably, wanted the Government to publish the Prevent learning review, and we have done that today. As I referenced earlier, the Home Secretary has also asked the independent Prevent

commissioner to look carefully at the details of this case, and we will progress that at pace. The Home Secretary, as I referenced earlier, has also written to Essex police about this matter. Let me also say that we continue to want to work very closely with the Amess family. The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I stand ready to meet them again in the near future to discuss what more we might be able to do to support them.

The shadow Home Secretary specifically asked me about redactions in the Prevent learning review. I am happy to confirm that nothing material has been redacted. The report is now live on gov.uk and contains only minimal redactions to obscure the names of people who worked with the perpetrator, including teachers and police officers, and personal information about the perpetrator's family as well as some national security sensitivities. Nothing material has been redacted.

I say to the shadow Home Secretary that I hope there is much common cause here. I hope he will acknowledge that there are a number of reforms to the Prevent programme, which we have recently referenced, including with regard to the point he rightly made about mental health provision. I will say a bit more about that in a moment.

Let me respond to the shadow Home Secretary's particular point about the threat from Islamist extremism and the referrals to Prevent. He is right that we should never forget the horrendous death toll caused by Islamist extremism over the past 20 years. It is the foremost threat that we face, and we must and will address it head-on. Last year, the number of Islamist referrals to Prevent increased by 17%, but that was from too low a base. Work is already under way to improve ideology training and build awareness of the ideologies that drive radicalisation.

We should be clear about the fact that the threat is evolving fast. In October, the director general of MI5 said that 75% of counter-terrorism work was of Islamist extremism in nature and 25% was extreme right wing, and that 13% of those being investigated by MI5 were under the age of 18. He flagged that MI5 was seeing a “dizzying range of beliefs and ideologies”.

The Southport attack reflects how that particular threat is changing.

I come back to the shadow Home Secretary's point about mental health. As he knows, the Government's mental health legislation is currently in the other place. The purpose of the Mental Health Act 1983 is to ensure that clinicians have the power to detain and treat mentally unwell people who present a risk to themselves or to others. The new Bill will not change that. It is specifically designed to make it more likely that those detained will seek help, complete their treatment successfully and stay in contact with authorities where needed, reducing the risk to themselves and others.

NHS England has asked every mental health trust to review the findings of the Care Quality Commission report published in August and set out action plans for how they treat and engage with people who have serious mental illness, including how they work with other agencies such as the police. The trusts have also been instructed not to discharge people if they do not attend appointments. I hope that goes some way to answering the shadow Home Secretary's questions, but I am happy to continue the conversation with him.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister, and of course the Home Secretary, for coming to this place for this statement. None of us in the House can imagine the pain, the suffering and the anger that the Amess family are going through after losing their beloved Sir David: their father and husband. I have met the family, and they are still in absolute devastation. We should hold them in our thoughts today.

We should never forget Sir David. I pay tribute to him and to his family for the way in which they have conducted themselves throughout this whole sorry affair. I will continue working closely with the family as well as with the Home Secretary and her team to ensure that they get the support and the answers that they need.

We will never forget Sir David in Southend. We will shortly be putting some memory boards up on the Chalkwell lifeguard station that reflect Sir David's life and our journey to becoming a city. I thank Lady Julia and the local councillors for working closely with me on the project.

I welcome the news today that the Prevent commissioner will be reviewing this case and the implementation of recommendations in relation to it. I am glad to hear that the Home Secretary has written to Essex police about the complaint that has been logged. I thank her for her support on that. It is important that that is seen through so that once again the family get the answers that they deserve. I ask the Minister, and obviously the Home Secretary, to give me an assurance that they will continue to work closely with me and, most importantly, the Amess family, so that we can get them those answers and give them the comfort to enable them to move on with their lives. They will never forget, but we can help them to move forward.

Dan Jarvis: I very grateful to my hon. Friend, not least because this is an issue of the most profound importance to his constituents. He is completely right that we must hold Sir David's family in our thoughts and in our hearts today. He is also completely right that we should strive to ensure—and I know that we will—that we never forget Sir David.

My hon. Friend is in his place close to where I remember Sir David used to stand. Sir David was, among many other things, a complete master of the pre-recess Adjournment debate. I can see him now standing there confidently, expertly and authoritatively reeling off a very long list of requests that he completely expected the Government to get on with and deliver for his constituents. He was truly inspirational. We will never forget him.

I absolutely give my hon. Friend the assurance he seeks that we will continue to work closely with the family and with all hon. Members to ensure that, through the work of the independent Prevent commissioner and the work I referenced earlier with regard to the Home Secretary writing to Essex police, the family get the answers that they rightly deserve.

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

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful as always to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. What happened to Sir David Amess was a terrible tragedy. Though I am new to this House, I have heard

many stories of his kindness and his compassion, and I know that he is sorely missed across these Benches. We owe it to Sir David's grieving family and to the people of Southend to ensure that a tragedy like that can never happen again. That means ensuring that our counter-terrorism strategy is fit for purpose and able to work with communities to tackle the modern challenges that our world is facing.

The Liberal Democrats have long raised questions about whether Prevent is best placed to deliver that. As we have learned over recent weeks, these failures are not happening in isolation, so it is right that the Government have asked the Prevent commissioner to look at this case. I would welcome further assurances that the commissioner will have a wide-ranging remit to take a comprehensive look at Prevent. I urge the Minister again to put the role on a statutory footing. The remit must include looking at how Prevent communicates with other agencies such as local authorities and different police forces.

Local communities need to be at the centre of our counter-terrorism strategy, whether that means keeping them safe or ensuring they are effectively engaged. Will the Minister outline how communities will be consulted on any upcoming counter-extremism strategies?

As the Minister mentioned, this tragic case has also brought to light questions about MPs' safety. Will he please provide some more details on how the defending democracy taskforce is progressing with its work, particularly on helping to keep Members and their families safe? It is my hope that we can continue to work across the House to deliver the effective counter-terrorism strategy that our country deserves. We owe it to the Amess family to make that a reality.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the way in which she has approached the statement and for the sensible and reasonable points she made, as she always does. She made an important point about the role and remit of the independent commissioner. I hope that she, like all hon. Members, would acknowledge that Lord Anderson is superbly qualified to fulfil the role. He is an expert in this area of public policy, and he brings authority, credibility and integrity to the role. The Home Secretary and I look forward to working closely with him but, of course, I reiterate the point about his independence.

The hon. Lady rightly raised the importance of the work that is taking place across Government on counter-extremism. That work is being progressed very closely with other Departments, specifically the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It is a priority for this Government and we will endeavour to update the House in the relatively near future about its progress.

Finally, I am grateful to the hon. Lady for referencing the work of the defending democracy taskforce. This initiative was set up by the previous Government, but we think it is fundamental to ensuring that those people who step forward to serve as elected representatives, whether in this House or in local government as police and crime commissioners or metro Mayors, are able to perform their duties without fear or favour. The remit of the defending democracy taskforce will ensure the most effective cross-Government response, working with operational partners and law enforcement so that those

[*Dan Jarvis*]

elected representatives can go about their duties unencumbered by the completely unacceptable harassment and intimidation that we continue to see.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): Sir David Amess was a hugely respected parliamentarian of massive popularity across all parties and in his wider community. He worked every day with true compassion to improve the lives of residents in Southend West and Leigh, Southend East and Rochford and more widely. My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson), and I bring that legacy with us as we continue the hard work of representing our communities.

I am pleased that the Prevent learning review published today has looked into the attack on Sir David Amess. I commend the hard work of his family, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh, the former MP for Southend West and the Home Office, who are committed to preventing such horrific attacks in future. We must do everything in our power to prevent anything so tragic from ever happening again. My thoughts and prayers will always be with his friends and family.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his words. Let me reiterate what he and the shadow Home Secretary said about Anna Firth. We are grateful for her support and the contribution that she continues to make.

With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, my hon. Friend has just provided me with an opportunity to offer one further personal recollection of Sir David. He responded to my maiden speech in 2011, which I made from the Opposition Benches. It was, by any metric, a pretty average maiden speech, but the warmth of his response has stayed with me forever. From that point, every time we saw each other we would reminisce about how overly generous he had been about it. For that, and for many other reasons, I will always be incredibly grateful to David Amess.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I thank the Minister for his generous tribute to Sir David. Southend is now a city, so we comfort ourselves that on that, at least, he won in the end. We all miss him, not least myself. I welcome what the Minister said about an inquiry into whether Essex police could have done more to protect him. I welcome the Speaker's Conference on MPs' security. The Minister knows that I have great regard for him, but I regret to hear that Prevent may have acted sub-optimally—that is an appalling Whitehall euphemism for errors that may have contributed to the death of an MP in the line of duty. In addition to those possible failures, the murderer in Southport had multiple interactions with Prevent, yet still those three innocent children were tragically murdered. We have spent a fortune on Prevent, but it seems that, ultimately, it does not do what it says on the tin.

I understand that the Amess family, rightfully seeking answers, have asked if the errors that may have occurred in Sir David's case, and that almost certainly occurred in Southport, could be looked into in more detail under the auspices of the Southport inquiry. That seems a reasonable request, given the exceptional circumstances.

Will the Minister and the Home Secretary, who rightly is in her place beside him, consider that request very seriously, and hopefully grant it?

Dan Jarvis: It may be hard for newer Members to understand how difficult this is for more experienced Members, such as the right hon. Gentleman, who spent so many years on these green Benches, working so closely with a much beloved colleague. I see that the right hon. Gentleman is sitting below another shield. Members across the House understand the pain experienced with the loss of our colleagues, and our shared determination to work together and with others to do everything we can to ensure that those who serve in this House have the support and the protections that they need and deserve.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly took the opportunity to reference one of Sir David's many achievements: the city status of Southend. That certainly would not have happened without Sir David's campaigning over many years. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for acknowledging the work that will take place with Essex police. I understand the important concerns that he has raised about Prevent. The terms of reference of the Southport inquiry rightly are still a matter of discussion between the Home Secretary, the Home Office and the families in that particular case, so I am unable to make a judgment about that at this point. What I can do is not only reiterate the point that I have already made, but offer a further commitment from the Home Secretary and me to look very carefully at this, to continue the conversation with the late Sir David's family and other Members, and to work out the best mechanism to provide them and all Members of this House with the answers that they both want and deserve.

Mike Tapp (Dover and Deal) (Lab): The murder of Sir David Amess cut to the very heart of democracy. Clearly, he was the very best of British. The Minister talked about parliamentary security in his considered statement. I have spoken to many colleagues across the House who have said that they feel that abuse and harassment are peaking, and many feel unsafe. Of course, it is unwise to go into details of specific measures, but is the Minister confident that these measures will make us feel safer in this House?

Dan Jarvis: As always, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his thoughtful contribution. "Best of British" is precisely the right phraseology to apply to Sir David. My hon. Friend asked an important question about how we defend our democracy. He asked about my confidence in the work that we are doing to ensure that Members of this House and elected representatives elsewhere can perform their duties with the confidence that they are safe. I must be honest with him and say that that is an ongoing process. All of us in this place will have experienced threats, harassment and intimidation. That is worse particularly for women Members. It is a stain on our society that there are those out there who feel that they can abuse female elected representatives.

What I can give my hon. Friend is an absolute assurance that we are organising and marshalling the resources that we have across Government, working with law enforcement and operational partners, and co-operating very closely with you, Mr Speaker, and the House

authorities, to ensure that those who step forward to serve can do so with the security and comfort of knowing they are properly protected. I will leave no stone unturned in my work with colleagues across Government to ensure that is the case. Where individuals have concerns, wherever they may be, I will always make myself available to discuss those concerns with them.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I echo the Minister's praise for Sir David, who was a loved friend to so many, including many Members in this House. I welcome today's statement, which is a sobering reminder of the importance of getting the Prevent programme right. The seriousness of the statement contrasts sharply with the immediate reaction and debate that followed Sir David's murder, when there was, to be frank, a bizarre and misplaced rush to talk about issues such as online civility, rather than the clear threat that was behind the murder. Will the Minister join me in saying it is time for an end to the denialism we often see around the threat from Islamism, and, recognising what he said about the changing nature of the threat, does he agree that as the major terror threat that we face, Islamist extremism should always be Prevent's top priority?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman speaks with long experience from working both at the heart of Government and in the Home Office. He makes some important points, and I assure him that I will give them further consideration. He is also right, though, to reference the changing nature of the threat. Of course, Islamist extremism presents the single biggest challenge that we face as a country, as the director general of MI5 made clear in his annual threat lecture back in October. The hon. Gentleman will have heard my earlier response to the shadow Home Secretary on the number of referrals—we are looking very closely at that. I am grateful to him for his contribution, which I will reflect on further. I am always happy to discuss this issue with him.

Matt Bishop (Forest of Dean) (Lab): Sadly, I never got to meet Sir David, but, as we have heard from Members across the House today, his reputation goes before him; he was a loved and valued colleague, respected across the whole House and across all Benches. Does the Minister agree that Sir David exemplified the best traditions of this place, working hard and working together to make real change? Can we also take a moment to express our respect for the officers who turn up at these scenes? As a former police officer, I have attended many such scenes, and know it is something we both never want to do and hope never to do again.

Dan Jarvis: I completely agree with my hon. Friend's characterisation of Sir David and his work ethic. I also take this opportunity to join him in paying tribute to those brave police officers who step forward under the most exceptionally difficult circumstances for the service they perform. I thank my hon. Friend for his service, too.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): I remember the day Sir David Amess was tragically murdered very well. I was serving as Lancashire's police and crime commissioner at the time, and I remember having initial conversations with serving Members of this House, including the former Member for Hyndburn, Sara Britcliffe, who,

along with her dad, had been lifelong friends of Sir David. I learned an awful lot about the sort of man he was and how much he meant to people in Parliament from the reactions of the Members I spoke to that day.

I will turn to the Minister's statement. The reviewer identified six issues. I will not read them all out in full, obviously, but they include not tackling all the vulnerabilities identified, problematic record keeping, the rationale for certain decisions not being explicit, responsibilities between police and local authorities being blurred, the tools used for identifying the individual's vulnerability to radicalisation being outdated, and so on. These words and phrases could have been taken from the statement about the tragic incident in Southport—something else that is incredibly important to us, as a fellow north-west MP—but they could also have been taken from many inquiries, reviews and statements over many years on similar cases.

The shadow Home Secretary's point about the differential between the number of murders that have Islamist terrorism at their heart being over 90%, while only 13% of the casework is linked to Islamist ideologies, was also quite stark. For me, the issues here are around process—the quality of following process and quality of work—and the interlinking between different public services, but also around culture and how our public services in different ways have danced around the issue of Islamist extremism, and whether Prevent has delivered in identifying the threat and effectively dealing with it. I echo the suggestion that it is time to take a step back from all the individual reviews, inquiries and statements and take a look at the bigger picture.

I am not going to press the Minister for a specific answer right now; in line with the tone all Members have taken this afternoon, I do not think this is the time for point scoring or trying to secure individual commitments at the Dispatch Box. I would just like to ask the Minister, as he goes forward, looking at this issue, Southport and others, to step back and ask whether Prevent is serving its intended purpose and offering value for money, whether it is keeping the public safe from terrorism, and whether it is time to take a broader, more strategic look, rather than a case-by-case look.

Dan Jarvis: As a former police and crime commissioner, the hon. Gentleman brings a weight of experience to the House that we appreciate hugely. He is right that the learning review identifies a number of points that cannot just sit on a shelf; they have to be actioned. We have to ensure that the processes that are in place are as effective as they possibly can be. I agree with him on the disparity between the number of Islamist attacks and the number of Prevent referrals; I will repeat my earlier point that there was a 17% increase in those specific referrals in the year ending 31 March 2024, but I agree with his analysis. He makes some important points.

What I can say to him is that there are a number of measures—including measures I have referenced today, as well as others in my Southport statement last week—that I think will go a significant way towards addressing the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has rightly raised. I will have to ensure that the House has confidence on that. He made a particularly interesting point at the conclusion of his remarks about stepping back and taking a strategic look at whether the processes and resources that are in place are appropriate.

[Dan Jarvis]

I will do that. I will also work very closely with Lord Anderson, who will bring a huge amount of analysis and value in this area. I very much welcome the opportunity to work with him, and with all Members, including the hon. Gentleman, as we accept this as a shared endeavour to ensure that these attacks never happen again.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): First, I want to put on the record my sympathies for Sir David's family and friends. As a new MP, I did not have the privilege of knowing him, but I vividly remember the day he was murdered. From the warm words spoken across the House, he was clearly highly regarded and is sorely missed.

I thank the Security Minister for his detailed statement. Can he assure me that the lessons from these Prevent learning reviews are learned, that all recommendations are implemented, and that there is appropriate tie-in not just between local authorities, police, national security and national crime agencies, but with the defending democracy taskforce, so that we can work collectively to ensure that tragedies such as this can never happen again?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. He makes an important observation about the importance of co-ordination and of ensuring that locally, regionally and nationally all the relevant agencies and services are in place and are talking and communicating with each other in the most effective way. He is right to refer to the defending democracy taskforce—a mechanism that I chair—which brings together a whole-of-Government response and ultimately provides the fulcrum point for discussing and acting on these matters in government. It is our specific responsibility to ensure that the services he refers to are properly resourced and co-ordinating properly with each other. I am grateful for the points he has made.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I agree with colleagues that Sir David Amess's kindness knew no party boundaries. In particular, I reflect that he found himself in a place of unexpected and certainly unsought popularity in the SNP group in 2015 when, as a group of new MPs, it turned out that barely any of us had not received a kind word, a little bit of advice or certainly some directions from Sir David in those opening weeks. He was remembered kindly by everybody in our group, given that it was a group of newbies at the time, so I want to put that on the record and send my thoughts to his family.

I thank the Security Minister for the statement. Will he set out how an ongoing assessment of the efficiency of Prevent and Channel will be undertaken going forward? Does he feel that he has the full co-operation of social media companies in particular in taking forward his work?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his points and for his reflections on Sir David. He makes an important point about the mechanism the Government will use moving forward. Clearly, the public inquiry will provide a very important forum to ensure that the

lessons that have been identified, and further lessons that will no doubt be identified, are properly actioned and implemented. In advance of that, as I think he will be aware, we have commissioned Lord Anderson to look at these matters. I think he will acknowledge, as other Members will, that Lord Anderson is precisely the right person: independent of Government, with previous experience as an independent reviewer of terrorism legislation; a recognised legal mind, with credibility and authority in this field; and a Member of the other place. We want to work collaboratively with him to ensure that we satisfy ourselves, and therefore Members across the House and people right around the country, that the mechanisms in place are fit for purpose. That is a significant priority for the Government and I can give the hon. Member an assurance that we will not rest until the processes in place are fit for purpose.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments from both sides of the House about Sir David Amess. One challenge in addressing Islamist extremism is the proliferation of hate preachers around the world, both online and in person. I am very concerned about the prospect of the preacher Mohamed Hoblos visiting Middlesbrough later this month. Will the Minister set out the steps he will be taking with regard to that specific case and the broader actions he will take to address hate preachers around the world?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. He will understand that I am somewhat limited in what I can say, but I can tell him that the United Kingdom has a range of disruptive immigration measures at our disposal to refuse entry and cancel permission if it is assessed that a foreign national's presence in the UK is not conducive to the public good. I can give him an assurance today that we will look carefully at the circumstances that he has helpfully raised.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his words. None of us who were privileged to know Sir David Amess are not mindful of both his goodness and his faith—he and I shared the same faith.

As a nation blighted by terrorism and action by evil people who believe that they have the right to take life, it is clear that the powers to address those people must be accessible by intelligence services and that funding to suit must follow appropriately. The actions that resulted in the death of Sir David and those three precious little girls were shocking. It is clear that there was not enough support for the Prevent programme. Indeed, it failed and we all acknowledge that. We do not say that in an objectionable way, but in a way that is factual and evidential, and it is a point that we want to make. I hope that things will change—I think that is what we are all looking for—so that UK citizens are safe from known suspects. How can the Government ensure that public officials and MPs' staff, who we have a responsibility to look after, are safe in our places of business, while always remembering that we must be and will be accessible to our constituents who elected us to this place?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as I always am. Both he and Sir David were and are true champions of this place. I know that the House is

grateful to him for the important and constructive contributions he always makes. His interest in, and experience of, terrorism is well known and long standing. He makes a very important point about accessibility. All of us, as constituency MPs, rightly want to get out and meet our constituents, and make sure that they feel as if we are accessible to them. There is, on occasion, a balance to be struck to ensure we are able to perform our functions and duties at a local level without fear or favour, while at the same time ensuring that activity that takes place locally and nationally is as safe and secure as possible. I give him an absolute assurance that these are matters to which we attach the most profound importance. We are working very closely with Mr Speaker on the work he is doing on the Speaker's Conference. I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance about the priority we attach to that important work.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): As a new Member, I sadly never knew Sir David Amess, but from what people have said about his dedication to his constituents and his good humour across the House, he is a model for all new Members to follow.

At the Home Affairs Committee last week, we heard from the permanent secretary about how Prevent is changing and how the terror threat is changing. As we can see from the learning review, there are clearly gaps and there are lessons that still need to be learned. That requires independent scrutiny and independent oversight. Will the Minister tell us how the new Prevent commissioner will be able to provide the scrutiny we need?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and I completely agree with his characterisation of Sir David as a model for all Members—he is absolutely right about that. He raises a very important point, and I completely agree with his assessment of the learning review. It did identify a number of gaps, and those are gaps that will have to be closed. He will understand what I mean by this, but I need to be careful not to seek to provide too much direction and guidance to the

independent Prevent commissioner, not least because, knowing Lord Anderson, I do not think he would take too kindly to it. What I am completely confident in is that Lord Anderson has all the requisite skills, experience and credibility to provide that function. He is an outstanding appointment. The Home Secretary and I look forward to working very closely with him. Further to the work he will be seeking to do, I can give my hon. Friend and the House an assurance that we will leave no stone unturned in doing what needs to be done to ensure that Prevent is fit for purpose and provides the confidence that people rightly want.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As we have heard today and previously in this place from so many hon. Members on both sides of the House, Sir David was a loved and valued colleague, and not just an MP, but a man with family and friends. Sadly, I did not have the privilege of working with him in this place.

We know that Sir David's killer exited the Prevent scheme many years before the attack took place. Future actions are, tragically, too late for Sir David and his family, but what steps will be taken to ensure that all relevant agencies along the line do not just learn from but act on the lessons from the killer's ability to evade detection in the period leading up to his attack?

Dan Jarvis: I completely agree with the points that my hon. Friend makes. She is right to highlight the difference between learning lessons and implementing and acting upon them. I can give her an assurance that, through the processes announced previously and today, we have the mechanisms to do that. That said, we will continue to have conversations with the Amess family and others to look at areas where we might want to do more. I want to have those conversations sooner rather than later.

My final word, I am sure on behalf of the whole House, is to reiterate a collective tribute to Sir David Amess. He was an outstanding parliamentarian. He is greatly missed and we will never forget him.

Point of Order

2.10 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. *Hansard* will confirm that during questions to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology earlier today, the Secretary of State—who is in his place—said that no Conservative Ministers had met AstraZeneca representatives following the announcement of a £450 million investment to expand its Merseyside vaccine facility. The Secretary of State is wrong. Publicly available transparency data from the Treasury and the Secretary of State's own Department confirm that meetings did take place between AstraZeneca and my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), the then Chancellor, and my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith). May I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on what to do, and may I offer the Secretary of State the opportunity to apologise and correct the record for the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and for giving me notice of it. I trust that he notified the Secretary of State of his intention to raise it. Should the Secretary of State feel that the record needs to be corrected, there are processes whereby he may do so, but the hon. Gentleman has put his point on the record.

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Why detain the House? Why don't I just apologise now, and correct the record? I am grateful to the hon. Member for alerting me to that information. I am happy to correct the record, and I am happy to apologise to him for saying what I said earlier. [*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 247.] I should also correct the thrust of my argument this morning, which was that there was insouciance during the period between the March statement and the general election in July. Actually, it was not insouciance; it was just incompetence that meant they could not get the deal across the line.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State.

Political Donations

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.11 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about a cap on political donations; to make provision for a review to recommend the level at which such a cap should be set and to consider the impact of such a cap; to make provision about political donations made by foreign nationals through companies; and for connected purposes.

This is a Bill that will take big money out of British politics, protect our democracy from foreign interference, and restore public trust in our electoral system. For too long, our politics has been exposed. It is far too easy for those who do not have the national interest of our country at heart, or who have made their wealth through illicit means, to funnel money into British politics. The Bill is simple in its aim: to ensure that it is the people of this country, not the deep pockets of foreign billionaires, oligarchs or corporate interests, who decide our country's future in elections and referendums.

Trust in our political system is faltering. Many people look at our politics and see a system rigged in favour of the rich and powerful. A recent poll by YouGov found that more than two thirds of the British public support a limit on political donations. Not-for-profit organisations such as Unlock Democracy, Spotlight on Corruption and Fair Vote say that that we should take swift action to tighten electoral finance legislation, or else risk democratic backsliding. The message is clear: people want change. We want big money kicked out of politics. Under our current system, however, there is no limit to what a single individual or business can donate. That is not democracy; it is a bidding war for influence, ripe for exploitation by oligarchs and foreign billionaires.

Look at the mess this has resulted in. Just over a month ago, people across Britain recoiled in horror to read the news that the US billionaire Elon Musk planned to donate an uncapped amount of money to Reform. If he were to follow up that plan, we would be powerless to stop him. Most alarming were the past donations to the Conservative party from individuals with links to the Russian Government. This is not just about fairness; it is about national security.

Britain has long prided itself on being a beacon of democracy, but we must not be complacent. Our political financial regulations have glaring loopholes that are open for exploitation by foreign money, funnelled through UK-registered companies, opaque financial networks and questionable donors. Malign actors who do not share our values of tolerance, liberty and the rule of law should not have unrestricted access to our democracy. We know that hostile states seek to undermine our democracies all the time—we have seen it in cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns—yet our political finance laws remain riddled with loopholes that allow foreign and dark money to shape British politics. The Bill seeks to close those gaps, ensuring that our elections and referendums belong to the voters and not to foreign interests.

This Bill seeks to deliver two fair, necessary and overdue changes. First, it will introduce a fair cap on political donations, as determined by a review, and

secondly, it will close British politics to the influence of foreign money by preventing foreign donors from funding our politics. These are essential measures that must be brought into effect. We must protect our elections from manipulation, and ensure that there is further transparency in political funding. In doing so, we will help to restore faith in our democracy and introduce vital safeguards for our political institutions. There is already a consensus in the House that foreign donations have no place in British politics, but that gaps in the law allow this to happen. We must act now to close the legal loopholes that allow these donations to flow unchecked. We in the House have a responsibility to uphold the integrity of our democracy, and it is our duty to drive the change that our country needs.

Britain has always been a nation that stands for fairness, democracy and integrity. It is time for us to take a firm stand against undue influence in our politics, and ensure that our democracy serves the people. The Bill is not radical; it is reasonable, necessary and long overdue. It will ensure that political influence is not bought, but earned through genuine public support. Introducing a cap on political donations is not about limiting participation; it is about making sure that every vote, every voice and every citizen matters equally in our political system. Let us give control of British politics back to our constituents, not to unaccountable tech billionaires or those who seek to buy influence. Let us renew our commitment to an open and fair democracy—one that belongs to the people of this country, now and for generations to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Manuela Perteghella, Dr Roz Savage, Ellie Chowns, Liz Jarvis, SORCHA Eastwood, James MacCleary, Claire Young, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Wera Hobhouse, Sarah Olney and Martin Wrigley present the Bill.

Manuela Perteghella accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May, and to be printed (Bill 183).

Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

2.19 pm

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): I beg to move. That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Government are using technology to grow the economy and create new jobs in order to empower citizens and deliver a smaller, smarter state, but none of that is possible without data. Successive Governments failed to set out the extraordinary opportunity that data presents. Our citizens have counted the cost in slower growth, fewer jobs and flatlining productivity; in communities that feel less safe because police officers are spending more time filling in forms and less time out on the streets, where we need them; in hospitals, where patients are left waiting longer for the care that they so desperately need; and when people queue up to register the death of a loved one, or struggle to rent new homes without the decades-old documents that they need to prove their identity. An outdated approach to data is holding Britain's economy back. This Bill will take the brakes off, unleashing a new era of wealth and opportunity for all.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): The Secretary of State says that successive Governments failed to act, but is it not the case that this Bill is almost identical to the one that the last Conservative Government introduced, which very nearly made it on to the statute book?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for pointing that out. Indeed, a lot of this Bill is based on the one that his Government introduced. They called a general election, which halted it in its tracks. We offered to get that Bill through in wash-up, but that was turned down by the Government. We are here today to discuss a Bill that his Government could well have got through; of course, they had 14 years to do so. I am grateful to him for pointing that out, and for no doubt supporting a Bill for which he claims so much credit.

The smart data measures in the Bill could make switching energy suppliers as quick and easy as switching bank accounts. Consumers will be able to compare utility prices and find better deals, putting money in their pockets. Businesses will be forced to innovate and improve their services, too. Fast-growing firms will also benefit from the digital verification services that this Bill enables. Today, people spend months waiting to get paperwork sorted for a new job. By helping people to prove who they are without physical documents, we will cut the time it takes to get on the payroll, and give businesses the freedom to get on with growth.

One of the biggest barriers to growth is the appalling state of Britain's crumbling infrastructure. Today, streets are being endlessly dug up and re-dug up by different firms repairing gas one year and water the next. At the same time, bigger infrastructure projects have stalled and fallen silent for years. By offering a complete and accurate picture of the underground infrastructure, the national underground asset register will strengthen Britain's building bureaucracy. It will cut the time it takes for workers on site to get the data they need from six days to six seconds. That means that they will be able to get on with building the roads, railways and homes that Britain so desperately needs.

[Peter Kyle]

Today, a siloed approach to data is slowing the state down. Patients are put through the same tests again and again, and prescription errors mean that they get the wrong medication. This is simply unacceptable. The NHS has one of the deepest, most diverse datasets in the world, but the people who need that data cannot access it. By introducing mandatory information standards for all information technology suppliers, this Bill will ensure that information can flow safely, securely and seamlessly through the healthcare system.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Secretary of State outline the benefits that this Bill will have for my constituents in Harlow? I am thinking in particular of residents with multiple prescriptions who struggle to quickly have the data at their fingertips.

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend is championing his constituents, and I am pleased to inform him that the Bill will deliver much more streamlined access to the healthcare system, from primary care right the way through to hospitals, where information should flow freely, not just because of the incentives being put in place but the actual requirements. Of course, when patients travel to their GP or to hospital, they will be able to count on far less disruption on the pavements and in the streets, simply because of the underground asset register. Those are just two examples of how this Bill will benefit his constituents.

The Bill will make it easier to introduce transformative new technologies such as artificial intelligence. It will reduce duplication and error, and save our doctors and nurses time so that they can focus on the patients who need them the most. The same goes for the police officers keeping our country safe: the measures proposed in this Bill will save them 1.5 million hours every single year.

Engaging with the state today takes time and effort, but I see no reason why it should. I created the new Government Digital Service to deliver efficient, convenient digital public services that are shaped around citizens' lives. This Bill will bolster those efforts.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Open banking benefits 12 million customers every year by allowing them access to their data. It has been a great success. Does the Secretary of State see that as a model for how citizens can access their data held by the state?

Peter Kyle: Smart data underpins the service that the hon. Gentleman refers to. We see boundless opportunities for smart data to be applied in new ways, and the Bill before us will unlock some of those opportunities. I am grateful to him for getting that on the record.

An electronic register of births and deaths will make life that little bit easier for a new parent or those who have lost a loved one. However—

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Some of my constituents have raised concerns about how their information will be kept safely in the online register of births and deaths. How will the Secretary of State ensure that the Government keep such information safely?

Peter Kyle: It is imperative that we reassure people up and down the country that their data will be used safely and wisely, and that they will always remain in control of how their data is used. I can give my hon. Friend those reassurances. The House will notice that this Government have acted with transparency when it comes to informing the public how data and the algorithms that process that data are being used. Just last week I released more algorithms for public scrutiny, so that they can be put into the algorithm playbook that we have released. From Department to Department, more of those algorithms will be made available as our resources allow. That is just one example of how we are using transparency to earn the public's trust. In the year before the general election, just one Department released an algorithm for public scrutiny.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): There is a great deal in this Bill that we can all support, but some difficult concepts lurk within it, as I know the Secretary of State will recognise. He is talking about data transparency. One of the issues of concern is about precisely what we mean by the "scientific research" on which data may be employed, and precisely what we mean by "the public interest" that must be served by that scientific research. We will not examine this issue on Second Reading, but may I ask him to commit to a proper examination of those concepts as the Bill moves forward, so that we can all understand what we mean and the public can get the reassurance that he describes?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his informed intervention. I can assure him that we take this issue very seriously. I can also assure him that this is one of the issues on which we will go into considerable depth in Committee, and I am sure that his Whips are hearing of his interest in getting on to that Committee. He is clearly volunteering to put in the hard yards to make sure that we get the Bill right.

None of the things that I have outlined will succeed without trust. People will not use technology unless they are confident that it is being used safely, but we often lack the rigorous evidence that we need to take decisions about the safety of our rapidly changing online world. The provisions in this Bill will allow researchers to access data held by platforms, enabling them to conduct robust independent research into online safety. I am grateful to peers for their dedication in rigorously scrutinising these measures. We have listened closely, and in response we have made some important changes to the Bill. First, we have brought forward measures to strengthen data protection for children. Information society service providers likely to be accessed by children will now have clear legal duties to consider how best to protect and support children when designing their data-processing activities.

Secondly, we have added a provision to help charities use email to engage with people who have previously supported their charitable purposes. Thirdly, we have committed to making it easier for people to navigate data protection measures in a world transformed by technology. In two rapidly growing sectors—automated decision making and edtech—we will ask the Information Commissioner's Office to publish codes of practice to give people the knowledge and confidence they need to use personal data legally.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that clause 80 removes the existing right of individuals not to be subjected to solely automated decision-making processes unless it involves a category of special data. In practice, this might mean that journalists could have their data processed through ADM, which could pose significant risks to their sources. What reassurance can he give me that these concerns will be explored and assessed as the Bill passes through the House?

Peter Kyle: The Bill improves the automated decision-making process, but individual attributes and sectors will be impacted and we will of course take that into consideration in Committee, where I am sure that issue will be raised. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting it on record on Second Reading.

Peers also added several measures during the Bill's Report stage. First, Baroness Owen ran an admirable campaign to outlaw the creation of intimate images and deepfakes. This horrific form of online abuse has a devastating impact on its victims. The Government will work with Baroness Owen to ensure that the drafting of intimate image abuse measures in Committee keeps women and girls safe. Secondly, my Ministers will work with Opposition Members to explore the possibility of new security guidance for users of the national underground asset register, as proposed by Viscount Camrose. I am confident that we will find a solution that is satisfactory to all.

Thirdly, Viscount Colville added a public interest test for scientific researchers seeking to use clause 67 to process personal data. However, expecting scientists to define the outcomes of their work in advance goes against the unpredictable nature of research. Many groundbreaking discoveries come from research with no clear public benefits at the start. The mRNA-based vaccines that saved millions of lives during the covid-19 pandemic drew on curiosity-driven research that for years had had no practical applications. Today's AI revolution draws on decades-old neural networks research that was long thought unimportant. As the Royal Society has said, this additional public interest requirement would be an undue bureaucratic burden on researchers. For these reasons, we will seek to overturn the measure.

Fourthly, many Members will have observed Baroness Kidron's campaign on AI and copyright with keen interest. One of the extraordinary things about Britain is our ability to support a cutting-edge AI sector and world-leading creative industries at the same time. Both are fundamental to our future prosperity and standing in the world, and I refuse to choose between them.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD) *rose*—

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP) *rose*—

Peter Kyle: I will finish this section of my speech and then give way to those Members who have a considerable interest in this area. Let me say what I have to say, and then I will hear what hon. Members would like to contribute and engage as fully as I can.

The final framework must reward human creativity, incentivise innovation and provide the certainty required for long-term growth in both sectors, but the importance and complexity of this issue means that it should be considered through the live consultation. As I said in that consultation, legislation is ultimately likely to be needed.

Pete Wishart: Of course the creative industries are excited about the inclusion of clauses 135 to 139, which they see as their guarantee and protection against the ravages of generative artificial intelligence. Those clauses are in the Bill to protect our creative industries. Will the Secretary of State assure the House today that he will respect them and keep them in the Bill, with no attempt to water them down?

Peter Kyle: I pay tribute to those in the creative arts sector who are in the House today. I know that, for people who engage in that kind of activity, it is not just a job; it is a passion that comes straight from the heart. They are emotionally connected in a profound way to the work that they create, which is a credit not just to them as individuals but to our entire country. I can assure them that I have no intention at all of standing in the way of respect for their work.

As we go through this process, it will be essential that we listen to the voices from both sides. The consultation that is currently live is a meaningful one, and I assure the House that I am engaging with it. I look forward to hearing all the voices in the consultation and, as I have said, it is likely that legislation on this specific issue will come out of it. That would give the House an opportunity to go through this issue in enormous detail at the appropriate time. I am listening carefully and I want to engage with all the voices throughout the Committee stage and ensure that the debate continues.

Jess Brown-Fuller: Some creatives are arguing that the current consultation could be undermined because it already promotes a preferred option, which is the handing over of creatives' intellectual property to the AI sector. That would include creatives such as composers, lyricists and writers—one of whom the Secretary of State is sitting next to. Some of them are struggling to earn a fair living, although perhaps not our hon. Friend the Minister. AI models are being trained on those creatives' work without their knowledge or consent. Without adequate protection for those creatives and without greater transparency over when their intellectual property is being scraped, the creative industries as we know them will cease to exist. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that those creative voices, of whom there are 2.4 million in Britain, are heard throughout the Committee stage?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her offer of advocacy for the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant). I have never known him to lack a voice for self-advocacy. However, should the time arise, I know that she will be on his speed dial. The issues that she has raised are of profound importance. As I have said, I recognise not just the economic issues but the personal connection that creatives have with the art and work that they create. I have absolutely no intention of disempowering them in that relationship, and I certainly have no intention whatsoever of taking away any rights from those individuals without any consultation.

We recognise that people in the creative arts sector are making representations, as they absolutely should be, and I listen carefully to them, but this country has the third largest AI market in the world. There are young people currently studying in schools, colleges

[Peter Kyle]

and universities around the country who aspire to work in the technology sector, and they should not have to leave the country and work abroad in order to fulfil their potential. Of the people who have contributed so much to our economy, of course those in the creative arts are absolutely front and centre. Alongside them is the technology sector, which is providing enormous opportunities in job creation, wealth creation and innovation right across the country. Parts of this country are becoming a magnet for talent, not only from this country but from around the world, and I do not want anybody to feel that they have to leave the country to seek opportunities to exploit their talent and potential as individuals. I believe there is a way forward, and I assure the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) that, whatever people think of the consultation, I am listening very closely. The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms has been engaging fully, and we take these issues incredibly seriously. We will continue to do so in Committee and beyond.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I am a great admirer of the Secretary of State, and I admire his belief in his cause today. The creative sector will have heard his commitment to listen, and I thank him for ensuring the openness and engagement of his Ministers on this issue. In the spirit of listening, will he agree from the Dispatch Box today to meet those creatives who are keen to have an audience with him on this significant issue?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's work on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in scrutinising these areas and for being a voice for the sector. It goes without saying that I would be delighted to meet the people he references, and the same goes for Members on both sides of the House. Whether I can fit every one of the 2.5 million people who work in the sector into my office, I do not know. It is a bigger office than I had seven months ago, but I am not sure I can fit everyone in. However, I will do my absolute best; I am here to listen and learn, as I have been from the outset, and I am here to find a way through. It is time to reconcile these issues and to give certainty to people in both the creative arts sector and the technology sector. I believe the Bill is the moment for this House to provide the certainty that both sides need as we move forward.

Fifthly and finally, let me say a word on Lord Lucas's amendments. People will use digital identities to buy a house, to rent a car and to get a job. The intention of clause 45(6) is to force public authorities to share whether someone's information, such as their sex, has changed when disclosing information under clause 45 as part of a digital verification check. That would mean passing on an excessive amount of personal data. Sharing such changes by default would be an unjustifiable invasion of people's privacy, and I am unable to say that clause 45(6) is compatible with human rights law, which is why we will seek to overturn the amendment.

Sir Jeremy Wright: The Secretary of State is very generous in giving way. Before he finishes, may I ask him about the situation we are creating with this Bill and the Online Safety Act 2023 of setting a framework within which regulators need to operate and cover a good deal of ground? Does he think the advent of these

pieces of legislation makes a stronger case for a new Committee of this House, and perhaps a Joint Committee, to maintain scrutiny of ongoing digital regulation? If so, will he be prepared to advance that case?

Peter Kyle: That is the right hon. and learned Gentleman's second audition of the day. I am open-minded on these issues, and I take leadership from the Leader of the House on Committee matters.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on this Bill, and on setting out the importance and ubiquity of data; the current confusion on data sharing, data formats, data processing and data usage; and the lack of action by the previous Government to address some of these issues.

Given the evolution of AI technology, its simply being a method of processing data and its growing importance and applications, can this Bill possibly address all future issues? Is this Bill the Government's last word on data, or is it their first word?

Peter Kyle: Of course, we should have had this Bill two years ago. We have seen enormous progress on AI technology since then. I have been at the Paris summit for the past few days, and I saw where this technology is heading. Huge advances in the power of AI and the move towards artificial general intelligence are happening faster than anybody imagined. I cannot guarantee that this Bill will be sound for time immemorial, but I can say that it is fit for the moment in which we are living.

I reassure my hon. Friend that all our regulators have been tasked with assessing how non-frontier AI, as applied throughout the economy and society, will impact the sectors they regulate. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is offering assistance, where needed, as we assess the impact across our society.

My hon. Friend refers to a general-purpose technology, and it will therefore be applied and deployed in different parts of the economy and society in very different ways. We must make sure that, as a society, we deploy it safely. Once we ensure that the technology is safe, we can embrace it and explore all the opportunities that it offers.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): It is hard to imagine a dataset in which it is more important to maintain confidentiality than patient data. This Bill makes changes to the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that there are no changes to patient confidentiality?

Peter Kyle: I am pleased to give the hon. Member that assurance.

Data reform could not be more urgent or more necessary. Governments have spent years waxing lyrical about the immense promise of technology.

Sir Ashley Fox: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Peter Kyle: I will carry on, I am afraid.

The failure of previous Governments to deliver data reform has undermined that promise, stalling economic growth and leaving our public services wrapped up in red tape, and our citizens have paid the price. This Bill will smash the silos standing in the way of reform and remove the brakes that are holding Britain back.

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

2.47 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): The Conservatives want Britain to be a science and technology superpower, and that means fully unlocking all the benefits of data. As a country, we must make the appropriate use of data more widespread. That would cut red tape, make research easier, create new jobs, deliver economic growth and enable people to access public services more efficiently.

A data-enabled economy and society is good for everyone, which is why we introduced the groundbreaking Data Protection and Digital Information Bill before the last election and progressed it through all Commons stages, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) rightly said. We still believe in those reforms and call on the Government to build on them, but we also recognise the concerns around individual rights, privacy, AI and copyright that have been raised in relation to Labour's Bill.

When the previous Government left office last July, we had turned Britain into one of the world's leading tech economies. We were home to more tech unicorns than any other European country, and more than France and Germany combined. Britain had become the world's third largest AI ecosystem, with pioneering start-ups creating new jobs and innovative products. We led the way on developing safe AI through the world's first AI safety summit and AI Safety Institute.

Our original Bill complemented those achievements and would have accelerated Britain's progress towards becoming a highly data-enabled economy and society. In particular, our proposals for a digital verification services framework are replicated in this Bill. It is also clear that this Bill has been informed by consultations carried out under the last Conservative Government on the governance of digital identities.

Similarly, putting the national underground asset register on a statutory footing is a Conservative idea, and we welcome its inclusion in this Bill. More than 700 different organisations dig holes to install and maintain underground assets every year. Expanding and standardising the digital map of pipes and cables will help local councils, utility providers and others to better co-ordinate their activities, hopefully reducing the 60,000 accidental damage incidents that occur every year. However, the security of the register must be of the highest possible standard, given that the information is highly sensitive. The amendments tabled on register security by Viscount Camrose and Lord Markham in the other place should be taken seriously by the Government.

While the asset register provisions will turn our aim of joined-up thinking into reality, this Labour Government's approach to AI and copyright is a total failure, and no joined-up thinking has happened at all. Last December, the Government finally launched their consultation, just as the Christmas break started. Why did Labour wait six months when this area of policy moves so quickly, with AI firms, the creative industries and the public needing legal certainty and firm answers? When the consultation finally arrived, the creative industries sector was unanimous in describing Labour's proposals as completely unfit for purpose. For the sector, Labour's idea of imposing a requirement on creatives, such as journalists, songwriters and film makers, to proactively

opt out of data mining is not the solution. Labour's proposal could align the UK's approach closely with the EU regime under the digital single market copyright directive, which has produced widespread uncertainty about what constitutes a valid reservation of rights.

Labour's approach to copyright and AI is the ultimate test of its credibility on tech and creative industries issues, and it has failed—the entire sector knows it. Rather than solving a problem, Labour is the problem.

Mr Frith: I know the hon. Member fancies himself as a bit of a tech bro, but he should recognise that much of the anxiety in the creative industries sector is caused by the dither and delay of the Conservatives' time in Government and their failure to grasp the issue. As ever, we on the Government Benches are doing the hard work.

Alan Mak: The last Conservative Government left Britain with a world-class creative industries sector. It is Labour's dither and delay that is causing huge anxiety, as I will go on to say.

Rather than solving a problem, Labour is the problem. One way to resolve that is to accept the Conservative proposal, tabled in the other place, to develop international technical standards for watermarks, which the Secretary of State referred to. We welcome the agreement by the Minister in the other place to take that work forward, and both Houses look forward to the outcome with great interest.

As I have said, the creative industries sector is valuable. It is worth £124 billion to the UK economy and employs over 2.4 million people. They will all be damaged by Labour's approach and they all deserve better, so why has an impact assessment not been published at the same time as the consultation? What has Labour got to hide?

Pete Wishart: I have listened very carefully to the hon. Gentleman, as I did during the debate on the creative industries a few weeks ago. During that debate, Members on the Conservative Benches gave the impression that they were for the opt-out solution that the Labour party is putting forward. Is he now telling us that he is against that and that he will support the creative industries in seeing off the challenge from generative AI?

Alan Mak: The creative industries sector is telling us that that solution is not fit for purpose. We will hold the Labour Government to account because the creative industries are extremely important.

Under the Conservatives, we became the second largest exporter of television programming and the fourth largest exporter of film, while also being home to world-class theatre, music, broadcasting and journalism.

Peter Kyle: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Mak: I make progress, but I will give way shortly.

On the Conservative Benches, we have many well-respected champions of the creative industries sector. I am especially looking forward to the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, who brings his insight as a former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, creative industries Minister

[Alan Mak]

and Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), the current Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, for her work and leadership on the issue. My right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), the shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), the shadow DCMS Minister, are both long-standing advocates for the creative industries. They have both engaged extensively with the creative industries on AI and copyright issues, and together we will continue to champion those industries in this House and beyond.

Peter Kyle: The hon. Gentleman did not answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart). Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the opt-out or not? He seemed to disagree with it, but then he described exactly the same process as we have in the consultation.

Alan Mak: The Secretary of State needs to listen to the creative industries sector. So far he has ignored that sector, issued a consultation late and given it no faith whatsoever. The timing of the consultation and the Bill is fully faulty, reflecting Labour's entirely incoherent approach—[*Interruption.*] The Government's consultation on AI and copyright is open for another two weeks and it will take them many months to respond to the views expressed. On top of that, more time will be needed for the Government to come to any sort of conclusion, and that is before the Chancellor and No. 10 panic, take control of the policy, edge out the Secretary of State and cause even more delay.

Peter Kyle: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Mak: I am not in government, so I will not give way until later—although if the Secretary of State wants to come to the Dispatch Box to explain why his consultation and review are late and why he has not given any certainty to the sector, I am happy to give way, but I do not think he wants to do that. Let us go back to the Bill—[*Interruption.*] Okay, I am happy to give way.

Peter Kyle: Well, we certainly did not take 14 years to do that, but will the hon. Gentleman answer this: does he agree with the opt-out system? Yes or no?

Alan Mak: The Secretary of State keeps asking me questions, but I am not in government. It is for him to answer. It is for him to bring forward a consultation and legislation, and to give certainty to the creative sector. There is no point asking me questions—I am not in government.

What I can tell the Secretary of State is that it is extremely unfortunate that this legislation is passing through Parliament now, while the consultation is still ongoing. Amendments are being tabled by Members from all parts of both Houses, leading to legislative positions being crystalised even though the consultation has not yet closed. If the Government really took seriously the views of the public, the tech sector, the

creative industries and other stakeholders, they would not be following this approach or timetable. Therefore, we will table amendments calling on the Government to respond to their own consultation more quickly.

Labour's consultation provides the worst of all worlds: it does not provide any legal certainty or allow the views of those who have responded to be taken seriously. However, Labour should take the views of parliamentarians seriously, including those of its own Back-Bench MPs, who have voiced concerns at the Government's approach in this very House. Labour should also take seriously the views of those in the other place. The Secretary of State acknowledged that the Government have already been heavily defeated on several amendments, including the Conservative amendments tabled by Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge on sexually explicit deepfake images, which secured wide-ranging support. The Government were also defeated on Conservative amendments tabled by Lord Lucas and Lord Arbuthnot that recognise the importance of accurate data, particularly when it comes to gender and sex. Confusing biological sex and elective gender puts patient safety at risk.

The Bill is lengthy and we will continue to properly scrutinise it as it progresses through the House. Labour's track record to date on science and technology issues is so bad it needs all the help it can get. In just eight months in office, the Labour Government have already committed eight acts of harm on science and technology issues. They have imposed a national insurance jobs tax, punishing tech workers and businesses; lost a £450 million investment from AstraZeneca, doing away hundreds of jobs; launched an AI plan with no new funding or delivery plan, which creates two new quangos and more red tape; cancelled the UK's new exascale supercomputer, hampering our scientists while our competitors race ahead; skipped the international AI summit of world leaders, started by the Conservatives but ignored by this Labour Prime Minister; scrapped £500 million of funding for the AI research resource, which funds computer power for AI; abandoned Conservative plans for the national maths academy, harming the next generation of data scientists; and aligned Britain with the EU's failing approach to AI and copyright.

Labour's approach is analogue government in the digital age: slow, uninspiring and not good enough for Britain. Labour promised so much, but it has delivered only failure.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I can now announce the result of today's deferred Division on the Online Safety Act 2023 (Category 1, Category 2A and Category 2B Threshold Conditions) Regulations 2025. The Ayes were 320 and the Noes were 178, so the Ayes have it.

[*The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.*]

2.59 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for setting out the reasons why the Bill is so important. I welcome the measures that will help to make people's lives easier and unlock the full power of data to deliver the Government's missions, including the important mission of growing our economy.

After two false starts with data Bills in the previous Parliament, it seems that the third time is the charm. That may be a consequence of our particularly charming Front Bench, as pointed out earlier, but it is certainly right that we have before us a data Bill that addresses the way in which data has increasingly become fundamental to our society and our economy. It really is fantastic to see the Government leading the way on action to make the most of data's potential.

Some 85% of businesses handle digitalised data and the British data economy represents around 7% of GDP. I use those two statistics to emphasise that data is not remote and abstract; it is part of our everyday lives and of our businesses' lifeblood, and that is precisely why the Bill promises to be so transformative. I want to emphasise that we are all walking data generators—we all generate data, all the time. That does not mean that we have to be wearing a Fitbit or some sort of smart device, though we all have two or three, generally; we all generate data.

When the Select Committee that I have the good fortune to chair was looking at the algorithms of social media companies as part of our inquiry into those algorithms and the Southport riots, it was clear that social media advertisers and others are effectively generating digital twins of us all. The thing with a digital twin, which represents us in data, is that there is not just one and it certainly is not under our control. Many companies and organisations, and all those who wish to understand their potential customers or users, have data on us and are tracking data, including that which we generate. Therefore, to have a Government who lead the way in ensuring that that data is managed, generated, stored and shared in the interests of the general public, and that it is better understood by Government and the public services for which they are responsible, is so important.

Driving higher productivity through the smart use of data not only will grow the economy but, as the Secretary of State set out, will make all our lives easier. In an era when we increasingly interact with public services online, the measures in the Bill will enable a modern digital Government, which will save people time. Boosting our public sector productivity, which has been stubbornly low in recent years, will help to deliver the efficient, effective public services that our constituents expect and deserve. That includes freeing up to 1.5 million police and 140,000 NHS staff hours a year to focus on protecting us, saving lives and providing better NHS treatment and all the other services that need to be people driven. An important part of the Bill is that it recognises that freeing up administrative effort through better joined-up data sharing, collection, storage and so on gives people greater opportunity to deliver services for others.

I particularly welcome the national underground asset register. Before I became an MP, as I may have mentioned at some point, I worked as a chartered engineer in what my constituents continue to call "a proper job". As the head of technology for Ofcom, I spent an amazing amount of time trying to work out what BT had underground. I thought that, in part, it was BT being reluctant to share their knowledge of their underground cables and systems—part of that was their ducts and so on—because of that opening them up to competition. I eventually realised, however—this is some time ago, so

I hope they will not mind me saying this now—that they did not know what they had underground and their own systems did not reflect what was under the ground or what their assets were. When it came to repairing a fault or improving or upgrading to a new network, therefore, not only was there the additional cost of trying to find out what was there, but systems were designed slowly or wrongly.

The Secretary of State referred to traffic jams being caused by roads being dug up in the wrong place. That is a fundamental example of the impact of not having simple, accessible and secure data on our assets. It seems amazing that I was working on the issue as a regulator 15 or 16 years ago, and that only now under this Labour Government are we addressing that essential national asset.

I will also briefly mention advances in digital identity, which will deliver tangible benefits to the public, making tasks such as opening a bank account, starting a new job or renting a flat that much easier. I will not go into the debate on whether digital ID should be mandatory, but I will certainly say that it should be available and accessible to everyone. I have a constituent who was obliged to take a photograph of himself with the *The Chronicle*, the local newspaper of the day, in an attempt to prove to the Department for Work and Pensions that he existed because he was disabled and could not go into the jobcentre. That was the only way open to him for verification, because he did not have a passport or a driving licence. I hope the measures set out in the Bill will enable digital ID to be accessible to those who need it.

The Bill also promises an approach to data that is, in some quite literal ways, cradle to grave, including for patient passports, electronic registration of births and deaths, and critical services such as benefits and so on, which I have referred to. It is therefore vital that the public have confidence in our country's data protection regime. I have long argued—and it was great to hear the Secretary of State say essentially the same thing—that we can unlock the benefits of data only if there is public trust. Often, my constituents feel that advances in technology are done to them, rather than with them and for their benefit. Critically, our constituents need to feel they have agency over the way in which data impacts their lives. Rather than feeling empowered by digital innovation, too many feel the opposite: disempowered, undermined, dehumanised, tracked and attacked.

As an engineer with 20 years' experience before entering Parliament, I found it deeply disturbing to follow the trajectory of tech from boring but incredibly useful, which was how it was when I started my career, to exciting but exploitative, which is how too many of my constituents view it now. I always say that I came into politics for the same reason I went into engineering, which was to make the world work better for everyone. I think the Bill can significantly contribute to that, with its emphasis on high standards for protecting personal data, including the strengthened role for the Information Commissioner and the new measures to protect the data of children. Delivering the improvements promised by the Bill must therefore go hand in hand with respecting the rights of citizens to control and manage their data.

So important is data that already, in the first few months of its existence, the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, which I chair, has extensively

[*Chi Onwurah*]

discussed many of the issues being addressed by the Bill. In our session with the Secretary of State, we discussed the problems of legacy systems and inconsistent standards for information in the NHS. It is good to see that the Bill looks at addressing that. The Secretary of State made it clear that he understood the scale of the challenge, and I think he has delivered on his pledge to us to deliver a Bill that safeguards data.

We also discussed the considerable unmet demand for digital ID, which the Bill will meet, and the need to focus on outcomes, with the chief scientific adviser echoing in her session with us the idea that data gathering must be proportionate, seeking to answer specific questions and not hoovering up data willy-nilly. This Bill is in that spirit, taking a pragmatic approach that seeks to use data to solve problems, not to needlessly extend the role of Government or big tech in our lives.

We have heard about the exciting ways that data can help solve problems right across Government. In the Committee's session yesterday, the Science Minister, Lord Vallance, spoke about the importance of data to the Health Secretary's ambition to move from cure to prevention in the NHS, and the role that genomics and the revolution in life sciences could play in transforming healthcare. I hope the Minister will address in his closing comments the single data health record for the NHS. It is important to have a consistent, safe, secure and shared understanding of a patient's treatment, and I ask him to address how the evolution of the role of genomics and the detailed personal data in any genomics record will be reflected in the provisions of the Bill.

In the Committee's session on the Budget, we also discussed the data environment, the infrastructure around data, and how that is critical to our future success in supporting private sector growth and delivering modern public services. I welcome that the Government have made data centres part of our critical national infrastructure. That recognises a reality that has been there for some years now.

Last week the Committee launched our inquiry into the "digital centre of government"—a change in the machinery of government that the new Labour Government made, centring digital transformation and digital government in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology in order to enable the revolution in public service delivery that is part of the Labour Government's ambitions. The effective implementation of this Bill is essential to the rewiring of data in a digital Government.

It is also critical that there is the political will to ensure that the effective sharing of data across Government serves the Bill's intentions of supporting public trust, consistency of standards and consistency of data formatting. When the Minister responds to the debate, will he say a little more about the role of open standards and open source? The Secretary of State has already spoken about transparency, but will the Minister talk about the role of open standards and open source in ensuring that we have a consistent framework for data sharing across Government?

I look forward to engaging with Ministers in the Department in the months ahead on the Committee's inquiry and on the progress of the Bill, which marks an important and overdue step in delivering a digital Government fit for the future.

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

3.13 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Data is the new gold. It is by using good data, and lots of the stuff—heaps—that we will cure diseases, empower consumers and businesses, find solutions to societal problems and unleash economic growth. Behind that data, however, are the lives of everyday people, and the decisions made with that data will impact everyday lives. We must ensure that data and the value from it is used in the service of the British people. That is why the Liberal Democrats welcome this Bill's efforts to modernise and clarify our data laws and to unleash growth and opportunity.

The digital landscape is evolving rapidly, and it is right that we seek to keep pace. The Bill marks an improvement on the previous data Bill introduced under the Conservative Government. However, although this Bill contains some positive steps, it also contains significant gaps and missed opportunities. We must seize this opportunity to get the legislation right, and to ensure that the data landscape we put in place serves all of us across the UK.

Maintaining public trust in data safeguards is vital. As the Ada Lovelace Institute emphasises, trust about data and technology is a must. In order for our democratic principles to be upheld, citizens must be able to trust how their data is being used. That is even more important as the data-driven digital interfaces of government increase.

Trust is also two sides of the same coin: inclusion and adoption. One is critical for society and the other is crucial for growth. That is why, in the name of constructive opposition and the interest of firming up public trust, we would like to highlight concerns and missed opportunities. As the Bill passes through the House, we will be seeking to interrogate and strengthen it where necessary.

One of our primary concerns lies with the powers granted to the Secretary of State, particularly on recognised legitimate interests and the framework for digital verification. In essence, the Bill allows ministerial decisions that bypass meaningful parliamentary scrutiny. That risks a situation where changes to how data is captured or shared are made unilaterally, without the thorough checks and balances that Parliament or the public expect.

Both the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee and the Constitution Committee have highlighted these issues. The Open Rights Group highlights concerns that a governing party could change the rules on election data, for example, or have undue influence on the Information Commissioner's decision-making process and jeopardise impartiality. Although there is a drive in the Bill to formalise digital identity frameworks, the Liberal Democrats believe it is crucial to strike the right balance. We support harnessing digital verification to make services more efficient, provided there is robust transparency and independent oversight of how personal data is stored and used. We urge Ministers to tighten this area with clear ethical safeguards to genuinely foster trust rather than undermine it.

Secondly, modernisation should not come at the cost of transparency. Several clauses appear to dilute individuals' rights to information about how their data is collected and processed, notably in respect of legitimate interests

and automated decision making. Clause 77, for example, risks seriously watering down the rights of data subjects, and in doing so seriously hampers public trust in data processing. The National Data Guardian and the British Medical Association, for example, are worried about the clause eroding transparency in how health and social care data is used for research. If we truly wish to harness the benefits of emerging technology, from AI to digital verification, we must earn and maintain that trust, and that depends on being open about how data is used and by whom.

That brings me on to the Bill's proposals on automated decision making. They currently focus on special category data, which leaves our ordinary personal data less shielded. AI and algorithmic processes increasingly determine people's credit, insurance, and even job prospects. There are risks in restricting enhanced safeguards to only certain categories of information without further amendments to protect individuals.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Lady is absolutely right about that tendency, but it does not have to be like that. We can either build a society that is about personal interactions and familiarity, or we can allow a society of the kind she describes to develop, which will destroy the tapestry of those interactions that make up the wellbeing of each of us and all of us.

Victoria Collins: There is definitely a lot of opportunity in automated decision making, but the safeguards must be in place to make sure that human decisions and the right to safeguards around the impact of those decisions are upheld, because restricting enhanced safeguards to only certain categories of information, without further amendments, could exclude a wide range of significant decisions from meaningful human review and create a lack of transparency. Again, doing so undermines public trust and hinders the adoption of AI and emergent technologies.

We share the concerns of organisations including Justice and the Open Rights Group that clause 80 weakens safeguards by broadening the scope for automated decisions. Although the clause makes safeguarding requirements more explicit, there are concerns that it also provides the Secretary of State with considerable powers via secondary legislation to amend or set aside those safeguards. The Liberal Democrats are firm in our conviction that where a person is the subject of automated decision making, there simply must be a right to explanation, a right to appeal and a meaningful human intervention.

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): I hope the hon. Lady recognises that one of the changes we have made to the Bill is to insist on there being meaningful human involvement. That was not in the previous version of the Bill. I think that that helps considerably with the issue of automated decision making.

Victoria Collins: I thank the Minister for his intervention. For us, it is a question of making sure that any input from the Secretary of State—whoever that is—does not undermine those safeguards. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that the current Secretary of State will be around for a while.

Chris Bryant: What do you know?

Victoria Collins: I know nothing. I shall continue with data adequacy.

We must be mindful of our data adequacy agreements with the EU and other partners, and I know that the Government are all too aware of that. By watering down protections, we risk undermining our international credibility and endangering agreements that are essential for British businesses, academic institutions, and cross-border collaboration. It is paramount that our reforms do not jeopardise those vital partnerships, and it is vital that, as we update UK data law, we protect our position as a leading, trusted partner for international data sharing. At a time when international waters look increasingly choppy, this is more important than ever.

There is a real opportunity for the Bill to go further and promote data trusts or data communities—where groups of individuals collectively manage their data for wider societal benefit, such as medical research or tackling climate change. The Bill could champion that approach, thereby boosting public interest innovation. Instead, it is largely silent on collective or community-driven data governance, and misses a crucial chance to build genuine public trust in how technology can help us all.

By going further on data trusts or data communities, we could further unlock economic growth, as is exemplified by open banking. Consumers and small business can use this, and smaller providers can grow and compete more effectively. Furthermore, considerations over access to data on energy consumption could help improve sustainability and drive down energy bills.

The Bill has come to us from the other place, and I commend the work that has taken place in the House of Lords in recent weeks to scrutinise and improve the legislation. There are several areas where the changes made in the other place will have the support of the Liberal Democrats. On AI and copyright, we have been very clear that the current Government proposals would fail creatives. The Conservative shadow Minister was not clear on his stance on the question of opt in or opt out, so the creative industry has been left unsure of whether the Conservatives will support it. I am happy to take an intervention from the shadow Minister if he wants to clarify his position.

Alan Mak: I said to the Minister, and I will say it again for the hon. Lady: it is for the Government to bring forward their proposal. Once the consultation closes, we will respond. That is the proper order in this House.

Victoria Collins: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. As Liberal Democrats, we have been very clear on this, and we have listened to what the creative industry has said so far—

Alan Mak: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Collins: Let me finish my point and then I would be very happy to give way.

We are against the opt-out system, because we want to preserve the rights of copyright. It is easy for those creatives to opt in, whereas opting out is harder, especially for smaller businesses or creatives in their own right.

Alan Mak: I was going to say to the hon. Lady, half in jest and half in reality, that the Liberal Democrats will say whatever they need to say in any part of the country and on any issue. That is the reality.

Victoria Collins: Like anyone in this House, we can say whatever we want to say—within the rules of the House, of course, and under the eye of Madam Deputy Speaker. We have been clear on our views and on our values. We have listened to the evidence and we have said what our view is, which is that we do not support the opt out. Our creatives are one of the UK's greatest exports, which is why we support them. Our world leaders in this area should never be asked to give up their existing rights.

We also welcome the provisions of clause 81 to protect children's data and introduce a legal duty for data privacy by design for services that are likely to be accessed by children. Across all areas of technology and the online world, safety by design for children is a concept to which we are firmly committed, and this is an important step.

Finally, we welcome the measures in clause 141 on deepfakes. Sexually explicit deepfakes have devastated far too many lives in this country, and it is very welcome that the Bill now contains a consent-based offence and that enforcement will have real teeth, with the possibility of custodial sentences. This is a long overdue step that has to be taken.

Overall, we support a modernised data framework that upholds digital rights while stimulating innovation. We want a dynamic tech economy that addresses real-world challenges—from healthcare to public services to climate resilience. Indeed, the Liberal Democrat vision is of a digital future that spreads the benefits of technology across society while protecting fundamental liberties. None the less, the Bill needs further amendments to safeguard fundamental rights and embed proper scrutiny. We will work with colleagues across the House, as well as with civil society organisations such as Big Brother Watch, Liberty and the Ada Lovelace Institute, to ensure that those important protections are not overlooked. We welcome measures that clarify or simplify how organisations may use data to develop new products, support research or improve public services. For instance, the concept of data trusts and data communities, where individuals pool data for broader societal benefit, has the potential to create public interest innovation while retaining trust and control.

By improving oversight mechanisms, reinforcing transparency and embracing ideas such as data trusts, we can create a Bill that truly balances public interest with economic growth. We owe it to our constituents and to the future of our digital economy to deliver legislation that fosters innovation and secures individual rights in equal measure. I look forward to exploring these issues in Committee and ensuring that we seize the opportunity to shape a robust, rights-respecting digital landscape for the UK.

3.25 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I would like to draw the attention of the House to my membership of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain.

I rise to contribute to today's debate on the Data (Use and Access) Bill as a creative who worked as a screenwriter before I entered this place. To write a good script takes discipline, focus, sweat and tears—I have found that tea and biscuits help, too. Us mere mortals cannot create something out of nothing. Creativity is an act of synthesis: pulling together the flotsam and jetsam of our experiences

and observations and applying them in an original way. We pour our life experiences into our work, creating the humanity behind the lines, which lifts characters from the pages and into the public's consciousness.

If the public want to hang out by watching the shows that we create, we have on our hands the rarest of commodities—a hit.

Many years ago, I worked on the hit show “New Tricks”. It was a cold case cop drama that ran to 12 series on the BBC, created by Nigel McCrery, who died this week. “New Tricks” was, and remains, a very popular show. Twice a year, I receive the royalties collected for me by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society. I am paid fairly for my original work when it is rebroadcast around the world, or on digital platforms.

This week, I discovered that the subtitles from one of my episodes for “New Tricks” have been scraped and are being used to create learning materials for artificial intelligence. Along with thousands of other films and television shows, my original work is being used by generative AI to write scripts, which one day may replace versions produced by mere humans like me. This is theft and it is happening on an industrial scale. As the law stands, AI companies do not have to be transparent about what they are stealing. I therefore welcome the principle of the amendments in the Bill before us today, which address this issue. The amendments require generative artificial intelligence firms to be transparent about the content used to train their models, allowing creators to know when our work has been used. Another amendment expands the existing copyright regime, which is completely clear that the unlicensed use of creative content to train AI models is theft, to cover all GAI models marketed in the UK.

Over in the United States, Thomson Reuters has just received a summary judgment on its infringement claim. It is the first pure AI training case decided in the US, and the judge has said that AI training is not fair use. I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and his listening mode, but the creative industries worry that the Government's preferred position of creators of original material opting out of having work scraped is not workable because no such model currently exists anywhere in the world. We are worried because creators build our industries. The creative industries are at the heart of our industrial strategy.

Sir John Hayes: I fully endorse much of what the hon. Lady has said. We as a House were slow to regulate the internet when it first emerged. The fascination with the new blinded people to the damage it could do. We have had the online harms Bill more recently and so on and so forth. The risk in this case is not that we go too far, but that we do not go far enough. It is important, based on what she just said, that we take swift, decisive and firm action to avoid the eventuality of reducing humans, as she described them, to “mere” puppets.

Alison Hume: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and it is crucial that the Government take that into account at the end of the consultation.

Peter Kyle: We have heard lots of voices from the creative arts sector. The point of the consultation is to hear from all sectors. So far in the debate we have not heard representations or voices from the technology sector—I look forward to the contribution by the hon.

Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone)—but I have been reassured by the technology companies that they are engaging with the consultation and are trying to present the technological solutions for which my hon. Friend inquires. That is why the live consultation is so important: so that I, and we as a House, can judge whether the submissions from technology companies are robust and implementable enough and can see where the technology will go. The consultation is still live during this debate, and I hope that by the time we are in Committee, we can have more of an informed discussion, even though, as I said before, there is the likelihood of further parliamentary involvement down the line in a fully informed way.

Alison Hume: I thank the Secretary of State for his reassurances. I know that creatives are worried because the scraping is happening now and will carry on until we have a solution. We must protect the creative industries. They grew by over a third between 2010 and 2023 in terms of gross value added, far outpacing growth in the UK economy as a whole. They are worth more to the economy than life sciences, car manufacturing, aerospace and the oil and gas sectors combined. They are a glorious British success story. They make us proud. They make us feel good. They shape the nation's identity. They make us, well, us. They are represented in every corner of the UK, with 2.4 million workers, 70% of whom live outside London. They are writers, musicians, photographers, artists—all manner of wonderful creative folk, powering one of our greatest success stories and one of our best engines for growth.

In my constituency of Scarborough and Whitby, I have been entreated by individual creatives and small and medium-sized enterprises to ask the Government to look after their rights and to protect their income. Recently, I proudly served on the Employment Rights Bill Committee—a Bill that will see the biggest improvements for working people in a generation. Creatives are working people, too. Creative work is work. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has talked about her determination to take the brakes off the creative industries and turbocharge growth.

If the creative industries are a fast car, the creative is the driver. Without us, it is the equivalent of a driverless car—fine, maybe, to get from A to B—but if we are to produce the kind of quality scripts behind the superb television dramas that entertain, comfort, inspire and, as recently shown in the case of “Mr Bates vs The Post Office”, effect meaningful change, we need a human being at the wheel. To have a human there, we need to ensure that they are paid for doing what they do best: being original.

We should inspire the rest of the world to adopt high standards, lead from the front and amplify our influence on the global stage. Britain's creative industries deserve a dynamic licensing market that protects copyright and drives growth and innovation in both the creative and tech sectors. I look forward to the outcome of the consultation on AI and copyright and to working with the Secretary of State and the Minister to find a future-proofed solution, which protects original work and the ability to earn an income from it. The Labour party was founded on the principle of a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. Being in government is our opportunity to fulfil that principle for UK creatives.

3.34 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), whose speech was absolutely spot on—I agreed with it completely.

It will not surprise the Government Front Benchers that I welcome the Bill. There are very few parts of it, if any, with which I disagree—perhaps because it bears an extraordinary similarity to the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill introduced by the previous Government, which I spent many happy hours taking through Committee and Report. As the Secretary of State pointed out, unfortunately that Bill fell as a result of the calling of the general election, and I share his regret that it was not possible to get it on to the statute book. That is another reason among many why I regret the calling of the general election at the time chosen by the previous Prime Minister.

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman refers to all the happy days he had, but I do not think that he really enjoyed the Report stage of the previous Bill. I think—nobody else will notice if he admits it here now—that he did not really like everything that was in the previous Government's version of the Bill, and that he rather prefers our version.

Sir John Whittingdale: Although the hon. Gentleman and I had a robust but nevertheless amicable exchange on Report, it was in fact his colleague, the hon. Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), who took that Bill through Committee. It was not until Report that the Conservative Government decided to add measures to the Bill—measures that I fully supported, of course, but which nevertheless made the task a little more difficult, as they resulted in a lack of agreement across the Chamber, which had previously pertained throughout the passage of the Bill. It is a pleasure to debate these matters again, and, indeed, to see not just the hon. Gentleman but some of the officials who laboured to take that Bill through Committee with me, and are now tasked with doing it all over again.

One point about the Bill that the Secretary of State did not refer to is that a lot of it seeks to improve the working of data protection law in this country and make data more accessible while safeguarding important privacy rights. However, the fact that we are able to make changes to improve our data protection laws is a consequence of Britain no longer being a member of the European Union—otherwise, we were trapped by the GDPR requirements. This is an example of where we can draft legislation to benefit people in this country and not have to accept top-down imposed legislation from Brussels—another reason why I was an enthusiastic supporter of the previous Bill.

One issue that featured a lot during the previous debate, and which I am slightly surprised has not been mentioned so far, is whether the changes made in the Bill would in any way jeopardise data adequacy recognition by the EU. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry; the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) did mention it, but the Secretary of State did not. Data adequacy is an important issue, and concern has been expressed outside the House that the Bill might put it at risk. We were very keen to ensure that that was not the case, and we worked closely—as I am sure the Minister

[Sir John Whittingdale]

continues to do—with the Information Commissioner, John Edwards, who has a lot of experience in this field, having previously overseen the data protection regime in New Zealand, which enjoys data adequacy but is not identical to GDPR. I am sure, given that this Bill is so similar, that there is no risk to data adequacy, which is of importance to many large firms.

The Bill covers a lot of other areas that we regarded as important and which have remained largely unchanged, such as the operation of the Information Commissioner's Office, digital identification, the national underground asset register, the electronic use of the register of births and marriages, the extension of smart data use, automated decision making, and the retention of information where required by coroners after child deaths. All those areas were included in the previous Bill, and I am delighted that they are still there in this one.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): If I may, I will take this opportunity to explore some of my right hon. Friend's knowledge and expertise in this area. Will he comment on the balance in this Bill between safeguards on the one hand and freedom on the other? I would be interested in his thoughts.

Sir John Whittingdale: If my hon. Friend is referring to data protection, it is a careful balance. People are rightly concerned that their data is protected and that they should have privacy rights, and there are campaigning organisations out there that have examined the Bill and expressed concern. We were careful to ensure that the standards of data protection required were maintained, and I am sure this Government take the same view.

At the same time—this is where there are small differences between the previous Bill and this Government's Bill—we were keen to ensure that data protection did not impose unnecessary burdens, particularly on small businesses. There were one or two areas where we were able to slightly relax the definitions and to reduce the burden on business, but this Government have taken a different view. They are relatively minor and relatively technical areas, but there are things such as the definition of “vexatious and excessive”, which was an issue that occupied a lot of discussion. The Government have now removed that and reverted to the previous definition, which we felt was unnecessarily burdensome. There is also the whole area of subject access requests that would occupy a huge amount of firms' time in trying to respond to them. We felt there needed to be at least some safeguard to prevent those becoming, as we defined it, vexatious, so I regret the fact that the Government have not proceeded with that element.

However, those are relatively minor areas, and in large part the Bill is one that previously enjoyed cross-party consensus when it went through this Chamber in the last Parliament and that I suspect will continue to enjoy cross-party consensus as it moves into Committee in this Parliament. The Secretary of State is no longer with us, but I hasten to add that I am not volunteering to serve on the Public Bill Committee. Having previously endured many hours doing so, I do not particularly want to repeat that experience.

Perhaps in part because the Bill enjoys a lot of support across the House, there is inevitably a particular element about which there is real concern, and that is

the area of copyright protection and artificial intelligence. It is worth saying that that was not originally in the Bill at all, and I congratulate Baroness Kidron, who managed to persuade the Clerks in the other place to allow her to move the amendments to insert it into the Bill, and it is now part of the Bill. I think those amendments are very important, and I very much welcome them.

The hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) referred to the fact that the previous Government had not acted in this area, and he is right. The Conservatives did not act because we felt, and continue to feel, that the law on copyright is clear and does not need changing. This Government have proposed to change the law to bring in the text and data mining exception. That will create the opportunity for AI to take, scrape and ingest creative content, of the kind the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby mentioned, using an exception that the Government are bringing in. It was proposed under the last Government, but I can tell the House that the last Government rejected it precisely because we felt it would drive a coach and horses through copyright law and do real damage to the creative industries.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman's speech is very helpful, and he is making some useful points. The shadow Minister would not give us any clarity about his party's position on the opt-out mechanism, so could he help: what is the Opposition's position on that? Do they support it—yes or no?

Sir John Whittingdale: I am very happy to address that. I am not on the Front Bench, but I will tell the hon. Member my view, which is very clear: I have profound reservations about the opt-out, which reverses the whole principle of copyright law. The owners of rights will have to go and say that they do not want to have their rights taken away from them, otherwise there is a right for others to use their content. I would prefer to see an opt-in or, in actual fact, a licensing method whereby rights holders could agree, if they wished to do so, that their content could be used.

Pete Wishart: If only the right hon. Gentleman were on the Conservative Front Bench on these issues, we would have a little bit of clarity, but he is absolutely spot on. There is no issue with copyright at the moment and no confusion about what is required in the law. All the Government are doing is trying to create some sort of smokescreen so that they can start to dismantle and water down our copyright regime. What does he think about those attempts, and will he join the rest of us in standing up for the copyright regime as it stands, where there is no question about its legality?

Sir John Whittingdale: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I have no wish to replace my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak), who is doing an excellent job. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman and I have been involved in discussions on copyright for many years, and I share his view. Indeed, I welcomed the debate that we had in this place just a couple of weeks ago on the creative industries, where a lot of these arguments were rehearsed, and the Minister helpfully agreed that there is no workable opt-out technology available.

The existing opt-out, which the European Union has suggested, simply does not work. On top of that, it is unenforceable. The Minister and the Secretary of State have suggested that they would not proceed unless a workable opt-out could be developed. It would be a first if it were. In any case, I am opposed to opt-out in principle, but it is at present practically impossible to introduce. I hear the Secretary of State talking about the technology companies working to bring a workable solution forward, but I hope that the Minister will again make clear that the Government will not proceed unless there is a viable, workable technological solution that allows rights holders to make clear that they do not wish to have their works used by artificial intelligence training models, and have that enforced.

Chris Bryant: I think it might be easier if I respond to that now. Yes, I completely and utterly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. That is our settled view. We want to get to a process where there is more licensing of content, and we have said that repeatedly. It is one of the aims of our consultation. He says that copyright does not need changing, but the amendments tabled by Baroness Kidron in the Lords do change copyright law. We will somehow have to square that circle at some point during the Bill's progress.

Sir John Whittingdale: The amendments that Baroness Kidron tabled put in clear terms what we believe the law is already. A number of cases are going through, and the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby referred to one in America. That important judgment said that AI training did not constitute fair use. That was an American court, but previously we had been told that America was ahead in encouraging and promoting the use of this technology. It is reassuring that even in America, they recognise the importance of protecting creative works. A news publisher brought forward that case.

It is important that we recognise that creative industries in their broadest definition are affected by this issue, and the newspaper publishers are particularly anxious about the consequences. One of Baroness Kidron's amendments, which is now in the Bill, emphasises the importance of transparency, and I know the Minister agrees with that, but it also requires companies to make clear, in meeting the transparency requirements, exactly what kind of activity the web crawlers are involved in.

Newspaper publishers depend upon search, and it is important that the search engines can find and flag up their content, because without that they will not get the audiences they need. That is a different exercise from training for ingestion and AI-created content. If the Bill is about requiring transparency, the amendments passed in the Lords seek to achieve that, and I hope they will be preserved, because it is important that we have that transparency, not just as a general principle but in detail in that way.

Two weeks ago, the Minister gave some welcome assurances, and he has done so again this afternoon. We need to continue the debate. As he said, if the Government proceed, legislation will be required in due course, which we will obviously want to examine carefully.

A view has been expressed on behalf of the creative industries and publishers that while the Minister and other members of the Government have been open to discussions, the Secretary of State has not met them, so

I was pleased to hear him earlier give the assurance that he would meet them, because this is of such vital importance to them.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Havant said, there is a lack of any economic impact assessment on the proposals in the consultation paper. I hope that the Government will produce such an economic impact assessment.

This is a subject that was not intended to be included in the Bill—I welcome the fact that it is—but it is obviously one that we will debate again many times.

Chris Bryant: In Committee.

Sir John Whittingdale: Perhaps outside Committee as well. I will rely on my colleagues who serve on the Committee to carry out the work at that point as well. I thank the Minister for his willingness to engage and assure him that we will continue to do so.

3.51 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): It fair to say that if we do not work with data, we do not really think about it too much, but, when we do, we realise how much of it surrounds us in multiple forms. Every day in this place I walk past shelves groaning under the weight of volumes of *Hansard*: an institutional memory of all that has happened here. New technologies offer us an opportunity to take all that knowledge of what has come before and use it to help shape what we do next. Data is a powerful but often underappreciated and undervalued commodity.

The Bill is to be welcomed. I have no doubt that it will help grow the economy, improve public services and make people's lives easier. However, when it comes to the creative industries, we must recognise that creativity is more than just the sum of its data parts. A novel is not just words, a song is not just notes and lyrics, and a painting is not just pixels or brush strokes. The poems of Robert Burns are not merely letters on a page; they come alive in our minds in a way that no dataset can fully capture. When we treat creative works as nothing more than data points, we risk undervaluing the talent, the skill and the human expression that make them meaningful.

I started my working life as a broadcaster. At 15 years old, I secured a work placement at Central FM, which is still proudly broadcasting independently across the Forth valley. I went for a week and I stayed for 10 years. I presented the breakfast show, dragging myself out of bed at 4.30 in the morning. My parents were more impressed that their teenage son could get up that early than they were about my career choice.

Back then, only 17 radio stations were available in Stirling. Today, my teenage son can stream thousands of stations, podcasts and songs from a device in his pocket. The march of technology is relentless; it can sweep people up or it can sweep people aside. In radio, I saw that march at first hand—first came digitisation, then networking and then automation—and, with each step, jobs disappeared. My last full-time broadcasting job was in 2008. I left because I saw too many friends chasing too few jobs that paid too little money. Now, we are at another turning point.

AI is a powerful tool with huge potential, but it needs vast amounts of data, and that data has enormous value. At a recent Public Accounts Committee evidence

[Chris Kane]

session, we heard from academic experts who told us that once we hand over our data, whatever promises are made and whatever covenants are placed on it, we have lost control. If unchecked and unregulated—or regulated improperly—technology and the data it uses does not care whether it makes people's lives better or worse. We are dealing today with the good and the bad consequences of decisions taken by tech companies and regulators in relation to social media and smartphones. Let us learn from our mistakes, not repeat them.

The amendments proposed in the other place, particularly on copyright and transparency, resonate greatly with me and much of the creative community. I urge colleagues to give them due consideration in the next stage of the Bill's passage through the House. I was heartened to hear the Secretary of State's positive comments to that end in today's debate, and I welcome the Government's separate consultation on the issue.

There will be other opportunities to consider these points, but the concerns of the creative industries must be heard and acted upon. Copyright protections are not a barrier to AI innovation and competition, but a safeguard for the work of an industry worth £125 billion per year and employing more than 2 million people. We can enable a world where much of this value is transferred to a handful of big tech firms, or we can enable a win-win situation for the creative industries and AI developers, where they work together based on licensed relationships with remuneration and transparency at their heart.

Technology does not care what or who it replaces, but we should. The world needs data scientists, and it also needs poets. Creative workers are right to be nervous about AI further eroding their ability to monetise their work. If we do not act carefully, we risk a future where technology exploits creativity rather than supports it. Data and technology drive progress, but progress must not come at the expense of those who create, innovate and inspire.

AI has immense potential, but without proper safeguards on it and its data, it risks sweeping creative workers aside, or worse, replacing them all together. As we embrace the opportunities that AI and data-driven technologies present, we must ensure that progress does not come at the cost of our creative industries. Human expression cannot be reduced to mere data points. The livelihoods of those who enrich our economy and culture must be protected. It is our responsibility to force innovation while safeguarding the rights of creators. We can build a future where AI enhances human creativity rather than undermining it, and where both well-paid data scientists and well-paid poets thrive in a digital age.

3.57 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane). He was spot on in reminding us that data has always existed in various forms throughout the centuries, whether in volumes or in little things that we can plug into a computer. The only difference now is that all that data is scraped and ingested into huge machines, which regurgitate it into some form that only they will decide. The hon. Gentleman

was also spot on in reminding us about his work at Central FM, a very fine radio station. This hon. Member is always available for interviews at any time that Central FM comes a-calling.

This is an alright Bill. It is good. It is quite fine. It is reasonable in its approach and intent. It is a good shot at trying to redefine our data regulation laws. It will do a good job of ensuring that our public services are more aligned and mainstream, and that access is available to all our constituents. However, it is a much better Bill because of some of the amendments made in the House of Lords. The amendments that were added at the later stages went further on child protection in online data and looked into deepfakes, which was particularly helpful, and I congratulate our colleagues down the corridor on bringing them forward. It is a much better Bill because of the amendments that were delivered by Baroness Kidron on copyright and transparency. They significantly improved the Bill to make it something worth defending and protecting. I hope that that will be the main mission as it continues to go through this House.

You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that it is unusual for me to congratulate our be-ermined unelected friends down the corridor, but this oiky Nat will doff his cap to their lords, their ladies, their barons and their earls, because they have done a good job at shaping the Bill. It is certainly a much better Bill than it was on Second Reading down the corridor.

I have a few issues with the Bill. There are concerns about the security of some of this data. I am particularly worried about some of the relationships within the EU-UK partnership, and I just hope that whatever is proposed in the Bill does not drag us further away from the mainstream when it comes to the European Union. The right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and I agree about most things when it comes to the creative sector, but we do not agree about the European Union and the benefits of this country leaving it. I am a passionate remainer, and I hope that at some point I will be able to take our country back into the European Union, as a proud member of the Scottish National party; my intention and ambition is that we go back into that fantastic union of nations that has done so much to enrich our culture and our lives.

Sir John Whittingdale: The hon. Gentleman is right that we do not agree on this particular issue. Of course, were we to rejoin the EU, we would then be bound by its legislation on this very issue, which includes the opt-out.

Pete Wishart: This is where the right hon. Gentleman and I do profoundly disagree. I look at this arrangement and the partnership across the European Union as a positive—it is a good thing. We were major contributors to some of the EU directives put forward on copyright and artificial intelligence. They miss us, and we miss them; we were just so much better when we were in partnership. I think we will just have to respectfully agree to disagree as we go forward on this particular issue.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I am keen to emphasise that it is of course possible for us to align ourselves with the European directive that the previous Government constructed before leaving the European Union in order to be able to maintain good creative copyright protections for our creatives, without us necessarily having to rejoin the European Union.

Pete Wishart: Absolutely—the hon. Lady is spot on. I know that several Members across the House are looking just now at some of those who took part in the debates we had on the European copyright directive and what it was doing; again, there were disagreements about its value. The hon. Lady is right; we can keep ourselves alive. That is my hope. I just hope that the provisions of the Bill do not do anything to further alienate us from our European colleagues, because it is very important that we keep that alignment.

This Bill is also important because it removes a number of the unnecessary and harmful clauses in the previous Conservative Government's Bill. We will just have to take with a pinch of salt the ambitions of this Bill, such as the £10 billion in growth anticipated from it. All I will say is that I have heard that all before. I know this is a Government desperate to find growth anywhere—they have made such a mess of the economy since coming to power that everywhere they see the green shoots of growth. We will wait and see whether we will get this £10 billion of growth.

The Government have a first test, which comes with clauses 135 to 139. We do not know if we will get growth from the Bill when it comes to data, but we do know that we get growth from the creative industries in this country, which in 2022 contributed £125 billion to the economy and provided 2.4 million jobs. That is real growth. We should not mess with that and undermine it in the way the Government might be doing with the watering down of the copyright provisions and giving generative AI access to our nation's creative treasures—I will just say that gently to the Government. However, I do very much welcome the inclusion of clauses 135 to 139.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman has talked quite a bit about clauses 135 to 139. He may end up on the Bill Committee, in which case we will be able to talk through the intricacies of those clauses then. Several of them actually require Ministers to introduce very significant changes via secondary legislation. Is that really what he would like? Surely such matters should be properly included in a Bill.

Pete Wishart: Yes, at this stage it is definitely what I would like, because we have got them—they are in a Bill that we will decide and vote on and look at in Committee. They are a security and a guarantee for our creative sector, because they are already in a piece of legislation that we will hopefully pass.

Chris Bryant *rose*—

Pete Wishart: If the Minister is going to say something positive about ensuring that we respect our copyright regime—that it will stay intact and continue to do the job it has been doing so effectively for the past few decades—then I will look at this now. I think I heard the Secretary of State say something about another piece of legislation. It might be necessary to bring in another piece of legislation, and I think we would all welcome that. However, it has to be on the basis of defending and protecting our intellectual property and our copyright regime. I will give way once again to the Minister.

Chris Bryant: I am very grateful; the hon. Gentleman is being generous. I completely agree that we need to ensure that the rights of rights holders are protected, that they are able to be remunerated properly for their

work, and that human creativity is at the heart of everything. The amendments tabled in the House of Lords state that Government Ministers should basically write the law in secondary legislation, so it would not be on the face of the Bill. He normally opposes such power-making powers being given to Government Ministers, so I am slightly surprised that he is so passionate about them now. I wonder whether it would not be better for us to legislate properly, with all those things laid out for proper scrutiny.

Pete Wishart: Again, I am grateful to the Minister for intervening in such a helpful manner. I am not particularly averse to secondary legislation—it has its place and purpose, and if it helps achieve desired outcomes then I have no issue with it. This is what my constituents want. I have been knocked out by the number of emails I have received and secured from my constituents asking me to support the creative sector in the consultation on copyright and AI, and to back the amendments as the Bill goes through the House. There does not seem to be any doubt that most of our constituents seem to be in partnership with their artists and the creative sector on this matter. I think what they want to see is the Government showing the same determination and ambition for our creative sector and our artists. They have that opportunity. I will be patient with the Minister. He has hinted occasionally about having some sort of solution that defends and protects our copyright regime, while at the same time supplies what he requires to ensure ambition in the AI sector. We are all looking forward to doing all that.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for giving way. I did not include this point in my own contribution, because I did not realise that the AI copyright issue would be such a big part of the debate, but I just want to let him and the House know that the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee and the Culture, Media and Sport Committee sat together with creatives and technologists to discuss how the technology solutions the Minister is looking for could address the exact point that he is making: supporting copyright and providing access to data. Google and OpenAI refused to take part, because they said their response to the consultation was ongoing. As an engineer, I think that you should always be able to explain what you are doing in the midst of you doing it, but that was their position. However, the technologists who were there had a view that technology could—there was not a consensus—support that, although not necessarily immediately.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee. She is absolutely right. Her Committee has a central role in looking at these issues and I wish her well in any of the inquiries she launches. It is particularly disappointing that Google and other AI companies will not come to her Committee. I hope that she uses the powers that I know, as a former Select Committee Chair, can be used to oblige reluctant witnesses to come in front of her. I am pretty certain that somebody who is as determined an individual as she is will be able to secure that.

Mr Frith: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case, as ever, and I agree with much of what he is saying. Does he agree with me that we should be ready to point out where those who contribute to this debate are

[Mr Frith]

proxies or funded by tech companies not appearing in public to make the case, but instead making arguments through smaller organisations that can be a little bit more assertive and nimble-footed, and not quite as accountable?

Pete Wishart: That is a very interesting contribution from the hon. Gentleman. It would be a useful exercise to find out who is speaking on behalf of certain companies, if they are reluctant witnesses. We should not have reluctant witnesses in this House. People should have an obligation to appear for parliamentary scrutiny. It does not matter whether it is the biggest tech brothers or the smallest company in our constituencies. He is right that that type of transparency would be really useful.

Sir John Hayes: We should not be naive about this, because the tech companies have form. All of their pedigree suggests that they cannot be trusted to do the right thing—to manage their affairs, or to protect either the public interest or the interests of the creative industries—so I hope that the Government will take exactly the robust approach that the hon. Gentleman has described. Perhaps one way in which they could do so, given that copyright has been introduced into these considerations via the amendments, is to extend existing copyright to the internet, so that people who publish online are subject to the same restrictions—

Chris Bryant: They already are.

Sir John Hayes: The Minister says that they are, but they should be subject to exactly the same restrictions as those who print and broadcast.

Pete Wishart: Far be it from me, who am on my feet, to get in the way of a conversation between the right hon. Gentleman and the Minister. I was interested by that little exchange. The right hon. Gentleman is right: we have to be careful when it comes to issues such as this. Given his experience of the House, he will have observed over the years some of the ways in which people who are able to make representations can be abused. As we go forward in such a critical area, he is right to issue a warning, and I think the House has heard what he has had to say.

Clauses 135 to 139 are the creative industries' safeguard and guarantee in the face of an almost existential threat to their ability to sustain themselves and continue to bring that uncontaminated joy of human imagination to the people we represent. They would help to tackle the unauthorised use of intellectual property by big tech companies scraping data for AI. They would enforce transparency and lay out a redress procedure. They would explicitly subject AI companies to UK copyright law, regardless of where they are based in the world. That means—and this is a critical point—that those companies would have to reveal the names and owners of web crawlers that currently operate anonymously. Most importantly, they would allow copyright owners to know when, where and how their work is to be used.

To develop and thrive, our artists need the best possible conditions and political environment, and we have delivered that over the decades. That is why we lead the world when it comes to our contribution to the creative industries, and why we make such massive gross value added in

every single sector in which we are predominant. Our leading artists give us a soft power that is the envy of the world, and we must not do anything that threatens our ability to retain it. We have a gold standard IP rights framework enshrined in UK law. We have a copyright regime that protects our artists, and ensures that their wonderful works are properly recognised and that they are remunerated for the products of their imagination.

Ms Billington: I am interested by the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the importance of these clauses—amendments from the other place—which, in principle, I support. He has also mentioned the importance of ensuring that proper scrutiny takes place when it comes to, for example, the tech companies making representations in this place, but those amendments suggest that that would be dealt with only through secondary legislation. If we have an opportunity, as presented by those on the Front Bench, to suggest that we could have proper, primary legislation, why should we accept the idea of secondary legislation, which does not allow for sufficient scrutiny to ensure that we are providing the necessary protections, when we should be debating primary legislation in this Chamber?

Pete Wishart: I have probably not explained exactly what my fears and concerns are, and that is probably typical of me. What we currently have in the Bill is a guarantee that we will respect copyright and ensure that there is transparency. Until I am presented with something that covers all the issues that are covered in clauses 135 to 139, with all the security that they would give our creative industries, I will back those clauses to the hilt, and will do everything possible to ensure that they remain within the Bill. If the Minister, as he seems to be suggesting, is going to come back to us with a different Bill, let us see it. Let us see if it does all the things that we all want when it comes to backing our creative sector. If it contains all the provisions that will ensure that our copyright framework is respected, and if transparency is on the face of it, I will back it in a flash; but until I see it, this is all that I have got, and all that the House has got, and we should make sure that we defend and protect it.

There is an idea that somehow our copyright laws are broken. They are not broken at all; our copyright laws work perfectly well. The only people who have an issue with our copyright laws are those running the AI tech giants, who find that such laws get in the way of what they want to do and achieve. Their intention and ambition is to ingest our creative heritage, and to scrape the world for the last bit of human imagination and creative content. That is what has created difficulties and confusion about our copyright regime. There is nothing wrong with our laws. They are really good and the envy of so many, and they have served us well.

I will support the Bill as it goes through the House. As I have said to the Minister, it is a good Bill that generally does all the right things when it comes to data use, which should be supported. It is a better Bill because of the amendments, and I will continue to support it. But if the Minister has a Bill that he wants to present to this House, could he please get on with it? There is a consultation going on just now, which ends, I think, in two weeks on Wednesday. At that point, we will have the information that we require, and I suspect

that we will find an overwhelming desire to see our copyright regime protected and defended. If the Minister has a Bill, bring it on. In the meantime, we must support the provisions and clauses in this Bill.

4.15 pm

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to contribute further on this important Bill. I thank Ministers, particularly the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, for their ongoing attention and for being in listening mode, particularly on the copyright matters that have been so dominant so far.

The Bill rightly modernises data regulations, which will spur growth and improve public services, making everyday life better. When put to good use and used fairly and effectively, data can enhance efficiency across sectors, from food supply chains and commercial forecasting to healthcare. It is a powerful prospect with enormous benefits. The challenge is in ensuring that those benefits reach everyone. Given the demands placed on the Bill by the amendments tabled in the other place, I hope that it proceeds into Committee. As it does so, we will gain insight from the Government's ongoing and related consultation on copyright and AI.

Today's debate is concerned with the use of data to drive progress; it speaks to how we can live better, and how we can live best, with AI. We do not need to accept the false choice of innovate versus regulate. In considering the countries either side of us, it can feel as though there are only two options—one or the other; zeroes or ones—but the UK must act now. This is a national cause with international consequences. Faced with demands for innovation while others call for regulation, we should bid for harmonisation. Harmony is the language not of compromise, but of complement—a value greater than the sum of its parts. We must understand the strength of all contributions to that harmony.

No country has got this right yet, and this is our chance to learn from a blend of approaches. International examples should be observed. AI should be harnessed to be an honest broker, which is why transparency is key. In silicon valley, exceptions have been made to the US's general approach, and the creative and tech industries are balanced accordingly. The UK should embrace transparency and maintain the strengths of both sectors. Europe understands the role of transparency, though there is little evidence that this has led to more licensing for copyright holders. We must not assume that one will automatically lead to the other, or that this will alleviate the concerns of our creative sector. Singapore has a broad AI training exception, but it has a minimal creative sector. The UK, with its proud creative industry, should not make flawed comparisons with a country without the same creative strengths, outputs and exports.

Just as transparency is demanded in our supply chains, so too must it apply to our code chains. Arguments suggesting that transparency would be too burdensome feel disingenuous. In Select Committee hearings, the argument for transparency, which represents a giant step forward in resolving the tension between AI and creators, seems to have been deliberately opposed by those seeking to excuse themselves, as well as those they represent by proxy, from paying for the work of others.

The Government's commitment to an industrial strategy includes our brilliant creative industries, but discussions with those industries should focus on how we advance and enhance them. We risk making this about how we can protect their very existence if we do not take seriously the deep alarm voiced by creators over the threat posed by AI. We also risk losing the very things that make life richer.

I urge the Government to introduce a requirement for transparency. If an AI system is trained on the works of thousands of musicians, authors and film makers, they have a right to know and a right to be paid. This could include a register. We do not tell manufacturers, energy providers or tech firms that their products should be freely used to build billion-dollar businesses without compensation. The same principle must apply to creative work. Copyright is not a barrier to innovation; it is the foundation that allows creativity to thrive.

This threat to creators' livelihoods is particularly acute for smaller rights holders who lack the means to navigate complex systems or enforce protections against unauthorised AI use. These independent creators are the backbone of our creative ecosystem. More than 70% of them are based in our towns and regions, away from the cities, where for them, levelling up means making up. Without them, the UK's creative engine will begin to fray and diminish. Creativity thrives not just through the marquee names but through the countless independent voices, expressions and creations that enrich our experiences.

The argument that restricting AI's access to copyrighted works will stifle progress and leave us trailing behind other territories is incorrect. I ask again: what progress are we pursuing if it undermines the position of strength that we start from? I have seen no economic impact assessment that states that exempting music and other creative content from licensing, or introducing AI training exceptions, will boost the economy. Yes, jobs in data centres will be welcome, but they are minimal in comparison to those sustained by our creative industries. At its heart, AI is about capability and capacity. It should not facilitate the casual but disastrous dismantling of copyright. The job gains must come from skilled input and employment that puts AI to work. The harnessing of AI must be human-tethered.

We must remember that AI is a great enabler, and for our advantage. It is not a stand-alone sector; it is a transformative technology for all sectors. Our focus must therefore be on its use, not on sweeping legal exceptions that weaken copyright and risk hollowing out the very industries we are committed to growing. If there is a technological answer—a digital fingerprinting solution or a pay-as-you-go AI model—we should keep an open mind, but it is a leap to expect these solutions to come soon enough for the urgent issues at hand. The anxieties I have outlined cannot be left unresolved while we wait.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): My hon. Friend is, like me, a musician. Is it any wonder that creatives, particularly musicians, are concerned even by the language that has been referred to across the Chamber? "Ingestion" speaks of consuming, and let us not think what else it speaks of. "Scraping" is also a horrible word. Hopefully we can reach a situation, through the consultation that the Minister and others are engaged in, where we can use

[John Slinger]

better language in this space that gives more reassurance to the creative sector. Instead of “ingest” we could use “collaborate,” for example, and instead of “scrape” we could use “reward.” We might then protect our wonderful creative sector.

Mr Frith: I agree with everything my hon. Friend says, and I suspect he is a better musician than I am.

Chris Bryant: He is, yes.

Mr Frith: The Minister got the memo.

AI is giving the creative sector indigestion, frankly, and this is the problem we are facing, so aiming for a smoother future through collaboration is absolutely right.

As with previous technological shifts, such as the introduction of the internet or indeed the printing press, laws should be based on use, not on the technology itself. The principle of tech neutrality should be reaffirmed as a guiding principle for our laws and culture.

In the absence of a clear solution, we must return to first principles and stand for transparency, fairness and the fundamental right to be paid for one's work. Or will we entertain the risks of an opaque system, built on unnecessary secrecy, freely extracting value from copyrighted works without payment? We are in a defining moment. Innovation should uplift, not exploit. The future of AI must be built on trust, so I urge this House and this Government to ensure that AI innovation does not come at the cost of our world-leading creative industries.

4.25 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Opposition Members are broadly supportive of this Bill and its aims, which build on the work done by the previous Conservative Government and refined by Members of the other place. I will focus primarily on deepfakes and AI-generated images, specifically in relation to clauses 91 and 141.

I commend Baroness Owen for her work on non-consensual images and deepfakes, and for pressing the Government to address this issue with more urgency. Her work brought about a U-turn on the intent-based amendment, pushed the Government to agree on solicitation, and pushed them to act on the deletion of content.

Removing the intent-based amendment removes a huge hurdle for victims—a hurdle that would have required victims to prove the intentions of their tormentor. This would simply have placed more pressure on victims, while abusers would have been more likely to excuse their crimes.

It is right that solicitation is now included in the Bill, as many cases have shown that it is not enough just to criminalise creation; we must also criminalise the people who ask others to create these images and videos for them. Otherwise, we run the risk of a loophole where images are posted on to sites and people from other jurisdictions create the content and send it back to the person requesting it.

The Government tried to prevent custodial sentences from being an option for these abusers, as they argued that omitting “reasonable excuse” may breach the European

convention on human rights. Given the content, I cannot see how perpetrators' rights trump the rights of victims, but the change was made thanks to Baroness Owen and Members from across the parties in the other place, who persisted in making sure that the Government take all action needed to stop this growing criminal scourge.

We have seen a surge in deepfakes, revenge porn and nudifying apps. This technology is the wild west and, unchecked, poses a danger to many in society. We must act to protect the most vulnerable from harm. I welcome that clause 91 establishes requirements for the commissioner to report on what actions have been taken. It is right that we see what is being done to combat these crimes. We have heard many reports of sexual images of children being generated and spread. This causes so much damage, and once such exploitative images are created and disseminated, they are near impossible to eradicate.

As technology advances, we need to keep pace with new threats, lest technological change outstrip the pace of legislation. For too long, the law has been out of touch with fast-changing realities. There are apps just a few clicks away that allow users to generate their own AI boyfriend or girlfriend, and some of these apps can take real images and change them into sexually explicit figures that are already terrifyingly real. This is just one example of why we need further restrictions, with clear penalties for both platform providers and users.

One app, undress-ai, processed over 600,000 images of women within 21 days of launching. These were ordinary women, with no knowledge that their image was being doctored in such a way and used, even traded, for the gratification of others. This is simply not right.

Although consent is at the heart of aspects of the Bill, we need to look closely at provisions for withdrawing consent. This must be seriously considered, particularly where an image that is consensually exchanged is doctored into something that was never consented to.

Though I welcome aspects of the Bill, we must ensure that we keep up with the rapid pace of change. Apps that cause great harm are readily accessible. I hope to hear more about what can be done to assist people to withdraw consent, so that we can end this vile abuse.

4.29 pm

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): I will focus my remarks on the impact of generative AI on musicians. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and I am a member of the Musicians' Union.

With a background in the music industry, sharing friendships with many musicians and as a fan, I have been inundated with concerns from musicians about how AI could affect their livelihoods. The music industry has long been structured in a way that exploits musicians. Streaming services have made that far worse, and our musicians will once again lose out if AI copyright laws are not handled correctly. Big tech companies should not be able to generate and profit from music without permission or payment. How can we justify taking money away from British musicians and handing it to tech firms for free? That does not support growth; it undermines it.

In reality, many household names—artists whose music we all know, who have had top 10 hits and whose posters once adorned our walls—are struggling. New musicians can barely get a foot in the door and are often not paid

for years. Songs are played more than ever, yet songwriters see less of the money. Someone is getting paid, but not the people who create the music. Unless they are at the very top, making a good living as a musician in this country is becoming nearly impossible. Even those who can sell out venues of a couple of thousand people across our towns and cities are barely scraping by.

The balance is completely off, but we, in this place, have the power to help to change that. Unlike our European counterparts, in this country we have failed to introduce proper protections for creators' pay over the past decade. As the party of labour, with a commitment to make work pay, this Government should ensure that artists, songwriters and musicians are fairly paid for their work and protected from exploitation by faceless tech companies.

AI can be a powerful tool, transforming industries like healthcare and science by reducing admin burdens and freeing up skilled professionals. But AI that tokenises the toil of artists and spits out soulless imitations does not support human creativity or make it more productive. No one has ever loved a song because of how efficiently it was written. As James Oppenheim wrote in his 1911 poem:

Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;

Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.

If work is our bread, then music is our roses.

Musicians across the country are closely watching today's debate. The consultation is ongoing and these matters will be addressed more in due course. I thank the Minister for his ongoing engagement in the matter, but will he assure me that the Government will strive to get the Bill right for musicians and that musicians will not be overlooked in the introduction of AI technologies?

4.32 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I will attempt not to give a rerun of the speech I made during the general debate on the creative industries the other day.

Chris Bryant: No Paddington?

Max Wilkinson: The Minister will be delighted to hear that there will be no Paddington references. Ministers have set out the core objectives of the Bill: growing the economy, improving public services and making people's lives easier. No one is going to disagree with any of that. Those aims are laudable, and I support them, as do the Liberal Democrats.

However, there are concerns. I will focus on an area that others have already touched on, and speak in support of amendments that have come to us from the House of Lords relating to the creative industries and copyright. While the Bill seeks to improve lives, we worry that the consultation currently being undertaken by the Government leaves open a risk that incentives for human creativity will be removed entirely, and that we will end up in future with many tens of thousands of shades of pale grey.

At the heart of our creative sector is the ability of the human hand to paint or draw, or to write music that moves us, and of the human brain to compose verse that persuades people, makes the hair stand up on the back of our necks and changes the world for the better. Protecting that must be absolutely central to what we do as we embrace technology, but the risk of AI is that those protections are lost.

For the avoidance of doubt, and in the absence of clarity from the official Opposition, we back a system that would protect the IP of creatives; that is, an opt-in system. I would give way to the shadow Minister if he wanted to clarify the Conservative party's position—he does not. The default must be that creative content is protected. Even AI models, if we ask them, admit the risk to human creativity if IP is not protected by an opt-in model. While the Conservative party has criticised us on that, at least we have an opinion.

Ms Billington: I want to emphasise and build on what my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) pointed out in relation to music. We need to understand which creative sectors are most vulnerable to generative AI. It is those that have been easily replicable through other forms of technology in the past: music, writing and the visual arts, in particular photography. I say that because it is sometimes misunderstood that some creative sectors are more vulnerable than others, and if we do not understand that they have different regimes for how they are protected, there are risks of not being able to properly protect them.

Max Wilkinson: The hon. Lady's contribution is as right as all the others she has made during this debate and the general debate a couple of weeks ago.

I will immediately move on to the point that data is an abstract term and is being used to cover all sorts of information in these debates. Yet all data is not equal and our legislation must properly reflect that. For example, there is a clear and obvious role for AI in processing health data in a way that helps doctors with diagnosis and benefits patients with faster treatment. The same might apply to the chats we have with our local councils about bins, planning or licensing. Yet even though no one will disagree that the UK firms innovating in science, medicine, climate change and other key industries must not be stymied, the training data for other AI systems—the data we are talking about—is literature, poetry, music and art. Those are things that are creative in essence. It is not just data; it is creative endeavour and an extremely human form.

One of the options in the current consultation would abolish the copyright protections that underpin the livelihoods of our creative sector and, as others have said, that would be ruinous for the creative industries. Furthermore, the unintended consequences could actually harm the long-term development of AI models that we will all come to rely on. High-quality data is essential for training good AI models, but publicly available human-created text data might become the minority online. We have all seen the mistakes that AI can produce and a model trained on bad data will only produce bad results. The Government are rightly ambitious for AI, and part of that ambition must include producing models with traceable data that the public can be assured meets a high standard. Ministers should be embracing our copyright laws precisely because that is a means to improve AI, as well as protecting our creatives.

A reliable licensing system will ensure that AI models are being created using high-quality, human-generated data. Oversight of what is used to train those models will only help to build trust in what is a very new technology that the public is sceptical about. To that end, the Liberal Democrats support the amendments that have come from the House of Lords, which seek to

[Max Wilkinson]

strengthen the rights of creatives. The Government must think carefully about which side of the argument they support, and I have been pleased to hear some of the Secretary of State and the Minister's reassurances today. We will be watching closely.

We can take more positives from other parts of the Bill, and to reflect on that, I will move on to discuss some constituency matters. I am more optimistic about the Bill's potential to improve the situation of bereaved parents, which the Minister and I have discussed fairly recently, and I hope Ministers will confirm that that opportunity will be taken.

Many in the House will be familiar with the story of my constituent, Ellen Roome, who tragically lost her 14-year-old son Jools to suicide. In her search for answers about the circumstances leading up to Jools's death, Ellen has come up against outdated laws and social media giants taking an intransigent approach to sharing data that should naturally be hers as a parent. We are talking about the things that, in the past, she would have been able to find out by looking through her child's bedroom—things that might have been in wardrobes, stored under the bed or in school notes. These days, those bits of data will be on multiple social media accounts.

This is the subject of my private Member's Bill, the Social Media (Access to Accounts) Bill, also known as the Jools' law Bill. This Bill would give parents access rights to their deceased child's data automatically, so other grieving parents will never face the challenges and the huge legal costs that Ellen has had to endure. I note the plans announced by Ministers include establishing an information commission with a duty to ensure children's data is protected. This is a welcome step which I hope will strengthen the protections children badly need online, but we must ensure the commission is effectively resourced to take on the social media giants, who have made it clear that they only want profit.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): First, I offer my deepest condolences to the family concerned. In my constituency I also had a challenging case where a young boy lost his life. It is entirely appropriate that the Government are taking this forward, and I commend Ministers for their work on it and also thank the hon. Gentleman for his work on this important matter.

Max Wilkinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman. The purpose of my points today is to make sure that, while the data Bill progresses, consensus is built in this House that we all acknowledge that parents should have the right to their children's data in cases where a child has died of suicide. That is a simple principle, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree with it, as I know Ministers do. That consensus must be borne out in the legislation that we pass.

I am hopeful these circumstances will be covered in the final Bill, and that the Jools' law Bill will become law. So I ask Ministers today: will we have clarity on the Government's plans in this area, and will they support parents like Ellen? Will the Government accept the principles my constituent Ellen is pursuing? It is a simple ask that parental access to social media accounts data is protected in the event of a child's death, that social media companies are obliged to retain that data

for a suitable period of time, and that data is made available to inquests so coroners can make judgments to prevent such tragedies from happening again.

4.42 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I am pleased to follow the powerful speech of the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson).

This wide-ranging Bill cuts across many aspects of Government and people's lives. We must harness the power of data to drive economic growth, to support a modern digital Government and build more efficient, effective public services, and to support people to have improved lives more generally. For too long this potential has not been fully realised, holding back businesses, public services, learning and education, and people up and down the country more generally.

This mission-led Government's plan for change—delivering economic growth, better public services and action on the environment—cannot be fully realised without some of the opportunities that this Bill creates. Measures in the Bill are expected to free up 1.5 million hours of police time, meaning officers will have more time to tackle crime rather than dealing with admin. This will be welcome in communities blighted by antisocial behaviour and among retailers who have been affected by shoplifting or violence against shop workers—the Co-op in Oakwood in my constituency is an example. It will also be welcomed in terms of the service victims of domestic violence receive from the police, as they will have more time to take preventive work and support victims, including my constituent Hayley who came to me to talk about her experience of domestic violence.

It is also estimated that measures in this Bill will free up a huge amount of time within the NHS for clinicians, potentially saving lives as well as making services more accessible and responsive to people's needs. That is vital as the Government have inherited from their predecessors the longest waiting times in NHS history.

The Bill will also improve the information that regulators receive, enabling a real-time view of how a service is performing. Old models of regulation, where inspectors would go in on a periodic rolling basis, are often insufficient and not responsive to a service's current situation. We have seen examples in the NHS and education where extremely poor services have not been of a standard that people have a right to expect—there has been abuse in some cases—but regulators' oversight has not been modern enough to capture that and drive regulatory action.

Matt Rodda: I presume that my hon. Friend is moving on to a range of other benefits of AI. Has he considered the importance of AI in supporting medical and scientific research? There is a great deal of evidence to show that the power of AI applied to this area could speed up the development of new drugs and many other treatments. In addition to diagnostics, that is an important aspect of the benefits of AI to medicine, and is not always reported well in the media.

Jonathan Davies: My hon. Friend is right. There are tremendous opportunities to anticipate people's needs throughout their lives and also drive scientific innovation, so that we can live longer and healthier lives. The Health Secretary and other Ministers have been clear that the huge investment that the Government are making in

public services must go hand in hand with reform, since change will not be delivered solely by spending more money, and this Bill will help to make that possible.

I am also pleased that the Government will strengthen safeguards on personal data. That is key to ensuring that people have trust in the services that they use, and to preventing those who would exploit personal data from being able to do so. I look forward to following that aspect of the Bill as it progresses through its future stages.

I also wish to touch on the national underground asset register—a national map of the UK’s underground infrastructure. In Derbyshire, people find it so frustrating to find that their street, their road, or the highway that they use has been dug up again by yet another utility company, or another person who needs access to the cables or the infrastructure underground. Not only is that frustrating for people as they try to get around, but it is, I believe, undermining the integrity of the roads that we use and driving our pothole problems. I hope that, combined with our journey to local government devolution, our roads will be another area where people will be able to see a tangible difference.

During the Bill’s passage through the House of Lords, efforts were made to strengthen copyright protections for creators, including artists, photographers, authors, musicians, composers and lyricists. I welcome the work that the House of Lords has done to push those issues further up the agenda. Stronger protections for creators is something that I will always seek to support.

Artificial intelligence has benefits for sectors such as music, yet more transparency from AI firms on the music, art, and literature on which their systems draw is absolutely necessary. Although the technology is new, some of the arguments that we have heard here and today in the wider discourse on this Bill are decidedly not new. I am reminded of the 15th century—although I was not there—when Johannes Gutenberg rolled out his printing press for the first time. People were worried about the effect that that would have on scribes and the monks who transcribed the religious texts. The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), who is no longer in his place, spoke about the volumes of books that we have here in Parliament.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I say gently to my hon. Friend that the difference is that then people understood from looking at the book whether it was printed or scribed, whereas with AI-generated works it is sometimes hard to distinguish, which is why we need labelling and additional consumer protections in this space.

Jonathan Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I shall get on to those points when I talk about the consultation that is currently under way.

We need to ensure that the benefits of AI are managed and that our creators are properly protected. This is a £120 billion industry, which employs more than 2 million people. It is an expression of who we are and contributes to our understanding of ourselves and each other, and it takes us on a journey where we can walk in somebody else’s shoes and build a more tolerant, cohesive and engaged society. If we do not get this right, all that is threatened. That would be bad not just for the global stars, the household names and the people whose records, CDs and downloads we have in our homes—

Mr Frith: And cassettes.

Jonathan Davies: Yes, and cassettes. It would also be bad for those at the start of their journey. We must cultivate up-and-coming talent and support emerging artists across all those sectors. We have a moral duty to do so and to find an equitable solution, and I commend the work that UK Music has done to point that out.

I know it was not the Bill’s intended purpose to address copyright and AI. The consultation, which closes on 25 February, is under way, and I know the Government do not want to predetermine its outcome because we want to get this right. We need to get it right for the economy and for our culture. Given that this issue has been conflated with those in the Bill, I would appreciate an assurance from the Minister that if we cannot proceed with progressing better protections to ensure the UK’s legal framework for AI and copyright for the creative industries at this stage, we will consider the matter following the closure of the consultation. I look forward to working with Ministers and colleagues across the House to get the best solution possible for our creatives.

4.50 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I am enjoying the debate and feel regretful that I no longer have any disclosable interests in the creative industries. I am grateful to Members for sharing their powerful testimonies. I do have a couple of disclosable interests in relation to tech, and I want to address my comments to some of aspects of that.

Over the course of human history, we have found ourselves in possession of resources that can radically change how our society operates and the quality of life that we lead. Over thousands of years, we have revolutionised society by harnessing fire, oil, electricity and even cassette tapes. I truly believe that the great opportunity for our generation is to harness the power of data for the public good.

Before I came to this place, I worked with large companies across the world, talking to them about how they should restructure and reform their organisations to make the best use of the power of data, not only to improve their businesses but to improve the experience of their users and customers. When they used data best, they brought prosperity to their organisations and made people want to come back to them time and again. How many of our constituents could honestly say that they want to engage with Departments and public services time and again? We have to face a hard truth: when citizens engage with Government, they are far from impressed. In so many cases, they feel that they are battling with sclerotic bureaucracy and a system built of silos, which feels designed for the convenience of the administration and not the user.

Chris Bryant: My biggest gripe is that everywhere I go in the country, when I need to park my car I have to download a new app because the local authority has decided what app it will use. Smart data might actually allow us to have an interoperable, interchangeable system for parking our cars.

Steff Aquarone: I could not agree more. Some of the conclusions that are reached through the procurement of technology services by local councils defy sense and are utterly baffling. I am sure that all of us are guilty of that; I will not go any further than that—

Chris Bryant: So you're guilty?

Steff Aquarone: All of us are guilty, I am sure, of being part of decisions that sometimes defy sense when it comes to usability. I can speak only on behalf of the citizens who contact me about having to go round in circles, sharing the same stories, digging out new and old reference numbers and wondering why nothing seems to want to work for them. I am sure the Minister would agree that it does not have to be this way. We have already seen the transformative impact of the improved usability of gov.uk services, and that is just the very front end of the machine. Total transformation of how data is used in our public services could radically change how we deliver services for citizens.

I hope the Government will look to Estonia for inspiration on how to have a truly data-driven Government with the citizen at the centre. It is a place I visited in my past life to talk about data-driven success stories. I am sure that it is no coincidence that, for the past 20 years, the Estonian digital transformation has been led by liberal Governments from our Estonian sister parties. After the fall of communism, in the late 1990s, Estonia embarked on an ambitious programme known as the “Tiger Leap” to expand internet access and computer literacy—the first step in embedding the digital environment into all levels of the citizen and Government experience. Their Government proudly say that their e-cabinet, which streamlined the decision-making process, brought the average length of an Estonian Cabinet meeting down from five hours to 30 minutes—an appealing prospect to those on the Treasury Bench, I am sure.

Estonian citizens can access 100% of their public services online at any time. The Estonians have transformed their healthcare system with the e-health and e-prescription initiatives, which free up GP time by allowing prescription refills to be dealt with online and ensure fast and simple access to key medical information during emergencies.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): Although all-digital services are desirable, we should never freeze out those who are not digital savvy, given that over 1 million people in this country do not own a mobile phone, for example. Does the hon. Member agree?

Steff Aquarone: The hon. Member makes an excellent point, for which I am grateful—I will address it in a moment, if I may.

X-Road, described as the backbone of e-Estonia, is a secure data-exchange platform that allows smooth and seamless use of data between organisations. It carries out 2.2 billion transactions every year, and is estimated to save Estonians 1,345 years-worth of work per annum. The platform has been described as having a “radical anti-silo” agenda. My experience so far of the structures of Parliament and Government have convinced me that we would all benefit from a heavy dose of radical anti-siloism.

That data transformation saves the Government money, and the public like it. Savings worth up to 2% of Estonian GDP have been made thanks to that efficient data environment—a saving that, if replicated in the UK, would easily fill the Chancellor's budgetary black hole. For 12 of the 15 e-services surveyed, 80% of citizens or more said they had made using public services easier. I call on the Government to be bold, ambitious and, above all, citizen-focused in such design and delivery.

Alex Sobel: I visited Estonia last year and spoke to our ambassador there. We are now on our third agreement between the UK and Estonia on Government e-services and digital collaboration. That was underutilised by the previous UK Government. It would be great to see the Minister and his colleagues step up the work with Estonia and bring that sort of work here, given that those agreements are in place.

Steff Aquarone: This is absolutely not a pitch to be a member of the Bill Committee, but I would certainly be grateful for the opportunity to implement my views in the design and delivery of Britain's very own Tiger Leap into the data-driven revolution.

Estonia is a crystal-clear example proving that the results of such a transformation are not just the preserve of tech geeks—a category into which I place myself—but provide tangible benefits for individuals, and not just by making them use digital stuff at the front end, which the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) will be glad to hear. I think about the lady in her 90s whose Openreach engineer understandably refused her fibre upgrade because the local council had not shared with them the fact that she used a telecare device. I also think of the farmers who are baffled by the systems used to issue flood recovery payments, because the data is not transparent.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the key to extracting value from datasets is data retrievability?

Steff Aquarone: Absolutely. There are so many layers upon which data governance, data infrastructure and data practices must be established, and data retrievability is one of the things that sit between those layers and the application or interface that uses them.

Jonathan Davies: I understand that one reason why Estonia has a sophisticated tech and AI capability, and a great many protections in how it manages that data, is that it faces a threat from Russia and is keen to ensure that its digital integrity is retained. I am glad that we do not face quite the same threat in this country, but we can learn lessons from Estonia, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised that.

Steff Aquarone: I do not doubt that that was an enabling factor, but one reason why being citizen-focused works so well is that it is much easier to build trust and credibility bit by bit by telling people why doing something differently will be better for them. In that way, we do not end up in the horrendous situation of facing yet another £100 billion abortive IT project that cannot quite establish public trust and collapses. Again, I draw attention to the success of some of our European neighbours.

To go back to examples that are not just about the interface, but about the underlying enabling tech, an exasperated constituent contacted me to tell me how the Department for Work and Pensions had refused to email him. He had asked it to send him details of his conversation with it by email, rather than by letter, to try to save the Government money, and he was told that it had to post this to him by letter because that was how the system worked.

Harnessing the power of data must not, however, come at the cost of our rights or civil liberties. I am very concerned about some aspects of the Bill that have been touched on by other hon. Members, such as the reduced accountability mechanisms for law enforcement when handling data, a potential watering down of our GDPR rights and giving more scope for automated decision making without human oversight, although I have been partially reassured by some of the comments from the Minister, for which I am grateful.

I am also concerned that, along with the provisions in the Bill for creating a digital ID system, there is no equal right to a non-digital ID. Not only does this create concerns about data freedom, but in areas such as North Norfolk, where digital exclusion is higher than in many other areas, I am worried about how many of my older residents will feel comfortable or confident using any digital system. Their rights must be preserved, and their experiences and fears given equal worth.

The Bill seeks to tackle a difficult but very important subject. It is right that the Government venture into data transformation to deliver for all our constituents and make their experiences as citizens interacting with the Government far better than is currently the case. I guess my reservation is about who it is written and working for, and why. I am trying to make sure that this Bill is built not around convenience for the Administration, but around genuinely citizen-centred design principles. The Bill tackles issues such as data handling, but I would like it to start to set out a vision for a data-driven society—I am a bit disappointed in that, as it stands, it could be more ambitious and innovative in this regard—and seek to carve us out as data pioneers among our international peers.

I hope the Government can see the evidence from successful data-driven societies, and I am confident they do. I hope they hear the frustrations of citizens at their experiences, and I think they currently do. I hope they will make this Bill one that can be lauded by future generations as the launchpad that transformed our society.

5.1 pm

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): It is an honour to follow that great contribution from the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), much of which I will echo. Like him, before I was elected to this place I worked a lot with data—understanding it, using it, deploying it—in tech companies, academia and then politics. I am a huge supporter of the Secretary of State's and the Minister's agenda, and broadly of the enormous potential for data and data-driven tools such as AI and machine learning, because they can drive productivity growth, boost earnings and, crucially, save constituents' time and money—whether it is registering the birth of children, kids going through school, accessing a GP or entering the workplace.

I would like to underscore a few aspects of the Bill that have not been spoken much about, but I would also like to make a wider argument about the importance of this agenda and about going further in some areas in the years to come, particularly in the connection between data and risk. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope you will forgive a slight and quick diversion.

The word “data” has its roots in the word for “fact”, but in the world of machine learning and AI it means something broader—the information we choose to record

about our world to analyse and use to make decisions. Data began as demographic information, because a state that wanted to build an army or fight wars wanted to know what kinds of people comprised its populace. Now we collect data about driving, sleep and clicks online to help us navigate or get fitter, but also to push us mindless advertising. What data we collect depends on what we want to use data for, and that requires constant judgments about risk: where we are willing to take risks, how much risk and what kinds of risks.

In many ways, we have become a society and a country too averse to risk—to failure. We create new regulators and give them enormous discretion because we want to minimise risk. We create new tsars for this, that and the other, and give them broad powers because we want to minimise risk. The effect is that we avoid failures on 1,000 small things, but we also lose the opportunity to maximise our output and our success, because success requires risk, and data often forces us to make clear and confident judgments about risk.

The topic of this Bill is an opportunity to begin to shift our culture in our economy and, crucially, in our state too, but also for politicians like us in this House to be clear about where we welcome and embrace risk and where we do not, and to take responsibility as elected Members for failure. I will focus on two areas in this Bill where I believe data is forcing to the surface different appetites for and judgments about risk: healthcare and social media.

Briefly, I will say something about copyright, which has been well covered in powerful contributions by others. I am pleased that the Secretary of State said that he is looking at this area in the AI consultation, and I look forward to hearing more about the details of that consultation and what comes from it. We should be optimistic. It is possible to do what others have argued for and place our creative industries on a secure and stable footing, while also ensuring that AI is unlocked in this country. I hope that the Secretary of State will hear the powerful contributions of my colleagues today.

The two examples I will focus on are those that matter to many of the working people in my constituency of Makerfield. As the Secretary of State said, data is at the heart of how this Government must break through barriers and inertia to deliver for working people. That is why I am so glad that this Bill is not about killer robots or space-age AI, but is focused on the transformation of Government and services that impact my constituents every day.

The first example is healthcare, and this is an area where we should embrace more risk. Systematising the collection and recording of data in healthcare unlocks the possibility of using data to spot patterns, of contacting people ahead of time—instead of fining them if they miss their appointment, as they do in my borough of Wigan—and of saving people time that they do not have. To unleash the full potential of data in healthcare, we need to be confident about building population-level datasets controlled and owned by the public, anonymised through tools such as encryption, and then using those datasets not just for academic research, but to improve services and delivery. This Bill takes initial steps in that direction, which I welcome. In Greater Manchester, my constituents benefit already from a shared patient care

[Josh Simons]

record between primary and secondary care, and a data science platform that brings in data across local hospitals. Patients already feel the benefit of that every day.

In healthcare, we can go further and faster. We must be cautious about inadvertently slipping into risk aversion, caution and stagnation, particularly in relation to concerns about privacy. For much of the past 20 years and the period I have been involved in this debate, debates about data have been dominated by concerns about privacy, but whose interests does the privacy lobby serve? Often, think-tanks and NGOs fight in the name of working people to stop data being used to do things that working people want done. There is a lot of good evidence that the public are relaxed about population-level anonymised data being used to save them time and money and improve the services they use, especially in healthcare.

Does the elderly woman I saw in my constituency surgery last week, who has been struggling to see her GP for weeks now, care if her data sits in an anonymised database and is used to unlock more facetime for her GP to see patients and to make it faster for her to get an appointment? I do not think she does. I therefore welcome the changes in this Bill to the EU's sprawling GDPR framework. If one of Brexit's much-famed opportunities is to lead the way in diffusing the collection and use of data, we should embrace it wholeheartedly, subject to the data adequacy requirement. More generally in healthcare, we must ensure that we do not inadvertently build barriers that block the collection and use of data controlled by those accountable to the public for the public good, where data can drive better outcomes and improve experiences.

The second case I will consider is social media. Social media collects data about our unthinking scrolling to build highly optimised engagement algorithms that rake in advertising revenue. That contributes little to growth, national security or, indeed, the welfare of humanity. The digital verification market that this Bill creates will be vital. Digital age verification is central to protecting our children, especially once the Online Safety Act 2023 is in force. I want my young kids to grow up in a country that protects them from harmful content, such as sexualised violence, and from spending hours mindlessly scrolling through content, wasting their time and corroding their minds.

I also welcome the Bill's provision to allow researchers to access online safety data held by technology companies, and I hope that we will continue to deepen those provisions. This is one area where I actually think we should be more worried about risk—a rare exception to my general view that we have become too risk-averse—because it is about the minds and character of our citizens and the strength of our democracy. At present, the information environment of our nation is being polluted, sometimes deliberately and often by foreign adversaries. Governments communicate with citizens, and citizens with each other, in spaces designed to drive them apart. As we have seen in past months, knowing what is circulating online, and how, is in the public interest.

I hope that the Bill is just the beginning of our Government using every possible lever to rebuild the fabric of trust in government, politics and each other in this new digital environment. Historically, states collected

data to wage wars and raise taxes. This Government should harness data to put money in the pockets of working people, to make public services more efficient and easier to access, and—crucially—to rebuild our public realm and restore trust in our great democracy.

5.10 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate, which I have really enjoyed listening to. I particularly enjoyed the contribution of the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), who talked about writers and stories. Her discussion reminded me of the book I am reading with my son, Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton's "The 39-Storey Treehouse", where they have just built a book making machine and have gone off to enjoy themselves while the book is written. I do not quite know how the story will end yet. That reminds us of the balance between the benefits that innovations such as AI can bring and the challenge, as the hon. Member said, of ensuring that people are fairly remunerated for their efforts, whether they be on building the machines or writing the stories.

I will direct my remarks to two particular areas of the Bill. First, clause 141 deals with what it refers to as "purported intimate" images, otherwise referred to as deepfake pornography images. There are images of all hon. Members and a majority of our constituents online, fully clothed—at least, I hope so—but individuals can take those innocent images of us or our constituents and use computer software to insert them into another image, generating images that appear to show an individual in an intimate state, undressed or engaging in sexual activity. Why do they do that? For their own sexual gratification, to share with others—perhaps for money—or to humiliate, threaten or control the individual in the image or their loved ones. That has a devastating effect on people's lives. No hon. Members will be surprised to hear that 99% of victims of that evil crime are women.

It is important to recognise the work of Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge. She introduced a private Member's Bill in this area last December. It was unfortunate that the Government chose not to support her legislation at that time, but I am grateful that they have drafted this clause of the Bill, which has the same effect. It was Baroness Owen's tenacity and explanations that persuaded the Government to ensure that the threshold is consent, rather than the victim needing to prove intent, in the use of images. She persuaded them to increase the penalty to include imprisonment, reflecting the severity of the crime. She also persuaded them of the need to amend the Sentencing Act 2020 to end the somewhat farcical situation in which an individual will be prosecuted for creating an image and, at the end of the court case, have that same image handed back to them as part of their property.

The Government gave the Baroness one further undertaking. Sometimes, images are not discovered immediately after they are taken; or, if a group of images is found on someone's computer, it may take a while to identify the victim. In such cases, a six-month timeout loophole can cause individuals to get away with these hideous crimes. The Government undertook to amend section 127 of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980, which limits jurisdiction to within six months of a crime, to ensure that people caught for a crime after six

months has elapsed or whose prosecution takes place after six months have elapsed can still be held to justice and account. I ask the Minister to explain why I cannot find that in the Bill—it may be there and I just cannot find it. If he could clarify that point, I would be grateful.

The other point I want to raise is accuracy. We have talked a lot about data, but data is useful only if it is accurate. We will all have heard the story of baby Lilah, a beautiful baby girl born in Sutton-in-Ashfield who was registered as male by accident. It is not very easy to have side notes in digital data. How do we ensure that data is accurate? Three clauses in the Bill may help us with that. Clause 45(6) says that information must be accurate, clause 28(3) and (4) suggest that the Secretary of State must check listed organisations for data reliability, and clause 140 requires the Secretary of State to produce a data dictionary to ensure that we know the definitions of all the data points.

The Secretary of State spoke about the huge opportunity that data offers the NHS. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am a consultant paediatrician. Others have talked about the huge opportunities that AI and data use and research can present to the NHS, but there is also a risk. How does the Minister intend to define sex? The Labour Cabinet and the Prime Minister have repeatedly struggled to define what is a woman. Leaving that to secondary legislation, considered in a small Committee, is not sufficient scrutiny for such an important matter.

Earlier in the debate, the Secretary of State referred to the powers that the Bill gives the Secretary of State under secondary legislation and why things are not included in the Bill itself. This issue should be given more scrutiny than that of an SI Committee. It is important to protect women: women's sport, women's privacy and women's single-sex spaces. It is important for intimate care. Many people want to receive intimate care, particularly domiciliary care, by somebody of the same sex. How will they know if the data is not available?

Data is also important to protect those with a trans identity. Many blood reference ranges are different for males and females. Haemoglobin varies from laboratory to laboratory, but is roughly 13 to 18 in males and 11.5 to 16.5 in females. If data is not complete or accurate, some individuals may receive unnecessary investigation. Data for screening and other health messages is important. We do not want male people called for cervical screening or men not to receive prostate information.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making some excellent points on sex and gender and the collection of data—she knows that I share her views on that. It is incumbent on the Minister and the Secretary of State to ensure that data is collected according to sex. However, does she agree that the previous Government put us in the situation that we are in?

Dr Johnson: It is certainly true that across the western world at the moment, there seems to be some confusion on some of the basics of biology and humanity.

Data is important for protecting children, too. One data provider listed in clause 28 is the Disclosure and Barring Service. GB News reported that there were 12,000 prosecutions between January 2019 and June 2022 of people on the sex offenders register who did not inform police of data changes. It is crucial that data is accurate

and up to date, so will the Secretary of State commit to the integrity of biological sex data in the Bill and in the Government's datasets?

Last September, the UK Health Security Agency released data on sexually transmitted infections by sex and sexual orientation, which is important because of the different epidemiological nature of infections in the different populations. However, the footnotes said that men were defined in the data as cisgender and transgender men, and women as cisgender and transgender women. That somewhat undermines the data integrity and the purpose of splitting the data in the first place. Data that is wrong, unhelpful, misleading or misused by malicious actors can be dangerous. Many are concerned. How does the Minister plan to define sex, and what are his plans for incongruous data?

In the debate in the upper House, it was reported that 3,000 people have changed their sex data in their passport, and 15,000 have changed it with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency on their driving licence. It was said in the House of Lords debate that up to 100,000 people may have incongruous official datasets between items such as passports and driving licences. How does the Minister intend to resolve that if we are to have one large dataset for each person?

Finally, clause 45(8) sets out that a person may need to pay fees in respect of disclosure. Will we expect people to pay for their own data, and, if so, how much? I know Labour is very keen on increasing taxes, but can the Minister guarantee that the cost will never outweigh the admin cost of producing the data?

5.19 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my medical colleague, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), in this debate. This is a wide-ranging Bill, but I would like to talk this afternoon about the role of data access in healthcare, and what I think is a transformative proposal for the patient passport.

NHS IT and case records are chaotic. I know about this chaos from my own clinics, where I spend—or waste—too much time looking at PDF readers; we also have dictaphones, and we even still have fax machines. Half the consultation can easily be spent opening up websites and computer programs for all sorts of different things.

The standard of information kept by different hospitals varies quite widely and IT interoperability is often very poor, so that if I transfer a patient from one hospital where I work to another hospital where I work, the other people in the hospital cannot easily work out what is going on with the patient. Sometimes we are unable to treat the patient because we are unable to access their medical record. Imagine an elderly lady lying on a trolley in a hospital corridor at 3 o'clock in the morning, unable to give a full account of her medical history. If we cannot access her file, how will we best treat her?

That is not an imaginary situation; it is an actual situation that is probably happening in our hospitals today. I therefore welcome the measures in the Bill that will standardise information and improve the flow of data between hospitals. Actually, I am pleased that West Suffolk hospital, in my constituency, has very good IT standards, and I hope the Bill will allow more hospitals around the country to follow its example.

[Peter Prinsley]

However, I urge the Government to look further when considering reform to medical data. Here is what I think may be a transformative proposal: we should give ownership of the medical record directly to the patient. Let us make the clinicians ask the patient to see the record, and not the other way around. Nine out of 10 Britons want better access to their medical records, and we should simply listen to them. Let us create a patient passport that has all the patient's medical data on it. It would be transformative.

People organise their lives on their phones, so let us put the passport there. We could just expand the NHS app to become a digital front door for the health service. People are happy to bank on their phones, send emails on their phones and book flights on their phones—

Chris Bryant: My mother-in-law is not.

Peter Prinsley: Well, the Minister's mother-in-law might not be.

I do not think it is such a leap of the imagination to let everybody access their medical information in this way. As we heard from the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), who has gone for a cup of tea, other countries such as Estonia do this.

I urge us to think carefully. One record, one patient—it would simplify so much of our healthcare, and this Bill is the opportunity to do it. I was heartened to hear that my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary supports such a proposal. It will be the future of healthcare, so let us simply make it happen.

5.23 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I stand in support of the objectives and aims of the Bill. Having worked with data and technology for more than 30 years, I wholeheartedly support the ethical, responsible and equitable use of technology and data to benefit and make easier the lives of the people of the UK, and to increase the efficiency of service delivery in the public sector. I also pay tribute to campaign groups including Big Brother Watch and Justice for their work to protect the vital privacy and data protection rights of people in the UK.

I want to share some concerns I have on the Bill, focused on two areas: clause 70 and clause 80. I urge the Government to take note and amend the Bill to ensure that the British public's privacy rights and rights to equality and non-discrimination are not compromised. Clause 70 will weaken protections around personal data processing, thereby reducing the scope of the data that is protected by safeguards in data protection law. I am particularly concerned about the executive power to determine recognised legitimate interests, which will allow for more data to be processed with fewer safeguards than is currently permitted and reduce existing protections that ensure the lawful use of data. I am also concerned about the increased power of the Secretary of State to amend the definition of "recognised legitimate interest" through secondary legislation without appropriate parliamentary scrutiny.

Currently, automated decision making is broadly prohibited, with specific exemptions. Clause 80 will permit it in all but a limited set of circumstances. That will strip

the public of the right not to be subject to solely automated decisions, which risks exacerbating the likely possibility of unfair, opaque and discriminatory outcomes from ADM systems; limiting individuals' rights to challenge ADM; permitting ADM use in law enforcement and intelligence, with significant carve-outs in relation to the existing safeguards; and giving the Secretary of State executive control over the ADM regulatory framework through secondary legislation. They may not be direct examples, but Horizon and the many Department for Work and Pensions scandals show the failings and risks of relying solely on automation and AI.

The Bill introduces a new regime for digital verification services. It sets out a series of rules governing the future use and oversight of digital identities as part of the Government's road map towards digital identity verification. The framework currently lacks important safeguards and human rights principles that prevent the broad sharing of the public's identity data beyond its original purpose. Further, the Bill misses the opportunity to take a positive, inclusive step to codify a right for members of the public to use non-digital ID where reasonably practicable. Such a right is vital to protect privacy and equality in the digital age. The right to use a non-digital ID where practicable would protect accessibility, inclusion and people's choice in how they choose to verify their identities when accessing public and private services, legally protecting the millions of people who cannot or do not want to hand over personal identity data online where an alternative is reasonably practicable.

Returning to automated decision making, it is clearly insufficient to move the burden of safeguards from the data controller, who is currently responsible for preventing harm, to the individual to complain if the ADM is unfair, since people may not complain due to a lack of knowledge or confidence, intimidation and various intersecting vulnerabilities.

Sam Carling: I understand the point the hon. Gentleman is making, but does he not accept that the Bill very clearly explains that in cases where any automated decision is taken, there would have to be the right to a proper explanation of the decision, which would probably address a lot of his concerns, and that there must always be a right for an individual to make representations about the decision and obtain human intervention if that is what they want?

Iqbal Mohamed: I welcome the limited protections in the Bill, but I know from experience that many applications for benefits—especially disability benefits and personal independence payments—that are processed through automated systems are refused, and the applicants have to go through a complicated and laborious appeals process in order to overturn those automated decisions.

Clause 70 introduces significant changes to the lawful bases for processing personal data. While the aim of those changes is to streamline data processing for legitimate interests, they also present challenges relating to privacy protection, parliamentary oversight, and the potential for misuse. It is essential to balance the facilitation of legitimate data processing with the safeguarding of individual rights and freedoms. Although the Bill is intended to modernise data protection laws, the proposed changes to automated decision-making rights in clause 80 raise significant concerns. The potential erosion

of individual protections, increased power imbalances, reduced transparency and the risk of discrimination highlight the need for a more balanced approach that safeguards individual rights while accommodating technological advances.

While I welcome the positive elements of the Bill, I urge the Government to ensure that it does not deliver the proposed benefits along with diminished human rights and rights to privacy, increased discrimination and other unintended harms to individuals, the wider public, minorities, artists and creatives, public services, or our country as a whole.

5.31 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I welcome the Bill. Given its potential to boost the economy by £10 billion, it is a huge win for so many sectors, and a brilliant example of the difference that this Labour Government can make. Technological innovation will improve efficiency and reduce unnecessary administration, allowing our key workers to focus more on the things that matter most. Police officers and NHS workers, for example, protect us and save lives, and in freeing up 1.5 million hours of police time and 140,000 NHS staff hours every year by cutting out excess administration work, the Bill will help them to do that. How many police officer equivalents could we make from 1.5 million hours of additional work? It is incredible.

Our NHS has been broken by the Conservative party. That requires funding to fix, which is why, in the Budget, this Government rightly pledged an additional £22.6 billion in resource spending for our health service. However, it also needs reform, and I have been pleased to hear that message clearly understood and prioritised by the Government through Bills such as this. At present, each part of the system finds it difficult to communicate with the others, partly because of issues relating to data sharing, which puts more strain on patients and more strain on our NHS staff. The Bill would change that. Medical records would be shared between health professionals, which would mean quicker diagnosis and treatment, and those records would be subject to strict security protocols: only the most relevant staff would have access to non-anonymised patient data.

These changes are hugely important, and cannot come soon enough. In North West Cambridgeshire, the improved data access in the Bill will allow for greater connectivity between all the health services that my constituents use. Whether they have an appointment at Peterborough city hospital, at Hinchingsbrooke hospital or further afield, and whether their GP's surgery is at Old Fletton, Lakeside, Botolph Bridge or beyond, the Bill will ensure that their healthcare professionals have all the information they need to do their jobs quickly and effectively.

On our streets, people are rightly concerned about crime. Police were stretched to the limit and stripped to the bone under the last Government, and the percentage of people seeing officers on the beat has dropped by two thirds over the past 14 years. We are giving police their time back by reducing the administration burden and allowing them to do their actual jobs, protecting the public and making our communities safer.

As someone from a science background, I am particularly interested in the Bill's reforms to data access for researchers. This has huge potential to help scientists to conduct

more impactful research and drive critical innovation in everything from pharmaceuticals to manufacturing, technology and more, and the benefits that that could bring to our economy are enormous. When working in the research space, I could see significant problems with data sharing and access, so I know that this Bill will make a real difference. Colleagues in the university sector have given me their feedback on the Bill, emphasising that providing researchers with secure access to Government data is crucial for research that drives economic growth, productivity and inclusivity.

Linking academic and Government data enables better research. Take my field of pathology, critical work is going on to understand the genetic causes of diseases so that we can develop new treatments. We need huge datasets for that, and it makes complete sense for the Government to work with partners to provide them. In response to the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed), a lot of our scientists, particularly those working in genetics, rely on datasets from other countries, particularly Nordic countries, which have known about this issue for quite a long time and have made a lot of data available to researchers.

We need enormous datasets to be able to do the necessary analysis, particularly around drug development. There are a lot of inclusivity problems, because particular ethnic groups are lacking from the countries on which we are dependent for the data. For example, there is often not enough information about how particular drugs affect black people. In order to deal with that, we need the data to be available so that we can look at the genetics. If we get too caught up in not allowing anonymised data to be shared with researchers for that purpose, it will really harm inclusivity; it will not help at all. It is worth making those points.

University colleagues have highlighted the new national data library, spearheaded by the Department. If designed effectively, it has the potential to facilitate research from the outset, and to help drive improvements in public services for the benefit of all UK citizens. I hope the Government will make sure that we get universities and private sector research partners around the table when we set up the library, to make sure that it will work for them and their needs.

This Bill will allow researchers to seek broad consent for areas of scientific research, while ensuring high standards of data protection. Notably, personal data will be able to be used for research purposes only if it was processed in a manner that does not permit the identification of the data subject. That goes back to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons). We talk about risks to privacy and personal rights, but this is anonymised data, usually at a very large scale; no one is looking at individuals' records. In my field, we look at thousands and thousands of genomes at the same time to identify associations between certain areas of genetics and diseases. This Bill poses no risk to patients, and we do people a disservice if we engage in scaremongering, so I am glad that Members have not done that. The Bill will give scientists more tools for innovation and discovery, and people can be reassured that their data is safe and their privacy respected. The quantity of data that we need to draw strong conclusions in research is huge, which has historically been a barrier.

[Sam Carling]

I am really pleased that the Government have published a 250-page impact assessment with this Bill. I welcome the particular emphasis on trust, but we need to make sure that we get the comms right, particularly around protecting privacy and ensuring that what we have said in this House becomes more widely known by the public.

The Bill makes important clarifications about the use of AI in decision making. We know that this is the direction in which a lot of organisations are moving, and there is a lot of potential, but strong safeguards are essential, so I am pleased to see the Bill place a serious emphasis on putting them in place.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Wales's creative industry is a cornerstone of our culture and economy. It generated £3.8 billion in the last financial year—5.3% of our GDP—and much of that success relies on strong copyright protections. Creatives must be paid when their work is used, including for AI training. Too often creative data is being scraped without permission, undermining livelihoods. Does the hon. Member agree that clauses 95 and 135 to 139 of this Bill are a vital step in safeguarding our creative industries?

Sam Carling: The hon. Lady makes her point well, and we have already heard from the Minister about the rationale behind those clauses. There are real issues with putting such measures through in secondary legislation, because this House should have more ability to scrutinise them. We know there is a consultation at the moment, and we have heard from the Secretary of State that he is very open to having a conversation on this issue and making sure that we address it. I am sure we all agree that we need to do that properly.

On safeguards, the Bill makes it very clear that where an organisation makes automated decisions, an individual has the right to a proper explanation of those decisions and the right to make representations about the decision taken, to obtain human intervention and to contest the automated decision. Those are really robust safeguards, but they are key provisions that must be shown to work in practice. We cannot enter a situation in which automated decisions are made wrongly, with no recourse. I strongly support the Bill and these safeguards, but I note that the British Medical Association has raised concerns around clause 77 and clause 70. I would be grateful for the Minister's response to those concerns around diluting protections for health data held by non-public bodies. I am sure that he has a response, and it would be good to hear it.

To wrap up, the innovative use of data, following strict guidelines and data protection rules, will massively improve the efficiency of public services and grow our economy. It is right that the Government take this route. The UK should be leading the way in innovative technology and fully utilising technological developments to improve people's lives, and I believe that this Bill will do that.

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

5.40 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): As a self-professed data geek—[*Interruption.*] The Minister looks quite surprised at that. Well, I am now self-professing

myself as a data geek, and it is a real pleasure to wind up this important debate on behalf of the official Opposition.

As the original architects of the Bill, the Opposition welcome the fact that the Government have recognised the potential of these Conservative-led policies to make people's lives easier by being able to prove identity quickly when dealing with statutory agencies and service providers; to streamline and enhance public service delivery, such as by harmonising the information available to healthcare professionals across NHS settings; and to boost economic growth through the innovative use of smart data. In short, this Bill will bring into effect the previous Government's ambition to harness and exploit data as the currency of the digital age.

The staggering pace of recent technological advances presents not only enormous opportunity, but challenges that demand further scrutiny. Earlier, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Alan Mak), rightly pointed out some of the areas where the Government's approach to the science and technology sector conflict with the outcomes that they want. We have had an extensive debate today with hon. Members covering a range of topics, some of which I shall refer to shortly.

Perhaps it is ironically apt that the Data (Use and Access) Bill has had so many iterations and this recursive Second Reading, but I must pay tribute to those who have been working before us to get it to the state it is in today. Much of the Bill is technical and uncontroversial, but some of it still needs to be thrashed out and debated, and I look forward to taking it through in Committee. I would like at this point to pay tribute to Lord Markham and Viscount Camrose. I was particularly pleased to hear the Government's response with regard to security around the underground assets register.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), who I am sure is glad that he is not doing another Second Reading speech and hopefully not taking the Bill through Committee for this side, and of course to Baroness Owen for the incredible work that she has done. The tribute paid to her by my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) was far better than anything I could put together from this Dispatch Box, and I thank him for his comments.

By my count, we have had 15 or 16 Back-Bench speakers, and I would like to draw particular attention to the intervention from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), who pointed out the wranglings that took place in the House of Lords regarding data that is used for scientific purposes. I am sure that the definition of public interest will be discussed in further detail in Committee. I also particularly liked the speech from the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed). As I have said, much of this Bill—this big tome—is in some ways uncontroversial. Many Members focused on a few specific areas, but I was interested that he looked at the whole scope of the Bill, particularly around the civil liberties components and the GDPR issues, which is what much of the core of the Bill is about.

There are a few points I would like to focus on, starting with data accuracy. My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who is not in her place, remarked that to empower the public

and businesses to take full advantage of the speed and simplicity offered by digital verification services, there must be a high degree of confidence in the accuracy of the data provided by public authorities. In the other place, the Minister acknowledged this concern, stating that, as far as the data underpinning digital identity is concerned,

“we must have a single version of the truth”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 January 2025; Vol. 842, c. 1620.]

However, he did not support the amendment seeking to guarantee the accuracy of data held by public authorities for the purpose of digital verification services, and nor did the Secretary of State in his opening remarks today.

While the reliability of the data that supports digital identity is fundamentally important across the board, an area of particular importance is the accurate recording of biological sex. This is vital for ensuring that services such as medical care are delivered properly and to protect female-only spaces. Biased data is worse than no data, and wrong data is worst of all. We call on the Government to ensure that data is robust and accurate as a matter of priority.

We must ensure the digital infrastructure is in place to support the Bill’s aims. We welcome the inclusion of provisions for NHS data sharing, and I should declare an interest as a former doctor whose wife is a doctor. I have spoken many times of the importance of data sharing. We focus on AI, but we need to get the basics right.

NHS data sharing, if implemented effectively, will enable the fast and seamless transfer of patient data between healthcare settings. It will lead to better clinical decision making and improved outcomes for patients, and the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) will be able to see his patients more efficiently and more effectively. I pay tribute to the strength of his argument, and I hope he takes the mantle I had when my party was in government of pushing for this to happen as quickly as possible.

To harness those benefits, the Government have acknowledged that healthcare settings’ IT systems will need to meet common standards to facilitate data sharing across platforms. The previous Government set out a bold plan for upgrading the nation’s digital infrastructure. This Government must continue and expedite that work to ensure the NHS has the tools it needs to implement the Bill’s reforms.

Finally, on the important subject of AI and copyright, the powerful debate both in the other place and here highlights the challenges, the complexities and the importance of making sure we get this right, particularly on the Government’s proposal for a data mining opt-out, as mentioned in the consultation. Many Members have raised that point, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon and the hon. Members for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane), for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), for Bury North (Mr Frith), for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) and for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson).

We cannot hold back the tide of change that AI has brought with it, nor can we put the genie back in the bottle, but we must do everything in our power to protect and promote our creative industries so that they can continue to thrive and grow, as they did with the support put in place by the previous Government during the pandemic.

The Government’s consultation on AI and copyright remains under way. My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State spoke about the overwhelming need for the Government to respond to the consultation as soon as possible. The Government must engage constructively with the industry and the official Opposition to identify solutions that turbocharge our developing AI industry while protecting and boosting the growth of our creative sector.

All of us, both those who work in the creative sector and those who benefit from it, understand just how important it is for our national identity. Live music is one of my passions. It was the thing I missed most during the pandemic. The idea that we could end up causing harm to our creative industry fills me with horror. The Opposition want to make sure we get this right, not only for those whose livelihoods depend on the industry but for all of us. This is complicated and difficult. If it were not, there would already be an answer—the Europeans would have an answer. This is a difficult situation that we need to get through.

Victoria Collins: As the hon. Gentleman says, it is vital that we support our creative industries. Will he clarify the Conservatives’ stance on opting in versus opting out, which is the current proposal?

Dr Spencer: Our position is pretty much exactly as I have just set out in my speech. A Government consultation is under way that presents four options, including the Government’s preferred opt-out option. There are challenges with that opt-out approach, as well as with a whole range of different approaches. As I have previously said from the Opposition Dispatch Box, whatever we do we must think about how that co-ordinates with what can happen in other jurisdictions. It is a complicated issue, and we need to ensure we get the legislation absolutely right. As I said, we need a response to the consultation as soon as possible so that we can chew through this further to find the best solution. In his summing up, I hope the Minister will update the House on that.

Max Wilkinson: The creative industries have been very clear about their position. The shadow Minister says that he wishes to support the creative industries and that that is the position of his party, but would it be too much to suggest he might go a step further and say that he supports the opt-in position, which is the position supported by the creative industries? That would give them reassurance that there is support from all parts of the House for the position they are taking.

Dr Spencer: The shadow DSIT team, including our shadow Secretary of State, have met representatives of industry in general. I have met representatives of the creative industries, and I am fairly sure the shadow Secretary of State has too. That is what the consultation is there for. It would not be appropriate to make a unilateral declaration from the Dispatch Box when a live consultation is looking into that complicated area. That would be not be reasonable opposition or good for anybody.

There are no easy answers to some of the challenges, but we should not shy away from them given the clear gains for the public and the economy that many of the

[Dr Ben Spencer]

reforms set out in the Bill will deliver. His Majesty's official Opposition and the shadow DSIT team stand ready to work with the Government, wherever possible, to find solutions on these pressing issues. Effective engagement between Government and Opposition will promote confidence among tech companies and would-be investors that the UK is open for business. The last Government's vision was to harness the UK's competitive advantage in tech industries to boost our economy and revolutionise the way we live for the benefit of our population. We remain committed to that goal in opposition.

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

5.52 pm

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): I am a DSIT Minister today, but the debate felt remarkably like the creative industries debate a couple of weeks ago, when I was responding as the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism. I will get on to some of the points about AI and copyright later, so if anybody wants to intervene on me they can wait for that bit.

I will start with some of the points hon. Members have made. The measure on the NHS and data is among the most positive in the Bill, and was welcomed by everybody today. It was not in the previous version of the Bill; it is one of our additions.¹ The other day, a colleague was telling me about her local hospital, and I was struck by the fact that it employs 42 people simply to carry around physical medical records. We have put our backs into changing that. That is not a good way to preserve records, or to ensure they are secure and not getting lost, let alone anything else.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) was absolutely right when he talked about patient passports. We need to turn the issue on its head, so that people have access to their data and can participate in and make better decisions about their own healthcare. As I said to my hon. Friend yesterday, that is similar to the change that happened a few years ago. After an appointment, consultants used to write to GP about the patient in doctor gobbledegook, but now many of them write to the patient in plain English, copying in the GP. That is the kind of change we need to see.

I am very hopeful about the changes that will be introduced by the Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) said, they will make dramatic difference. We need to ensure the interoperability of all the IT systems used across the whole of the NHS. I would like to extend that beyond England and Wales; I would not mind if we could manage to do the same for Scotland and Northern Ireland, but I fear that even my friend the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart), who likes me sometimes, would baulk a little at a United Kingdom-wide approach to such matters.

I am also excited about the elements of the Bill on smart data, which have barely had a look-in in today's debate but which could be transformative in many sectors. Many of us will know that when we use our

banking app, we are enabled to go not just to our bank but to our insurance, including our car insurance, and all those things can be related to one another in a secure way. That is because of the smart data system that has been in existence for the last few years. We need to roll that out in many other sectors, and that is precisely what the Bill allows. For instance, in the gig economy, it will mean that Uber drivers and those delivering for Deliveroo will have a better understanding of whether they are actually earning a living from each delivery.

Thirdly, nobody has referred to the reform of the Information Commissioner's Office. It is an important part of the Bill. There have been brief mentions of the register of births and deaths, which basically brings the modern world to the register office. As a former vicar, I suppose I am more interested in that than most, as I have hatched and dispatched quite a few in my time.

Chi Onwurah: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Bryant: On births and deaths? Of course.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for his excellent comments. I want to point out that I welcomed the strengthening of the Information Commissioner's role.

Chris Bryant: Hurrah. Incidentally, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) referred to John Edwards, who, in my experience, is a very capable leader of the team there. I am sure my hon. Friend and her Select Committee will have him in for evidence soon.

A couple of Members referred to data adequacy, including the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins). That is obviously important to us. As the right hon. Member for Maldon said, the Secretary of State has been working keenly with the European Commission. Unfortunately, the previous Government ended up with a data adequacy agreement with the EU that expires later on this year. That means that our time is tight to make sure we maintain that. That is absolutely vital to our economic success as a country and, for that matter, for the rest of the EU. I know that everybody wants to get there. It is not for us to tell the EU what processes it should go through, but we have had very constructive conversations so far. They will not want to comment on a Bill that is still in flight, so the sooner we can get it on to the statute books the better.

My hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) referred to music remuneration. For me, the issue of remuneration of musicians is not just about the AI copyright debate; there are many other issues. I do not think we have finished with the issue of streaming, incidentally. I had a successful meeting with the record labels, lots of musicians and the Musicians' Union on Monday afternoon. I have given them a clear timetable for coming back with a better offer to make sure that musicians are properly remunerated.

A quite famous tenor, who I will not name, texted me yesterday to say:

"Musicians all feel that they have been soooooo ripped off by streaming."

That is "so" with seven o's—I do not know what *Hansard* will do with that.

"I used to get two or three concert fees as advance royalty for a CD. Now, it is effectively zero. It is theft, really."

1.[*Official Report*, 25 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 11WC.] (Correction)

Those remarks have been repeated in a different context today. We are working on that, and I am determined that we will have a proper look at how we properly remunerate our musicians in this country, even if it is only to make sure that the shadow Minister, who declares that live music is one of the most important things in his life, has people to go and listen to.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), who has just come back into the Chamber, made a very good speech about digital government. All the points that he made are ones that we are determined to take up. Several Members referred to Estonia—Tallinn, incidentally, is one of the best cities in Europe to visit—but we also need to make sure that there is a digital inclusion element to that. If 19% of poorer homes in the UK have no access to the internet, they will not have any access to Government digital services either. We need to transform all that, and the Secretary of State and I will probably have something to say about that in the near future.

The right hon. Member for Maldon noted one other Labour change, on subject access requests. We would argue that one of the problems with the previous Bill was that it would have made it more difficult for people to get subject access request information. That is why we have a system where we think we have strengthened those rights, and that we think is better for the average person in the street.

The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) referred to Baroness Owen's amendments. We are not quite sure that these are right. We want to ensure that we have a workable solution that everybody agrees with by the time we finish in Committee. I am not sure whether he will be serving on the Committee, but perhaps that is a debate we will have—I look forward to that. We are very open to seeing how we can make sure that all the i's are in the right place and all the t's are correctly crossed—not dotted.

The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) made some important points, although I have to say that I disagree with her—she may not be entirely surprised by that. In relation to the amendments brought forward by Lord Lucas, public authorities must assess what information is required for a particular purpose. This governs whether and how sex or gender data is processed in a given situation or a given case. They are bound by data protection legislation to ensure that the personal data is accurate for this purpose. Where sex at birth is not an essential part of an identity check—for instance, when renting a property—organisations are not lawfully able to request this information. I think that is absolutely right for protecting people's privacy.

Tonia Antoniazzi: My hon. Friend will know that I was one of the first Labour MPs to raise in the Chamber the issue of sex-aggregated data. Can he assure me that the Government will ensure that data on sex is accurate and reliable where necessary and will he expedite the publication of the Sullivan review?

Chris Bryant: We have to make sure it is accurate to the precise process for which it is being used, just as a passport has to be accurate for the precise purpose for which it is being used. I am not sure whether my hon. Friend is intending to be on the Committee as well—

Tonia Antoniazzi indicated assent.

Chris Bryant: Oh dear, she is. I am not sure about having world-class rugby players on the Committee, but it is one of the issues I am very happy to debate with my hon. Friend. We want to make sure we have got it right and that we manage to embrace everybody as much as we can.

Dr Caroline Johnson rose—

Chris Bryant: Oh dear, I have started something off.

Dr Johnson: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's concept of "for the purpose". Can he be clear that when he is writing his dictionary of definitions, as per clause 140, he will ensure that the definitions are clear so that when people are looking at information on sex, they know whether they are dealing with biological sex or some other definition that the Minister may have come up with?

Chris Bryant: I am going to call the 25th amendment—or whatever we have—and say that I will write to the hon. Lady on that. We are getting a bit more technical than I am able to answer precisely, but my bottom line is that if somebody is applying to rent a property, the landlord should not have to know both sex at birth and gender. That is an inappropriate invasion of people's privacy. I should add that the hon. Lady also referred to people being able to change in changing rooms, and I completely agree with her points about women being able to change in protected spaces. It just seems to me we need to use a great deal of common sense in this area.

The Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah), referred to the national data library and open standards and open source. Again, I will have to write to her. As she will know, this area is moving fast in relation to legislative and IT ideas, so we will want to work with people, including her Select Committee, to make sure we reach the right set of decisions.

Turning to the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted, I made a mistake earlier and have to apologise to her. When referring to automated decision making, I talked about meaningful human involvement. That was indeed in the original Bill introduced by the right hon. Member for Maldon, but I think it is a vital addition to the current framework, which is why it is important. I am pleased that our new Government have gone further by committing to require the Information Commissioner's Office to do a code of practice on automated decision making and AI to make sure this really works in the interests of everybody. That will support the safe adoption and deployment of the technology.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) quite rightly raised the case of his constituent Ellen Roome, which we have discussed previously. Unfortunately, I was unable to speak in the debate he took part in, because I was speaking in the main Chamber at the time. I can tell him that coroners will be able to use a data protection process under the Bill and we hope that will be sufficient, but I am quite happy to discuss whether we can go further. I have discussed with several Members the question of whether families should have access to their children's social media accounts. There are obvious dangers in that because of safeguarding issues that might arise, but I think he understands that as well.

Max Wilkinson: To clarify, the Jools Law Bill would simply require access to the social media accounts and data of deceased children. There is no risk to those children in those circumstances because they would already be dead.

Chris Bryant: That was the original point that I was trying to make, and I obviously did not make it as well as the hon. Member did, so I congratulate him on that.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) was a bit critical of article 70, but I think that he is being a bit unfair. The requirements in subsections 8 and 9, and then later in 11 and 12 of the article are very clear about the circumstances—and they are the only circumstances—in which the Secretary of State can bring forward changes of the kind to which he referred. I hope that we will be able to please him, if not appease him, if that matter appears in Committee or on Report.

I just want to finish with some comments on AI and IP, not least because there has been so much focus on this area. All of us on the Front Bench wanted to have a data Bill, because we think that it is really important for our economy and for so many different aspects of the way that we deliver Government services. We also want a debate about AI and copyright, which is why we launched the consultation, but it feels odd to be doing a bit of that in this Bill.

Let me turn now to what the shadow Secretary of State said earlier. I asked ChatGPT what the view of the shadow Secretary of State was on AI and copyright. It replied, “Regarding his views on copyright, there is no publicly available information indicating that he has expressed specific opinions on this matter.” Well, yes, we heard that this afternoon, didn’t we? I hope the Opposition manage to find some ideas at some point.

This is a very serious matter and it is one of the trickiest issues that any country has to face at this point. I think that it is trickier for our country than most others, because we are the third largest AI economy in the world, and we are probably the second or, at worst, the third greatest IP country in the world. We have creators in every single sphere. Some countries specialise in one particular form of the creative industries, but we manage to do all of them. That is why I was listening very attentively to the contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Bury North (Mr Frith) and for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane), and the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire and many others as well.

I just want to focus on the things on which there is some agreement. I think there is agreement across the House on the idea that transparency is an important part of what we need to ensure in this legislation, and on the aim of control over intellectual property rights, and on possibly ending a stronger version of rights reservation for the creative industries. I can announce that we have set up two working groups in the past week, both of which have people from the creative industries and from the AI companies in them. One is specifically looking at transparency and what that looks like to be effective and proportionate, and it will start work on that next week.¹

Secondly, on the question of rights reservation, I fully understand that people are sceptical about whether there is a simple technical means of everybody being about to assert their rights—

Pete Wishart: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will in a moment, if the hon. Member lets me finish this point. I know that people are sceptical because such a means does not exist at the moment. I have said before that the robots.txt system does not work; it effectively means that a person is wiped from the internet, and lots of people do not know how to use it—it is far too technical. If, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North said, there were a system of simple digital fingerprinting where people could say, “No, you can’t use my work” or, “Yes, you can use my work for large language model training once you’ve remunerated me,” that would be a great outcome for everybody, because it would lead to a new system of remuneration. That could be done individually or for an artist, it could be done through DACS, and for a musician it could be done through their record label.

Ms Billington: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will in a moment. That is why I am keen on not selling the pass on that possibility by having undermined it before we get there.

Pete Wishart: The Minister is right—there is not much difference between us now. We are getting to a place where we are beginning to agree about the way forward, but we are dealing with this Bill, which has clauses that protect copyright and ensure transparency. What I think he is asking us to do is to set those concerns aside for a Bill that might come in the future, which may include the provisions that we already have. Is that roughly a correct characterisation of where we are going?

Chris Bryant: No, it is not. What is true is that, as I said, we want to get to a concrete idea of what transparency might look like. Not enough work has been done in the EU or in different territories—in the United States of America, for instance, where different states have different arrangements—and we need to do more about what that should look like in the UK. As I say, if the creative industries and the AI companies can do that together, that could give us a nugget of useful progress. Likewise, if we can get to what I am calling fingerprinting, for want of a better term—I know there is a system of fingerprinting—that would get us to the licensing of 60%, 70% or 80%, and that would be significant. I do not want to sell the pass on that whole package by taking too many steps at this point, but we will discuss this in Committee and on Report. I am conscious that I have Margate behind me, so I give way.

Ms Billington: It is not only Margate; East Thanet has three cultural drivers—Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs—all with phenomenal amounts of cultural engine throughout the centuries. Many writers such as Wilkie Collins and Jane Austen are well out of copyright. Musicians, visual artists and writers often earn little money. It is great to hear that we will have those working groups. They need to be confident that they will be paid by the machines, as it were, because otherwise they will end up even worse off than they are at the moment. Some 40% of greetings card designers have lost their job because of this issue. I urge the hon. Gentleman to come to Margate to hear what is being said by the creative industries here, and I am glad to hear that the Secretary of State is also keen to meet those in the creative industries.

1.[*Official Report*, 25 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 11WC.] (Correction)

Chris Bryant: Tracey Emin and Russell Tovey have also invited me to Margate, so I think it is inevitable at some point.

We are trying to get to a win-win, and we do not believe that is unachievable, which is why I am keen on sticking with the process of the consultation. We will respond to the consultation as soon as we can, although a large number of people have responded and we want to take the response seriously. Whatever we choose to do in the end, I would have thought that it will look like a full, stand-alone Bill. That may include elements of what Baroness Kidron has put in, elements from elsewhere or, for that matter, bits of the copyright directive, such as articles 18 and 20, which the former Government helped draft and then did not incorporate into UK law. It might be a whole series of different things, but it needs to be considered in the round.

Chi Onwurah: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Bryant: Oh Lord! I was sort of trying to get to the end.

Chi Onwurah: I share my hon. Friend's desire to get to the end, and his faith in the ability of technology to deliver solutions. As I said in an earlier intervention, my Science, Innovation and Technology Committee and the Culture, Media and Sport Committee brought together technologists and creatives with exactly that ambition. I am pleased to hear about the working groups that he has put in place, but I urge him to be transparent about who is in them—not necessary now, but perhaps he will write to my Committee—so that we can see how they are progressing in a transparent way. It is important that the technological solutions are viewed as openly as possible.

Chris Bryant: Yes, we will be transparent about the transparency working groups—it is a good point. For that matter, I am happy—as are any of the Ministers—to give evidence to my hon. Friend's Committee, or to a joint Committee, on those inquiries.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The Minister is being extremely generous with his time.

Chris Bryant: And everybody else's.

Dr Johnson: He talked about deepfake pornography—the purported intimate images. One undertaking that the Government gave Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge was that they would remove the prosecution limitation of six months from the offence being committed. However, I have not seen that in the Bill. Do the Government intend to table an amendment in Committee, or would they accept an Opposition amendment at that stage?

Chris Bryant: I will not accept an amendment that I have not yet seen, but that is one issue that we are definitely already working on, and we intend to address it in Committee. Government amendments for Committee must be tabled within a fortnight from yesterday, so that will all be happening fairly soon. If the hon. Lady can bide her patience for a while, I would be grateful. We are working to get to a resolution that everybody will be happy with.

I will make a few final points about AI and intellectual property. Several Members spoke about legislative change in that field. I completely agree that there will have to be legislation change, and I think it would be better if that were done in a single stand-alone Bill. That is why we launched the consultation. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) was absolutely right to say that we must get this right for this country's creative people and our economy—it is about both those things together. My hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons) was absolutely right: there might be a win-win solution that provides certainty, clarity and remuneration for both AI and creative industries, and that is what we are striving for.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) was rather shy about her own successes in life. In 2008, she was named Royal Television Society writer of the year for “Summerhill”. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] She was absolutely right about three things: first, that we should look after the rights of creatives, and I agree; secondly, that we should protect their income, and I agree; and thirdly, the importance of human beings—I 100% agree.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), with whom I look forward to giving the Bill the proper scrutiny that the House expects in Committee—alongside our Liberal Democrat counterpart, the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins)—said that he likes live music. I do, too; the next gig I am going to is Kylie, again—I am not a stereotype at all.

Last night, I went to the Royal Opera House to see “Festen”, the new opera by Mark-Anthony Turnage, based on the movie and the play. The shadow Minister is right that absolutely nothing beats live music, and we will do absolutely nothing to undermine it. Interestingly, the libretto, which was written by Baroness Kidron's husband, ended with the words of Dame Julian of Norwich:

“All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

I think that also applies to AI and copyright.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

DATA (USE AND ACCESS) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 18 March 2025.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

DATA (USE AND ACCESS) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, the Treasury, a government department or another public authority, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—
(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

DATA (USE AND ACCESS) BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the charging of fees or levies under or by virtue of the Act;

(2) the requiring of payments in connection with costs incurred by the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority for the purposes of a tender exercise relating to a smart meter communication licence; and

(3) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—
(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ENERGY

That the draft Energy Bill Relief Scheme and Energy Bills Discount Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 16 December 2024, be approved.—
(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Umana Yana restaurant in Herne Hill

6.19 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of residents of Dulwich and West Norwood. The petition is in support of a restaurant called Umana Yana in Herne Hill in my constituency. It is a wonderful restaurant run by Deborah Monfries and her family, who are in the Public Gallery today. Deborah's restaurant serves delicious Guyanese food, and I would commend it to all Members in the House. However, it has suffered a detriment in recent

years as a consequence of the installation of enormous telecommunications cabinets that obscure the view of the restaurant for passing customers.

The petitioners

"therefore request that the House of Commons considers this issue and urges the Government to bring forward legislation to ensure small businesses are not blocked from view by telecommunications equipment, to ensure the removal of equipment affecting small businesses, like Umana Yana, and that businesses are duly compensated by the telecoms companies for disruption."

I would add that petitions online and locally have been signed by more than 1,700 local residents.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the owners and supporters of Umana Yana, Herne Hill,

Declares that Umana Yana, an independent restaurant in Herne Hill, has faced serious disruption to their trade due to telecommunication boxes placed immediately outside their premises; notes that Umana Yana has been part of the local community for over fifteen years but has faced a significant fall in footfall as the shop can no longer be seen from the street, and that over 1700 people have signed local and online petitions in support of the restaurant; further notes that the shop has seen a loss of revenue for this valued community focused business; and further declares that small businesses across the country have faced similar challenges due to telecoms infrastructure placed without due consideration of nearby shops.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons considers this issue and urges the Government to bring forward legislation to ensure small businesses are not blocked from view by telecommunications equipment, to ensure the removal of equipment affecting small businesses, like Umana Yana, and that businesses are duly compensated by the telecoms companies for disruption.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003043]

Safety standards in the scaffolding industry

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I am presenting this petition on behalf of my constituent Maria Dennis, who tragically lost her 11-year-old son, Harry Dennis, two years ago in a tragic accident when an unsecured scaffolding board from a flatbed truck went through the windscreen of the car carrying Harry, killing him. I want to pay tribute to Harry's mum, Maria, for her determination to channel her grief into campaigning and action to make sure that a tragedy such as this never happens again. Maria is campaigning to raise awareness of the dangers of unsafe loads so that other families do not have to endure this agony. Unsafe loads kill hundreds of people every year, and it is estimated that 62,000 items fell off vehicles on the strategic road network in the last year alone.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons urge the Government to review the current laws and guidance in this area, including safety standards, skills training and awareness of the risks. This petition has been signed by about 2,000 people.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of Maria Georgina Dennis,

Declares that the petitioner's 11-year old son was tragically killed in December 2022, when an unsecured scaffold board came loose from the back of a flatbed van

and travelled through the windscreen of the petitioner's vehicle; notes that the Health and Safety Executive wrote in her report that the securing of the load was "grossly inadequate" and "the insecure loading caused an immediate and likely risk of 'harm'"; and further notes that the defendant protested in court that he had not been trained properly.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons urge the Government to review current laws and guidance followed by scaffolding businesses and ensure that scaffolding personnel must, by law, be a member of a governing body who are responsible for controlling how scaffolding businesses are run including safety standards, strengthening skills training and to improve the level of scaffolding competence.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003044]

SEND Provision: Derbyshire

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

6.23 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to bring forward this debate. I know that the Labour Government have inherited a broken system of special educational needs and disabilities provision—broken by 14 years of Tory under-investment, mismanagement and chaos. Even knowing this, I was shocked by the number of Amber Valley parents and carers who have reached out to me desperate for help. They have been let down by a national SEND system in measured decline and, in Derbyshire, by a county council demonstrating "widespread and/or systemic failings". SEND provision throughout the country is in a bad state, but in Derbyshire it is at crisis point. This Government are committed to

"breaking down barriers to opportunity".

Where previous Conservative Governments failed, we will succeed in rebuilding our SEND system and ensuring it is properly funded. In Derbyshire, however, we must go further. Derbyshire county council is failing our children. That is the story I have heard over and over from parents, carers and educators in Amber Valley.

It was therefore no surprise to read of widespread and systemic failings in Ofsted's damning report on Derbyshire county council's SEND provision. By the time Ofsted published its findings in November 2024, I had already heard about those failings at first hand through countless emails and surgery appointments. Wanting to get a true picture of the scale of the issue, I conducted a survey on SEND provision in Amber Valley. The results spoke for themselves, with 88% of respondents rating SEND provision in Amber Valley as poor and only 2% saying it was good. Some 83% complained of long waiting times, 81% said that provision in mainstream schools was insufficient, and 70% said that they had experienced problems obtaining an education, health and care plan, which is the first step in accessing support for their child.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on bringing this debate forward. I spoke to her beforehand. It is heartbreaking to hear what she is saying about her constituency, and I understand that, but the situation is replicated across this whole great United Kingdom. The number of Members who are here to speak is an indication of how many want to voice their concerns. She is right to talk about those who are waiting. Does she agree that early diagnosis and early intervention are all that really matters? If we can get that done early, we can save a child. It can give a child a future and an opportunity, and it can take the pressure off the parents as well.

Linsey Farnsworth: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention on a matter that I know is close to his heart. He is absolutely right. The delays are a real concern, and diagnosis at an early stage is important, but that is not what we are seeing in Derbyshire. That is the worry.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Having read the Ofsted report, it is clear that the SEND operation in Derbyshire county council is in complete chaos, with what appears to be a revolving door of senior officers,

[John Whitby]

unfilled posts, consultants and temporary positions. My constituent Claire tells me that the council is completely unresponsive, and that point about nobody ever getting back to people is a recurring theme. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is imperative that Derbyshire county council gets its act together and starts responding to parents who are in such desperate need?

Linsey Farnsworth: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I think that every Derbyshire MP will testify to the same thing: that phones are not answered and emails go un-responded to. It is not sustainable for this to be the status quo.

So many people in Amber Valley wanted to talk to me about their experience. What was planned as a small, intimate roundtable event soon became a large town hall meeting full of concerned parents, each with a story to tell. From this, a clear picture emerged. Children and young people are being failed at every step in the process. Families are waiting far too long for the education and health assessments to allow them to access the specialist help that they need. As a result, many children are missing significant portions of their education, with some falling out of school altogether. That is all while Derbyshire county council fails to communicate, just as my hon. Friend said.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, I represent the nearby constituency of Rushcliffe in Nottinghamshire, where the average waiting time for neurodevelopmental assessments is 54 weeks. That is actually an improvement from a year ago, when it was 68 weeks. Does my hon. Friend agree that a lot of what she is describing is systemic, as has been mentioned, and that this Government need to address it urgently?

Linsey Farnsworth: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The Government need to grip this issue across the country. Unfortunately, we understand his plight only too well in Derbyshire.

Parents and carers talk about barriers at every stage of the process and about how they are “ignored” by an “unresponsive” council. A big part of our challenge in fixing the foundations of SEND provision is, of course, funding. That made it all the more shocking to learn of the SEND budget left unspent by Derbyshire county council. In a debate in the Chamber on 23 April 2024, my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) highlighted that of £17.5 million received since 2019, only £1.5 million had been spent. That is nothing short of a scandal—£16 million unspent. That money was specifically allocated to create new school places for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Derbyshire county council claimed that it could not rush the allocation of the funds, but we are talking about six years—children will have started and ended their secondary school education in that time. What it has managed to spend, however, is about half a million pounds on two consultants for strategic help on children’s services. The families I have spoken to say that, despite that, they have seen no improvement. They say that had the council just engaged with parents, carers and educators, they would have received a wealth of advice for free.

Our children and their families are paying the price. These children are missing education, being labelled as “disruptive” and suffering from poor mental health. While Derbyshire county council was failing to create the new, much-needed and funded SEND places, my constituent Chris Spencer’s son was missing school. Chris told me that his son had been assessed as needing a place in a SEND special school but that none were available. His son was missing out on vital education, making friends and the support he needed. Without a school place, Chris was caring full time for his son at home, making it impossible for him to go to work. He told me:

“I want a job...I want to work, but I can’t”.

Derbyshire county council not only failed to supply Chris’s son with a promised school place but issued him with two fines for non-attendance. The first was withdrawn by the council after I intervened on Chris’s behalf, but the second went to court, where the judge threw out the case. It should not come to this—for an MP and a judge to have to intervene—before anything is done.

I am afraid that that story is just one of dozens. Angie Hardy, another constituent of mine, after years of fighting on behalf of her three sons, each with SEND, was still waiting on an EHCP, an annual review and the much-needed transport that had been promised. As a result, one of her sons has not been able to attend school since February 2022—yet another child missing out on education and the support they need to succeed.

Many other parents talked about resorting to legal challenges. They have found tribunals and judicial reviews not only extremely stressful, but with legal aid solicitors now so hard to come by—another victim of Tory austerity, I am afraid, and one that the Justice Committee, of which I am a member, fully understands—extremely costly. That is a common experience. One mother told me that

“judges are awarding places now, not the local authority”.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I have been supporting parents in Derby North who currently face a wait of more than a year for their children’s SEND tribunals, causing agony as they are left in limbo. We know that the historical lack of funding for local authorities, suitable school places and educational psychologists has contributed to the delays. Does my hon. Friend agree that the delays are yet another example of a SEND system that, as the Education Secretary said, had been “neglected to the point of crisis”?

Linsey Farnsworth: I agree. Crisis—a word that I have already used in this debate—is what we are facing right across the country. I am very concerned about that. In Derbyshire we face that very challenge, as well as all the additional challenges of the systemic problems in the county council.

As high as the legal costs for families can be, the emotional costs are still higher. All parents and carers want the best for their children and I found it impossible not to feel for families who, time and again, talked about being exhausted from constantly fighting: for timely, accurate diagnoses and care plans; for the little provision that is available; and even for the transport needed to get their children to school. Many families are at breaking point. They say that it should not be so hard, and they are right.

The Conservatives at Derbyshire county council have acknowledged the failings and issued an apology. That is a necessary first step, but it is far from sufficient. It has been five months since Ofsted uncovered widespread and systemic failings. Although the council claims to be making improvements, the pace of change is far too slow.

Only two weeks ago, fellow Derbyshire Labour MPs and I met representatives of the National Association of Headteachers. The stories that they told mirrored the frustrations and heartache experienced by the hundreds of parents and carers who have reached out to us in desperation. They told us that they, too, face a daily fight to be heard by Derbyshire county council. Too often, their emails go unanswered, they are made to jump through bureaucratic hoops to access the support that should be in place, and the revolving door of leadership has led to confusion and uncertainty.

While the leaders and the plans might change, we were told say that there have been no tangible improvements. EHCPs, which should be processed within 20 weeks—a long time for any parent to wait—can take more than 50 weeks, as my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) said. That is practically a year. Not only do educators not feel confident that their concerns will be heard; they fear petty reprisals. More worrying still, they said that the lack of funding is affecting not only their most vulnerable pupils but all pupils, as class sizes increase and teaching capacity cannot keep up.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this incredibly important debate. My constituency neighbours Derbyshire, and I recently held a roundtable on SEND provision with parents and teachers from schools and colleges. The issue that repeatedly came up was funding, and the disparity in funding not just between schools but across local authority areas. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need consistency of SEND provision across county lines in order to provide good-quality SEND provision for all our children?

Linsey Farnsworth: I agree that we need more consistency. One of the concerns in the Ofsted report just for Derbyshire was that there is no consistency, because of the lack of a clearly defined joint strategy. The support is described by parents as a postcode lottery—we have that problem just within Derbyshire itself.

Teachers are working so hard for the children in their care, but they still feel that they are failing them, through no fault of their own. Schools are relying on the good will of staff just to function. Due to insufficient funding, stress and exhaustion, we are losing amazing teachers who give their all every day. That is the real-life impact of widespread and systemic failings.

Many families still feel helpless, as their children are labelled disruptive and parents' ability to be a good parent and provide adequate care is called into question. Worst of all, I hear from parents of children, some as young as 12, who have become so desperate that they have considered taking their own lives. These children should be thriving in a stimulating learning environment, enjoying making friends and developing their skills. They should not feel so forgotten and lost that they tell their parents that they want to die.

As I have said, we are at crisis point in Derbyshire. We cannot allow this situation to continue. The children of Derbyshire deserve better; their families deserve better; and we, as Labour MPs, demand better.

I am grateful to the Department for issuing an improvement notice on 14 January, setting out the requirements the Secretary of State has placed on Derbyshire county council to ensure improvements. This decisive action appears to have made the council jump to attention, with its priority impact plan published two weeks later. However, Madam Deputy Speaker, you can understand the scepticism of educators across Derbyshire, given that they have seen it all before, with no fewer than eight plans put in place since 2018. This time must be different. If this Conservative county council cannot or will not make these improvements with the urgency they demand, the voters can replace it with a Labour council that absolutely will.

My fellow Labour Derbyshire MPs and I have promised that as hard as teachers, parents and carers have been fighting, we will fight, too. We are fighting for real change, real accountability and a real commitment to providing the education and support that every child with special educational needs and disabilities deserves. That is our promise, and it is one we intend to keep.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. You can all see that a number of Members wish to contribute this evening. I will just issue a point of clarity: the Adjournment motion will have to be moved again at 7 pm, so whoever is on their feet at that point should be aware that I will interrupt them. It would be a courtesy to fellow Members if you could all restrict your comments to five minutes or so.

6.41 pm

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I start by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) for securing this important debate and for her impassioned plea on behalf of the children and families of Derbyshire.

As a dad, I know that parenting is at one and the same time the hardest and most amazing experience we can have. As a society, we must support families better. In High Peak, Derbyshire county council has been failing families on an industrial scale. In every canvassing session and advice surgery I conduct, I invariably meet families struggling to secure the right support for their child with special education needs, such is the scale of the challenge in Derbyshire. The families I have met in my constituency are frustrated, exhausted and angry; they feel they are facing a system that seems to be actively working against them, rather than having their back.

As my hon. Friend said in her speech, Ofsted found that the Conservative-led Derbyshire county council was responsible for widespread and systemic failings in supporting children with special educational needs and their families. Of all the myriad failings of the Derbyshire Conservatives—and there are myriad—the way they have let down children with SEND and their families is the most egregious. It is deeply worrying, but sadly not surprising, as we know that between November 2023 and June 2024, Derbyshire county council paid nearly £350,000 in compensation to families it had failed.

[Jon Pearce]

Last week, I visited Whaley Bridge primary school, where more than 40% of the students have special educational needs. I met with the headteacher, Seren Hathway, and the chair of governors, Ian Bingle, and saw for myself the amazing work they do to support children with SEND. If Derbyshire county council had just half the level of commitment and professionalism as Seren, Ian and all the families I have met, we would not be here having this debate today.

James Naish: My hon. Friend referenced a very high percentage—I think 40%. In Nottinghamshire, each month over the past 12 months we have seen a 50% increase in SEND diagnoses in comparison to the year before. Does he agree that more research must be done to understand the relative growth in special educational needs, so we can get to the heart of the issue?

Jon Pearce: Yes, it is vital that we understand what may be driving some needs. At the end of the day, though, this is not a problem of increasing needs, but the result of absolute systemic failings in Derbyshire county council and the system more widely.

I am pleased that the Government are determined to fix this broken system and see that our mission to remove the barriers to opportunity for all our children is achieved. This is a fundamental part of that mission. Ending the years of failure of Derbyshire county council will not be easy. I am determined to work with families in High Peak and with my Derbyshire colleagues to put pressure on Derbyshire county council to finally provide the support our children desperately need.

6.45 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) for securing this extremely important debate.

Put simply, this is an issue I hear about from constituents every single day, as do all my Derbyshire colleagues. In Erewash, SEND families face an uphill battle. Conservative Derbyshire county council has, as we have been hearing about, consistently failed my constituents, as it has failed constituents across the county, causing anxiety and frustration in making any progress on the education and care of our children. We have heard already this evening about the Ofsted report, which confirms what many families in Derbyshire already knew: that SEND provision is failing at almost every level, if not every level.

The issue raised with me repeatedly by my constituents was rightly highlighted in the report: communication between families and the local authority. Emails and phone calls are roundly ignored, meaning that families are not updated. They are left in limbo for months. We heard about the incredible length of time that some families go through to get their EHCP in place. Sometimes it takes years, and that leaves SEND families feeling alone. Indeed, many of my colleagues will be receiving multiple new cases every week. I write to Derbyshire county council multiple times every week to raise these issues.

At a SEND drop-in I held in Erewash I was told of the case of a child who needs specialist education, much like we have heard from colleagues this evening. He was offered a place in a school that was ready and able to

provide support. All Derbyshire county council had to do was approve the placement. However, the council took three months to respond and by the time it did, the offer had been closed. The child's current school put in an emergency review, which again had no response from Derbyshire county council, so it then had to go to mediation. Since the response to mediation, there has been no further progress. The child is still not receiving the required education, having only two days of alternative provision a week. The process is complicated, long, unnecessarily drawn out, and incredibly painful for the children and families involved. To make matters worse, that child and their family have had no fewer than nine case officers over the past several years, an incredible lack of consistency that makes communication between the local authority and the family even more difficult.

Derbyshire has a crisis, as we have heard from multiple colleagues this evening. SEND families are being let down time and time again. Conservative-run Derbyshire county council is failing our most vulnerable children every single day. While Derbyshire now has a Labour representative in every constituency, it is incredibly disappointing that not one Conservative Member of Parliament has joined us this evening to hear about our plight with Derbyshire county council.

I was pleased to hear in the Budget that the Government are providing an extra £1 billion towards SEND services. I am also very pleased to hear that the Government will be reviewing SEND services. Evidently these services all over the country, but especially in Derbyshire, need to be reviewed and must be repaired. The Conservatives are responsible for this chaos, but I believe in the power of education to change lives and that all children, regardless of their circumstances, have a fundamental right to an excellent education.

6.49 pm

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): Special educational needs provision across Derbyshire is dire. I am thrilled that my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) has secured the debate, but I am horrified that special educational needs provision is so awful that it has come to the attention of Parliament. To those who live in Barlborough, Pinxton, Calow, Pleasley or anywhere in between, that is no surprise. A mum from Shirebrook was in tears on the doorstep because her baby had been let down so badly; a teaching assistant in Creswell told me how overwhelmed she was because the demand for resource was so high and the resource available so low; and a little boy in Clowne is self-harming because he just wants to go to school like all his friends.

All those people knew why things were as bad as this. I did not have to tell them. Sixteen million pounds underspent by Conservative-controlled Derbyshire county council: they repeated that to me time and again. This was never about lack of money; it was always about local Conservatives choosing to fail our young people. Bolsover residents knew that the Conservatives at Derbyshire county council had £16 million with which to support them and their little ones, and chose not to spend it.

It is therefore no surprise that Ofsted found widespread and systemic failings, with families waiting too long and feeling ignored, and children missing large amounts of education. Conservative failure has hit Bolsover very hard. One in six pupils there receive SEN support, and far

more need it. When I met heads from across Bolsover last year, special educational needs failure was the first issue that they raised. One school had 200 students on the SEND register, but had to park those who did not qualify for additional provision because it did not have the capacity to give those children what they needed. Another had five children who needed a special needs school place but had been unable to obtain one, with one of those children remaining in the nursery class for several years as a result.

A local family moved to Bolsover from Essex, bringing their autistic son's EHCP with them. Conservative-controlled Derbyshire County Council lost the paperwork. It does not respond to emails and it does not respond to my staff. The six schools consulted said that they could not accommodate the child because they already had too many SEN children on their registers. They do not have enough staff, and they do not have enough resources, so that child has no school place. He has not been at school during the current academic year, and has no tutor allocated. His parents are doing what they can to ensure that he does not fall behind. His mother has turned down two jobs to stay at home and educate him. The parents are angry and frustrated with the council's lack of communication or concern for their child's education.

Every one of those stories is a personal tragedy for the people involved. Childhoods are being lost. Family finances are put under strain. Relationships are breaking down. In a battle to help special educational needs children to reach their potential, parents and teachers are hitting a brick wall. A headteacher told me that they thought the Conservative county council saw them as the enemy. When those who care for our babies are made to feel like that, how can our children's special educational needs ever be met?

Be under no illusion: politics does matter. This is the best example of the difference it makes to all our lives. For Bolsover residents—for Derbyshire residents—this is the negative impact that politics can have. Our children are being failed by Conservative politicians at Derbyshire county council with a £16 million underspend, long waiting lists, failed Ofsted inspections, schools drowning, kids suffering, families in crisis. The Conservatives have had their chance, and they have failed. The only way to change this is for Labour to win control of the county council in May. A Labour Government backed by a Labour county council is our only chance of seeing real improvement in special educational needs provision for Bolsover and beyond.

6.54 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) for securing this crucial Adjournment debate. As she rightly indicates, SEND provision in Derbyshire has reached crisis point. Her point about Conservative-run Derbyshire county council's unspent SEND funding, and the heartbreaking consequences for families, is sadly all too familiar and echoes so many of the stories brought to me by my own constituents, who are in desperate need of support.

The scale of this issue is staggering. Throughout my election campaign, it was no secret that SEND would be a key issue for me if I was elected. A week after I was elected, I held my first community SEND meeting,

which was packed. What I had not expected was that after seven months in office, a third of all my constituency casework would relate to SEND—and the number continues to climb. In my inbox, at my surgeries and on the doorsteps across South Derbyshire, parents tell me heartbreaking stories about the declining mental health of their children, who are out of education or stranded in inappropriate settings. Many parents, including those working in education, describe extreme stress, financial hardship and lost work time as they navigate a broken system. Others who are less familiar with the process find it totally overwhelming. Meanwhile, their children's mental health deteriorates as they are left without the support they desperately need.

A lack of communication from Derbyshire county council leaves parents feeling unheard and their children forgotten. In some cases, SEND caseworkers have left post without informing families, leaving them emailing outdated contacts in desperation and without response. Gaps in specialist provision mean that many children, particularly those with social, emotional and mental health needs, are not receiving the support they are entitled to.

Under section 19 of the Education Act 1996, if a child is out of school for 15 days or more, the local authority must provide suitable full-time education. My constituents tell me that this is not happening. There is a lack of alternative provision, a lack of tutoring options and a lack of accountability. Despite parents, schools and professionals agreeing that mainstream settings often cannot meet SEND children's needs, the local authority continues to name unsuitable placements on education, health and care plans. That forces many families into lengthy and costly tribunals that can take over a year to conclude. Valuable placements in appropriate schools are lost due to local authority delays, leaving children stranded and without education.

Consider my constituents Theresa and Nathan. Their daughter has cerebral palsy, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Transitioning into mainstream secondary school severely affected her mental health, leading to self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Delays in her EHCP process meant that she lost a place in a suitable special setting. At 14 years old, she is on antidepressants and has remained out of education since January 2024—that is over a year. Theresa, Nathan and their daughter deserve better. The realms of families who contact me for support deserve better, and the countless families across Derbyshire who are fighting to secure the right provision for their children deserve so much better.

James Naish: This Government have made a very clear and welcome commitment to turn 3,000 spare classrooms into nurseries. Does my hon. Friend agree that where demand for nursery support is lower, we could look at alternative ways of using those classrooms to enhance SEND provision at a local level?

Samantha Niblett: I agree, but frankly it would be great if Derbyshire county council could get the basics right.

Although my team and I will always work constructively with the local authority to right the wrongs endured by SEND children and families across South Derbyshire, the council's chronic mismanagement of this crisis is indefensible. Schools are struggling, parents are out of

[Samantha Niblett]

work and their children are left without opportunities to thrive. I stand firmly with my hon. Friend and fellow Labour MPs across Derbyshire in holding Conservative-led Derbyshire county council to account and calling on it to spend the millions of pounds in unallocated funding to make this right. The status quo cannot continue.

6.59 pm

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I would like to start by thanking all the previous speakers for their heartfelt contributions. It is clear that this is an issue that affects us all, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) for securing this important debate.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Louise Jones: Like all the other Members from Derbyshire sitting here today, I have received hundreds of emails on the terrible state of SEND provision in Derbyshire, and hundreds of stories of children and their families being let down by Conservative-led Derbyshire county council. While our wonderful staff members all do their best to help and to deal with these cases, we know that behind every number there is a heart-wrenching story of a family who want the best for their child yet, despite all the love in the world, feel that they are prevented from giving them this.

One of these stories concerns my constituent Lacey, who contacted us in despair over her son Spencer, who suffers from a rare genetic condition called mucopolysaccharidosis type 6, or MPS. The condition, which affects every bone and organ in Spencer's body, means that he has special educational needs. He was meant to start secondary school in September—an exciting time for any young person. The family were looking forward to buying his first-ever secondary school uniform and taking the big photo outside his family home for his first day at big school. Devastatingly, this did not happen. In June his family were told the news that his chosen school had no place for him and that, even worse, there was not a single SEND place suitable for him available in Derbyshire at all. This is a failure of planning.

The issue here is clear: it is Derbyshire county council that has failed. Members do not have to take my word for it; as we have already heard, Ofsted said in its inspection just last year that there were widespread and systemic failures leading to significant concerns, making it one of the worst in the country. I want to put on record just how serious the situation has become in Derbyshire. We know that SEND provision all across the country has been struggling in general, but it is clear that there are other factors at play in Derbyshire to result in such a dire finding. The Ofsted report made it clear that this was the result of several years of uncertainty at Derbyshire, with senior posts unfilled or filled by interim and contract staff. Shockingly, some senior staff were not present for the inspection itself.

Clearly there has been a failure of leadership for several years now by the Conservative leadership of the council, and the Conservative cabinet member for education in not gripping the problem or realising what it takes to

deliver a long-term plan. Instead, they have been too content to let consultants provide them with shiny PowerPoints instead of delivering real change for our constituents. We desperately need real change at Derbyshire county council, because for as long as the Conservatives are in control of the council, I fear that the situation will not improve. I will not throw my hands up and say, "Oh, it is what it is. SEND is difficult everywhere." Like my colleagues, I would like to say to my constituents who are worried about the challenges facing their children, "I will never stop fighting." We will never stop fighting and standing up for those children, to get the education they need and deserve.

7.3 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I want to thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth), for securing this important debate for us tonight, because whether you are young or old in Derbyshire, it feels like you have a county council that is not on your side. SEND makes up a big amount of my postbag, as does the decision to consider closing the Ada Belfield care home in my constituency, which is greatly valued across the community for its quality and safety, and for its kind, compassionate, person-centred care. That is a concern to many local people as well. We have a widespread selection of issues in Derbyshire for which the county council is responsible.

I read with interest, although not surprise, the Ofsted report that was published just before Christmas. As colleagues have said, it identified widespread and systemic failings in the SEND provision in Derbyshire, and I have to say that it was not a surprise to read that report. That is what local people had been telling me for quite some time, but I think the report gave them a sense of vindication. Up to that point, they were almost feeling that maybe it was them, maybe they did not understand or appreciate the situation, or maybe they were the only one. But that report gave local people a sense that they were not alone. There are many people in Mid Derbyshire and right across the county who are held back by the situation with our special educational needs provision in the county.

I spent a little time thinking about how we got here. Colleagues have rightly said that the council made strategic choices—political choices—that meant the service it was providing was not effective enough. We have heard that the council did not spend £16 million of the money it had to support our children and young people with special educational needs, and I find that level of incompetence absolutely staggering.

I am conscious that councils across the country, not just Derbyshire county council, have faced a decade and a half of the most appalling funding cuts. Derbyshire county council's budget was around £1 billion a year in 2010, which is around £1.5 billion in today's money. I understand that today its budget is £780 million, so around half of what it was in real terms.

We know from the SEND report that there probably has not been enough integration between the NHS and the county council on this issue. One good thing the last Government did was to set up the integrated care boards, as well as the integrated care partnerships that oversee those boards. I was proud to sit on the Derby and Derbyshire integrated care partnership prior to my

election to this place. Some good work came through, but understandably, given the state of the NHS, primary and acute care took up most of the body's time.

I would like the integrated care board and the integrated care partnership to spend more time on the wider determinants of people's health, particularly people with disabilities and long-term conditions. As the Government's plan for change is implemented, I hope we will see acute and primary care restored to where they should be, so that local NHS leaders have more time to support SEND provision.

The Government are making a significant investment in local authorities, and I was pleased to learn earlier this month that we will be providing more than £69 billion of funding to councils, which represents a 6.8% cash terms increase in core spending powers. We also have £2.3 billion coming for schools, including £1 billion for SEND. Aspects of the autumn Budget were truly remarkable and laid the foundations for rebuilding public services and giving our children and young people opportunities in life.

I am sorry to say that some have used our Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to talk about another sinister issue in society, but that Bill will give a real boost to children and young people in Derbyshire's schools, particularly through the breakfast clubs. I ask the Minister to make sure that children who benefit from home-to-school transport are able to attend and participate in those breakfast clubs.

I did not want to come to this debate just to outline a situation that our residents know about, and that we all know about from our constituency postbags; I also wanted to outline solutions for the council. This Government are responding to councils' needs and investing money in our children and young people, and now we need Derbyshire county council's leaders to take that forward. If they cannot, they will have to step aside at the next election and allow a new leadership to do so.

7.8 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) on securing an Adjournment debate on this important subject, and on her powerful and heartfelt speech. I know that she, like all Labour Members here today, has a real interest in and passion for supporting families in her constituency who are navigating the special educational needs and disabilities system, and all the challenges that clearly presents.

I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby), for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for their interventions, and I thank my hon. Friends the Members for High Peak (Jon Pearce), for Erewash (Adam Thompson), for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet), for North East Derbyshire (Louise Jones) and for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) for their powerful speeches. Hon. Members have spoken incredibly powerfully for their constituents, and they are very much heard.

As hon. Members recognise, improving the special educational needs and disabilities system across the country is a priority for the Government. We want all

children to receive the right support to succeed in their education, and to lead happy, healthy and productive adult lives. Every child, regardless of their individual needs, deserves the opportunity to achieve, thrive and succeed. At the moment, we know far too many children are not being given that chance, and far too many families have been let down, year on year, by a system that is not meeting those needs.

Over 1.6 million children and young people in England have special educational needs, a figure that is increasing year on year, with more children requiring SEND support, and even more children and young people being identified as having a specific need that requires an education, health and care plan. As the Education Secretary mentioned in her keynote speech at the Centre for Social Justice just last week, the recognition of those additional needs and the debate around how we support children with SEND is a sign of progress, but clearly there is much more to do.

Jonathan Davies: One of the reasons the county council has got into this mess is because it was around a decade since Ofsted's previous inspection of its SEND provision. When I approached Ofsted, officials said the reason is that that was what Ofsted had been contracted to do by the Government. We need more agile regulation, as we discussed on the Second Reading of the Data (Use and Access) Bill today, but does the Minister have plans to look at Ofsted's regulatory model and the frequency with which it inspects? If the provision in Derbyshire had been inspected earlier, we might have less of a problem to deal with now.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We are looking across the system at how to reform it to make it better for families and for children who experience the need for additional support, and to improve outcomes. To assess all those issues, we need an inspection and accountability framework that drives improvements. I will come to the specific issues raised in the inspection of Derbyshire county council. It was inspected under a new inspection framework that threw significant light on the current situation, as exemplified by the various heartbreaking stories hon. Members have shared today.

Improving the SEND system is a vital part of the Government's opportunity mission. We are determined to break the unfair link between background and opportunity by giving every child with SEND, along with all other children, the best start in life. We are prioritising early intervention and inclusive provision in mainstream settings, as we know that early intervention prevents unmet needs from escalating. That will support all children and young people to achieve their goals alongside their peers.

We know it takes a vast workforce, from teachers to teaching assistants, early years educators to allied health professionals, to help all children to achieve and thrive. We are investing in each of those areas to improve outcomes and experiences across the country. We are committed to working with the sector and our partners to ensure that our approach is fully planned and delivered in partnership.

We have already begun the work by appointing a strategic adviser on SEND to engage with sector leaders, practitioners, children and families. We have established

[Catherine McKinnell]

an expert advisory group for inclusion, to improve the mainstream education outcomes and experiences for those with SEND, and we have set up a neurodivergence task-and-finish group to provide a shared understanding of what provision and support in mainstream educational settings should look like for neurodivergent children and young people within an inclusive system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley understandably raised concerns about education health and care plan timelines. The plans have significantly increased in number, year on year, since their introduction in 2014, with nearly 600,000 children and young people with an EHCP as of January last year. Over time, flaws and a lack of capacity in the system to meet lower-level need have added additional strain on specialist services, and that has had a detrimental impact on the experience of those accessing the EHCP process. There has been late identification of need and intervention, low parental confidence in the ability of mainstream settings to meet that need, inefficient allocation of resources across the system, and inconsistency in practice and provision based on location. Hon. Members have expressed the particular challenges in Derbyshire that have clearly manifested over many years. Those have all contributed to pushing up costs and have created an increasingly unsustainable system.

The latest data shows that in 2023, just 50.3% of EHCPs were issued within the 20-week statutory timeframe. That is leaving young people and their families without appropriate and adequate support. The Government want to ensure that EHC needs assessments are progressed promptly and plans are issued so that children and young people get the support they need to help them achieve positive outcomes. We know that local authorities have been struggling to meet the increased demand for EHCPs, so we are constantly working with them to improve those response times.

The Government are acutely aware of the challenges that families face in accessing the support their children need—and actually, of how adversarial the EHCP process can be. Independently commissioned insights that we published last year showed that if we can get those extensive improvements to the system, if we can use early intervention better and if we can better resource mainstream schools, that will have a significant impact. More children will have their needs met without having to even go through an education, health and care plan process, because their needs will be met in a mainstream setting with their peers. We are listening to parents, local authority colleagues and partners right across education and, as hon. Members have rightly identified, across health and social care, because we need to work out how to address and improve the experience of the EHCP process for families, and reflect on how we can roll out practice that will be more consistent nationally.

Every child and young person should have access to high-quality services to set them up for life, for work and for the future, and local authorities and their partners are key to ensuring that children can access the support they need. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission jointly inspected Derbyshire in September 2024 and found widespread and systemic failings. That led to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND across the

county of Derbyshire. The published report made it clear that the local area partnership, which consists of the local authority and the integrated care board, must address those concerns urgently and identified six areas for priority action. As a result of the inspection, His Majesty's chief inspector required the local area partnership to prepare and submit a priority action plan to address the identified areas.

A team has been put in place to track those outcomes against the action plan. Progress is being monitored and the Department for Education has appointed a SEND adviser to work collaboratively with an NHS England adviser to challenge, support and work with Derbyshire county council and the integrated care board to drive those improvements. I am sure that that is good news for hon. Members to hear, but clearly that progress needs to be made as quickly as possible, because as hon. Members rightly set out, families cannot wait any longer for the support they need.

We absolutely want more children and young people to receive the support they need, and ideally to thrive in their local mainstream settings with their peers, so that they do not need to travel long distances to find specialist places that can accommodate them and they can have their needs met with their friends in their local school. We know that many mainstream settings already go above and beyond to deliver that specialist provision locally through resource provision and SEN units, and we know as well that there will always be a place for special schools and colleges for children and young people who have the most complex needs. It is vital that we see the investment that is needed to create the new places in mainstream and special schools and in specialist settings. That is why we have announced £740 million of high needs capital for 2025-26. We will set out those allocations to local authorities in due course.

Hon. Members have raised concerns about the underspend in Derbyshire county council and we really need to see that money invested in those specialist places, whether in mainstream or special schools, to make sure that places are available with the support that children need. The Government are absolutely committed to working with Derbyshire county council, and with school leaders and sector partners locally and nationally, to develop and improve the inclusive education within mainstream settings that every child deserves.

James Naish: I thank the Minister for speaking so clearly on this important issue. On the intervention I made earlier about empty classrooms, we are seeing in Nottinghamshire that there is not the demand for nursery places that there desperately is in other parts of the country. Does the Department have any appetite to think about how those spaces could be used to try to deal with the issue we are talking about today?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend raises a really important point that manifests itself in many parts of the country: we have a shift in demographics and, as he identifies, early years places are opening up more quickly in some parts of the country than in others. That is why the Secretary of State announced the funding to create early years places in particular, but it is also why we have this capital funding that will be allocated to local authorities so we can utilise all the available space to make sure that we can provide these specialist places. Obviously we want local authorities to be able to apply

the funding in the way that will best meet the needs in their local area. That might mean repurposing space to create a specialist unit within a mainstream school, creating a more accessible space within a mainstream school or creating specialist places in whatever way a school is able to. If a local authority is able to support them, that funding will be available to create those spaces. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to that.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley for bringing this debate forward. Members here tonight are clearly very grateful for the opportunity to air their constituents' concerns and for this issue to be highlighted, and it is absolutely right that it is, because SEND outcomes in Derbyshire and nationally are an issue we all care passionately about. I acknowledge the challenges that far too many families face when seeking to secure the right support for their children with special

educational needs and disabilities, and that the system absolutely needs to improve, and we are determined to make progress and to make the change.

I want to conclude, as always, by recognising all those who work in our education, health and care systems in the interests of our children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, in Derbyshire and right across the country. We need to deliver the very best for all of our children and young people, including those with SEND. We need to give them the very best start in life, and prepare them for life, work and the future. I thank all who work to deliver that tirelessly day in, day out. Despite the challenges set out tonight, I am confident that together, with determination, we can see that change.

Question put and agreed to.

7.23 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Online Safety Act 2023 (Category 1, Category 2A and Category 2B Threshold Conditions) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 16 December 2024, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 320, Noes 178.

Division No. 100]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Carling, Sam

Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Easton, Alex
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McFadden, rh Pat

McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McMurdoch, James
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave

Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shannon, Jim
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica

Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair

Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Cross, Harriet
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhirst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eastwood, Sorcha
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Flynn, rh Stephen

Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 George, Andrew
 Gethins, Stephen
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Khan, Ayoub
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Logan, Seamus
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen

Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Question accordingly agreed to.

Column 247, Science, Innovation and Technology Questions

Peter Kyle: There was a deal by WhatsApp that was never followed up by the Treasury or Ministers. There were no meetings between AstraZeneca and the

[Peter Kyle]

Conservative Government. [*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 285.] (Correction) Their Government let Britain down every time, which is why the country turned to Labour, and Labour is delivering.

Column 285, Point of Order

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Why detain the House? Why

don't I just apologise now, and correct the record? I am grateful to the hon. Member for alerting me to that information. I am happy to correct the record, and I am happy to apologise to him for saying what I said earlier. [*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 247.] I should also correct the thrust of my argument this morning, which was that there was insouciance during the period between the March statement and the general election in July. Actually, it was not insouciance; it was just incompetence that meant they could not get the deal across the line.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 February 2025

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

Fuel Poverty: England

[*Relevant document: e-petition 700074, Reverse changes to Winter Fuel Payment.*]

9.30 am

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fuel poverty in England.

I am looking forward to speaking in this debate under your chairpersonship, Mr Efford. I am sure you will be fair but firm—fair with us and firm with the other side. We meet today to debate what I regard as a very serious issue. It is good to see so many people present, all well-brushed, shaved, toothbrushed and all the other things one does in the morning. I hope we all had a good breakfast. It is great to see everyone here.

This is a serious debate about a serious underlying problem, which affects millions of people, as we will hear. We meet today with the temperature forecast, at least in my patch in Yorkshire—God's own country, as we call it—to reach minus 1° at the weekend, which will cause great problems for those people who are living in fuel poverty.

I want to share one thing with the House from my personal experience. I grew up in a property that was later condemned as a slum and demolished. I remember my brother and I living in that unheated house—there was no heating at all apart from one coal fire. In winter, it was perishing, and it has left me with an enduring feeling that people living in the conditions that I saw should be better supported by a society that claims to be the sixth wealthiest in the world. With that background, I want to speak briefly about fuel poverty in England.

Let me say another preparatory thing. The incoming Government—although they have now been in place for some time—faced the most difficult inheritance for dealing with fuel poverty, given all the other fiscal problems that we have heard much about. Last week's announcement that they will address some fuel poverty issues was welcome, but I have one question about their proposals for private landlords.

Many tenants of private landlords live in fuel poverty, because the properties that are being rented are not properly thermally insulated. The Government have now said that private landlords must bring their properties up to standard, but the fear in some people's minds is that the landlords will simply use that as an excuse to bump up rents further, because they have had to pay to make properties more efficient. But they chose to rent out properties knowing that they were not properly efficient. I understand when tenants say to me and others that that is not right.

When the Government made their decision on the winter fuel allowance, I received about 1,000 emails, and in many cases they were heartbreaking. It is not often the case that the voices of ordinary folk get heard

in this place, so I want to refer briefly to three or four of those comments. I received an email from someone who has something called post-polio syndrome—they had polio as a child. A person with that syndrome finds it difficult to keep warm. I spoke to them and we said, "Look, it's possible to go into one of the local community or church halls"—which every single village in my constituency now has—"in order to keep warm," but the response was, "That's fine, but I've got to keep the house warm in any event, because when I go back into a cold home, I have this problem with the syndrome."

I had another communication from someone with asthma. He has managed to keep it under control for most of the years, but he caught the bug. It took him more than a month to shake it off, and he was struggling with his asthma. He could not get warm at all, in spite of wrapping himself in blankets. He tells me that the house he lives in has a roof that is more than 70 years old. He keeps on getting it patched up with the help of his family, because he has no money; he cannot afford a new one, and he cannot get help from anybody. The insurance company says that it is wear and tear, so it will not help to pay for the roof. All the heating he puts on is escaping straight into the atmosphere.

I also had a letter from a lady in Normanton. Her total income is £221 a week—she is a pensioner—and she pays £171 a week just for her mortgage and council tax, so she is left with only £50 a week to pay for heating, food and all the other necessities of life. How is that woman meant to survive in those circumstances?

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Jon Trickett: I will briefly.

Kim Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important and timely debate. Does he agree that it is shocking that nearly 80% of Liverpool Riverside residents have to spend nearly 10% of their disposable income on keeping their homes warm, and that more targeted support is needed to enable local authorities to support those most in need in our constituencies?

Jon Trickett: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments, and of course, what she is saying is correct. The lady who I was just talking about told me that living on £50 a week is practically impossible. I imagine that there are some people in this Chamber, modest as we all are, who spend more than £50 on a meal. Think about that woman in Normanton left with only that amount of money to live on. Her final comment was poignant. She speaks for the 1,000 people who wrote to me when she says:

"For many, retirement now means misery and trying to make ends meet. In the near future no doubt, I will have a choice like many before me—heat or eat. And I'll just be another statistic. That is something no one would look forward to,"

having worked all their life. She speaks for millions of people.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jon Trickett: I will, but briefly. There are a lot of people who want to speak.

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing those heartbreaking stories. A constituent of mine from Ilton wrote to me recently. She suffers with rheumatoid arthritis and needs a warm environment to keep warm, but because she is on personal independence payment, she is not eligible to claim the winter fuel allowance. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must urgently reassess their exemptions for the winter fuel allowance, to ensure that those who are in medical need receive the financial support that they require?

Jon Trickett: The hon. Lady has made her point. The House probably knows my views on the winter fuel allowance, but I had better move on before I get myself into trouble.

One in four households in Fitzwilliam and Kinsley in my constituency, where miners once provided the heat for our country, are now living in fuel poverty as a result of changes over the past few years. There are two definitions of fuel poverty. The first is the Government's rule, which was changed under the Tory Government in 2015. Under that definition, an estimated 3 million households in England alone are in fuel poverty, but it requires both that the household is in poverty and that the house is inadequately insulated.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jon Trickett: I am not going to take any more interventions, because so many people want to speak.

So many people with houses that are thermally insulated, but who still remain in poverty, are excluded from that 3 million figure. A more accurate figure is one that only looks at whether a household is living in fuel poverty, and under that definition 8.9 million households in England alone are living in fuel poverty. If we say that there are two people in each household, we are talking about 17 million or 18 million people waking up in the morning in an unheated house, like I did living in the attic with my brother, with ice on the inside of the windows. That is unbearable to think about in one of the richest countries in the world.

Ill health is a direct consequence of inadequately heated houses. Whichever figure is used, between 10% and 20% of all excess winter deaths in England are caused by unheated or cold houses. That is a disgrace. One in four children living in a cold home suffer mental health problems, which does not surprise me when they are living in such conditions.

Let me turn quickly to the causes, which we could debate for a long time. It seems to me that there are two separate issues. One is the prices that energy companies charge, which are, frankly, driven by profits and greed, and the other is poor insulation. I will leave it to others to speak about the impact of uninsulated houses on the climate because I do not have time to say everything. On prices, it is a scandal that between 2022 and 2023 the price of energy increased by 27%, leaving almost a quarter of a million more households in fuel poverty.

The other day, when the Bank of England decided to cut interest rates by 0.25 percentage points, it commented that it expects inflation to increase because of rising energy prices. That is a disastrous position for so many people in our country, which will drive more into fuel

poverty. I will quote Warm This Winter, the campaign group that represents 60 different charities. Its authoritative view on energy suppliers is that there is

"clearly an obscene level of profits being made".

The whole energy industry needs to be looked at, from extraction through to providers. The End Fuel Poverty Coalition said:

"While consumers have suffered in cold damp homes this winter, energy firms' boardrooms have been celebrating further bumper profits."

I do not see how that is acceptable in a society that claims to be one of the richest in the world, but there we are.

Let me turn to the building stock itself. I am a builder by trade; I was a heating engineer and plumber and worked in the building industry. It is shocking, when there are still people with building skills out of work, that the building stock of our country is so poorly thermally insulated. Just over 40% of all residences—houses and flats—in Britain do not meet the Government's minimum standards. The implications for the planet are clear, and others might want to talk about that.

The Government inherited a number of programmes trying to tackle fuel poverty. The previous Government had moved to providing smart meters. They are useful for consumers to see and control the amount of energy they are consuming, but they do not help to keep the house warm. That initiative by the Conservative Government distracted people from the real problem of low incomes and high energy costs, driven by profit-seeking.

There were three programmes in place. The energy company obligation required energy companies to begin to tackle the problem. That started well in 2020 with 113,000 houses, but by last year that number had gone down to 38,000. It collapsed when the energy companies, which were taking all that money from tenants and residents, failed to deliver. The second programme, the warm home discount, applies to only 11% of the population in England. Only 15% of all the houses that need attention have been fully insulated.

That is where we are today. I think it is a scandal. It is wrong morally, economically, financially—in any way we can imagine—that people who have worked all their lives and are now pensioners, who had a reasonable prospect of living a satisfactory life, are living in homes that are poorly heated. Children are living in poorly heated homes in which at least one adult is working on low pay—another problem is that bosses are increasingly paying low pay. Those houses ought not to be left in that condition. I hope the Minister will give us some confidence that we are going somewhere. It takes time for the Government to change direction, but we need to move fast.

Finally, let me pose three questions to the Minister, who I am pleased to see in her place. First, where are the Government going on fuel poverty—is it a high priority for them? Secondly, what is she going to do about the energy company obligation, which is failing? Finally, we often discuss the idea that the energy companies should have a social tariff for the lowest paid and those in the most difficulty. The country has decided that there should be a social tariff just for the internet—people living in difficult situations pay less for the internet—so it is extraordinary that we do not have one for energy

production. I believe that there is a consultation on a social tariff ongoing, so will the Minister tell the House exactly where we are going on that?

There is much more to say, but quite a number of Members want to speak, so I will draw my comments to a conclusion.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members to bob if you want to speak; you will only get called if you are standing. That allows us to plan ahead and make sure we get everyone in. Because there are so many of you who want to speak, we will have an informal time limit of five minutes.

9.46 am

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for securing this important and timely debate. I thank all the constituents who have written to me, not just in the run-up to this debate but over months and months, to share their concerns about fuel poverty, and in particular the winter fuel payment, which I will discuss later.

This is an incredibly important issue in my North Herefordshire constituency, where 22.9% of households live in fuel poverty, according to the latest data from the Government's low-income, low energy efficiency measure. That is far higher than the national average of 14.4%. As the measure indicates, fuel poverty is due to both low income and the lack of energy efficiency in the property—and, indeed, high fuel prices, as the hon. Member said. The number of detached houses in my constituency is nearly double the national average, and a far lower proportion of houses are on the mains energy supply. All those factors make fuel poverty a particular issue in a rural constituency like North Herefordshire. We also have a far higher proportion of over-65s—50% more than the national average. All those contributory factors mean that fuel poverty is an incredibly real and presenting issue in my constituency.

In the emails constituents have sent me in recent days, weeks and months, they have talked about living with only one radiator on, and the fact that the lack of winter fuel allowance means they can no longer buy any coal in the winter—coal is the only source of heating for some of my constituents.

Freddie van Mierlo: Like the hon. Lady, I represent a rural constituency in which the number of residents who use heating oil and gas is more than double the national average. Will she comment on how we can transition those residents to more sustainable and cheaper sources of fuel?

Ellie Chowns: I thank the hon. Member, and I do plan to comment on that topic.

A lady wrote to me saying that she now lives wrapped in blankets. Constituents have shared with me their particular needs relating to their health conditions and just how damaging it is not to be able to afford to keep warm.

The hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth talked about the outrageous profits made by the energy companies, and I share his extreme frustration and distress at that situation. The Government could go even further to ensure that we do not see what is essentially price gouging. Constituents struggling in fuel poverty are the ones who are basically bearing the costs, and at the same time the big energy companies are making profits in the billions each year. It is absolutely extraordinary.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Far be it from me to intrude on the grief of elected Members in England and their constituents, but this is Westminster, which is currently responsible for energy laws across the UK. Although devolved Governments have a role to play in reducing fuel poverty, the biggest levers of change, as the hon. Member would surely agree, are in the remit of the UK Government. I am thinking of the coupling of electricity prices—when electricity is increasingly generated here, on this island—with the global gas market; the nonsensical decision to cut the winter fuel payment; and the ongoing failure of the Government to reduce fuel bills, which are going up for the third time since July.

Ellie Chowns: I thank the hon. Member for his comments and agree that we must see the decoupling of electricity prices from gas. That situation currently contributes to the problems that people face.

We have established that the problem of fuel poverty is related in part to prices, which the Government have levers to control, but also to Government policies. I would like to talk in particular about three areas: targeted support to households in fuel poverty; insulation policies and how we deal with the housing stock that we already have; and how we ensure that future housing is future-proofed so that nobody who moves into a new house has to pay through the nose for energy.

On targeted support, I have criticised in the House a number of times the Government's nonsensical decision to completely cancel the winter fuel allowance for all except a small number of people. Very large numbers of people in my constituency have written to me and still do, expressing great distress at the impact of that decision on them. I cannot urge the Government too strongly to reconsider and ensure that next winter we do not have thousands of people in my constituency, and millions of people throughout the country, facing increased fuel poverty because of the Government's decision to stop the winter fuel allowance for so many who still need it. We also need there to be targeted support—I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth about a social tariff—and help to repay for those in energy debt.

On the fundamental structural question of the quality of housing, the problem is essentially that our homes leak heat. People are paying money for energy that is going out the windows, up the chimney and out of the roof. It is a total waste. What will the Government do to tackle this? The previous Government destroyed the energy efficiency programmes. We need a nationwide, house-by-house, street-by-street home insulation programme to ensure that the energy that people buy stays in their homes. I really hope that the Minister will make concrete commitments to go further and faster to insulate homes.

[Ellie Chowns]

Lastly, new homes must be built to the highest possible energy efficiency standards. If the cheapest time to insulate a home is at the point of construction, why are we not ensuring that all new homes are built to zero-carbon standards, to ensure that all the heat in a home stays in it?

9.54 am

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for securing this important debate. All of us, from all parties, would agree that this topic matters enormously to our constituents.

In my Mansfield constituency, one in six households live in fuel poverty. That is almost 10,000 households, which is higher than the average for the east midlands and considerably higher than the national average. Although energy costs have fallen from the extraordinary highs that we saw in 2022, the price cap remains very high for my constituents. Families with children in my constituency are more than twice as likely to be in fuel stress compared with pensioner households, and lone-parent households are three times as likely to be. The Government must recognise that.

I am pleased that the new Government are currently reviewing the fuel poverty strategy for England to help everyone, whether they are pensioners, families or people living alone, to keep warm. I welcome the Government's decisive action to help to reduce bills in the longer term, including through their warm homes plan, which will provide funding to enable property owners, including social landlords, to transition their housing stock to become decarbonised and more energy efficient.

I take this opportunity to congratulate Mansfield district council on all its work to retrofit existing properties. I hear from my constituents that that has made a huge difference to their fuel bills. I also congratulate the Labour-controlled Mansfield district council on building more eco-friendly, affordable family council homes in my constituency, such as those on the Bellamy Road development that I visited last week.

In the long term, Great British Energy will invest in clean power projects all across the country. Clean power is the cheapest form of electricity generation and will help our country to become energy independent and not as susceptible to huge swings in international energy prices. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth that in the medium term we should encourage energy suppliers to re-establish social tariffs. I say to the Minister that it is really important to have that in place for next winter. It would help everyone in my constituency who is experiencing fuel stress to access cheaper energy, and it would have a tangible impact for my constituents.

In the short term, I want to make the case for a substantial expansion of the cold weather payment scheme as an efficient way to address the current reality of energy cost pressures in Mansfield. It would offer a way for the Government to provide pensioners with further payments in the event of a serious chill, while at the same time offering something to families who are not often part of this conversation. Expanding the eligibility for households in receipt of a means-tested

benefit, state pension, child benefit or disability benefits would help the poorest families and non-pensioner households to receive support. This would provide vital economic security for families in my constituency.

I know that the Government want to do more—I am sure of that. I look forward to hearing their response to the review in due course and hope that Ministers can implement it ahead of next winter.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I inform Members that I have to impose a limit of four minutes if I am going to get everybody in by half past.

9.58 am

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for securing this important debate. All of us have heard heart-wrenching stories from our constituencies of families struggling to heat their homes. Vulnerable pensioners are worried about staying warm in what has been a cold and damp winter. Nearly 5,000 households in my constituency, or 11.3%, are classified as being fuel-poor or in fuel poverty. They struggle to keep their homes warm, spend a high proportion of their household income on heating their homes, or live in energy-inefficient homes that make keeping warm incredibly difficult, with the choice of keeping warm or putting food on the table a real one.

It is worth noting that just 1,372 pensioners in my constituency—6% of the total number—are on pension credit. That raises further questions about those who did not apply for pension credit, even though they may deserve it, or who fall just outside the limit but are actually in fuel poverty. In a first-world, highly developed country, that is unacceptable; it is unacceptable that people in one of the richest nations of the world struggle to keep their homes warm in winter. Fuel poverty has impacts outside of energy policy: it affects people's physical and mental health, and it adds demands to the NHS's winter crisis.

We must tackle fuel poverty by looking for both long-term and immediate solutions. In the long term, we must retrofit houses to make them more energy-efficient, insulating homes and installing heat pumps. Immediately, however, we must provide vulnerable households such as those in Melksham and Devizes with more support to pay unaffordable energy bills, and we must restore the winter fuel allowance for all pensioners.

10.1 am

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for securing this timely and important debate.

According to National Energy Action, one in 10 households in my constituency live in fuel poverty, with the worst affected likely to be low-income households, the unemployed and, of course, pensioners. There is no doubt that fuel poverty is inextricably linked to financial poverty. For example, 1.8 million carers struggle with their fuel bills, and the same people often have to use

food banks or to cut back on food in order to pay for their gas and electricity. Many of those carers are themselves older; as we know, it is essential to keep warmer for longer when we get older, as we become less active and more sedentary and our blood circulation becomes poorer.

That is why the decision to means-test the winter fuel allowance was wrong and needs to be reversed. Department for Work and Pensions figures show that 880,000 older people were eligible for pension credit but did not claim it. Since the decision to means-test the winter fuel payment, around 47,000 pensioners have come forward to make a claim, but that leaves over 800,000 older people without a winter fuel payment they previously would have received. Let us be under no illusions: these are among the very poorest pensioners in our society.

There is considerable evidence that when a benefit such as the winter fuel payment is specifically named for a purpose, recipients are more likely to use it for that reason—they put it aside to pay the next bill that comes in. It comes in the winter, because that is when the largest bills arrive; however, for this group of pensioners, the bill came but the winter fuel payment never showed up. Universal payments also reach the people who need them most; it is more efficient to make payments to everyone and then to use the taxation system to redistribute from wealthier pensioners who might not need the payment.

According to the Carers Trust, at least 180,000 unpaid carers over 65 will have been negatively impacted by the decision to means-test the winter fuel allowance. That group is also shut out of much of the other support available from Government. For example, eligibility for carer's allowance does not qualify people for the warm home discount, which is based on a property's type, age and floor area, not on someone's actual bill. Likewise, an underlying entitlement to carer's allowance does not qualify individuals for cold weather payments.

The drive for a clean energy transition is an opportunity to tackle the problem by lowering bills and insulating our homes, but the energy market, with the role of private companies, is broken. My hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth mentioned the obscene levels of profit being made, and they need to be addressed. As a minimum first step, we need to introduce social tariffs for low-income households to guarantee lower bills for those who need them. We also need to consider making assistance with fuel bills available as a form of social prescribing. Health professionals who consider that it would have a recognisable health benefit could then enable patients to get cheaper fuel. Finally, we need to reverse the cruel decision to means-test the winter fuel allowance. In one go, we reduced support for 10 million pensioners. That needs to end.

10.5 am

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for securing this important debate. As one of the sole surviving Conservatives representing a West Yorkshire seat, I agree with him that Yorkshire is very much God's own county. This is an incredibly important debate, and I thank many of the constituents who have kindly contacted me about fuel poverty.

There are specific challenges in the northern towns I represent. Not least, the housing stock is old, and most of it remains poorly insulated. There are also the increasing fuel prices that all households are experiencing. In the rural parts of my constituency, most of the houses are off-grid and therefore experience higher energy prices. In Keighley, 17.6% of residents are in fuel poverty, and many are pensioners who have been drastically impacted by this Labour Government's decision to remove the winter fuel allowance. Across the Bradford district, 64,000 pensioners are being impacted right now, over this winter period, as a result of Labour's choice—and it is a choice—to remove that allowance.

That is not the only challenge that people in the Bradford district face. The council requested a 15% increase in council tax, although the Deputy Prime Minister signed off a 10% increase. So, this financial year, all my constituents will have to pay an extra 10% on top of everything else. Labour Members may say that that is because of 14 years of Conservative Government, but only in 2021 the council declared that it was in sound financial health. It has also chosen to waste up to £50 million of taxpayers' money on a music venue in the centre of Bradford, Bradford Live, which is not even open yet. That money could be spent on better supporting those in fuel poverty across the Bradford district.

I am not the only one calling the Government out: many people in Keighley are doing the same, including the co-ordinator of a social supermarket, the Good Food Shop, who says that the 10% increase in council tax could push more of those coming to his shop—families and individuals who are already struggling—well below the breadline and lead to a huge surge in demand for its services. People in Keighley are indicating that the council and the Government—both of which are controlled by the Labour party—should be helping those who are struggling, not wasting council tax money on city-based projects in the centre of Bradford that do not benefit my constituents in Keighley.

The Salvation Army in Keighley is saying exactly the same thing. Major Imogen Stewart has also raised concerns about those in fuel poverty, linking that to the 10% increase in council tax. She said:

“People are afraid to turn on their heating”,

due to the increased costs they face. Those costs are also due to the winter fuel allowance being removed, which has directly impacted those in fuel poverty. The Salvation Army indicates that people are now coming to it not to use its food bank but to ask for blankets, sleeping bags and clothes to keep them warm. It is experiencing increasing referrals, and it fears that that will only get worse as time goes on.

Labour Members were elected on a promise not to introduce tax rises for working people and to put their party back in the service of working people, but my constituents are not seeing that; they are seeing the exact opposite. It is about time that the Government change tack and put working people at the heart of their policies going forward.

10.9 am

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) on securing this important debate on a pressing issue that has plagued our society

[Andrew Cooper]

for too long. It is a travesty that, in a nation as prosperous as ours, more than 3 million households are struggling to keep their homes warm and their lights on. If my hon. Friend is correct, that number is perhaps 8.9 million; however, it is at least 13.1% of households, and in parts of Northwich in my constituency, it can go as high as 20%. Those statistics not only show the scale of the problem, but highlight a reality that affects the health, wellbeing and dignity of too many people throughout our communities.

This crisis did not emerge overnight: over the last decade and a half, the action—or inaction—of the previous Government not only failed to address fuel poverty but made things worse. Nowhere is that failure more evident than in the Conservative's disastrous record on home insulation and energy efficiency. In 2013, David Cameron's Government infamously decided to "cut the green crap", leading to insulation rates falling off a cliff edge and never sufficiently recovering. That reckless decision has cost UK households an estimated £2.5 billion in higher energy bills since.

When that Government eventually acknowledged the crisis and promised to upgrade millions of homes, their attempts at intervention were nothing short of chaotic. The green homes grant scheme, launched with great fanfare in 2020, promised homeowners £1.5 billion in vouchers for insulation and energy-saving improvements. Yet, within months, the scheme collapsed in total failure—scrapped after just six months, having delivered insulation upgrades to just 10% of the homes it was supposed to help. Contractors were not paid, homeowners were left stranded and the Government wasted millions. Meanwhile, Britain's housing stock remains among the least energy-efficient in Europe, with millions of homes leaking heat because of inadequate insulation. The impact of these failings has been stark, with higher energy bills, colder homes and increased fuel poverty.

It has been great to see this Government committed to reversing that damage and to bringing energy bills down sustainably for the long term by improving the energy efficiency of our homes through the warm homes plan. This will not only help to tackle fuel poverty, but reduce carbon emissions, create green jobs and help us to meet our climate targets. I recognise that a significant part of the scheme will be delivered by social landlords, which will avoid many of the issues encountered with the previous Government's programme. However, the boiler upgrade scheme operates on a voucher basis, so it would be good to hear from the Minister what the Department has learned from the previous Government's rushed implementation of the green homes grant, and how those issues will be avoided in our plan.

The contrast could not be clearer: while the Conservatives spent years failing to deliver on their promises, we are getting on with things. We are determined to ensure that no family is forced to live in a freezing home. Through our investment, regulation, and commitment to a fairer, greener future, we can tackle fuel poverty. We can bring down bills and deliver energy security for the long term.

10.13 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon

Trickett) for leading the debate. Fuel poverty is huge and has no doubt been emphasised further through the loss of the winter fuel payment for elderly people. I commend the hon. Gentleman for Normanton and Hemsworth; I admire courage, and I admire his, because he had the guts—I could use another word, but it would not be parliamentary—to stand up and vote against that decision by his Government. Well done! We admire him for his courage and for the stand he took.

I wish to give a quick Northern Ireland perspective to back up the hon. Gentleman and the stand that he and others in the Chamber have taken. The Department for Communities back home defines a household as being in fuel poverty if it spends 10% of its income on energy costs. We are talking about a substantial section of the population. Others have outlined clearly that fuel poverty rates have fluctuated, and that is the case in Northern Ireland too, with rates of 44% in 2009 and 24% in 2021.

Yesterday, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to speak in the energy debate led by the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), which highlighted the correlation between the cost of energy and fuel poverty, and this debate is an opportunity to highlight that issue again. The increase in prices has meant that many are on the breadline, and that is not to mention the devastating impact that the loss of the winter fuel payment has had on our elderly generations. I have never had as many elderly people, pensioners, vulnerable people and people with complex health needs battling—I use that word on purpose, because it is the right word—the loss of the winter fuel allowance. I say this with respect to my colleagues on the Government Benches, but not supporting the winter fuel allowance for pensioners was wrong.

I wish the Minister well in her job, which she does to the best of her ability, and we welcome that. Has she had an opportunity to speak to the Department for Communities back home, which has responsibility for this issue? In his intervention, the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) said that this theme starts here at Westminster, but has she had an opportunity to discuss it with the relevant Minister? Back home, we have just—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. This is about fuel poverty in England and you are starting to talk about back home and your constituency. There are English MPs who want to get in on this debate, and we are running out of time, so draw your comments to a conclusion.

Jim Shannon: I will certainly do the best I can, Mr Efford.

The issue, no matter what, starts in Westminster—it is a fuel poverty debate on England that affects everybody in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and decisions are made, right here, in this House. With that in mind, I ask the Minister again, will she speak to the relevant Minister on how we can do better?

Seamus Logan: Would the hon. Member agree that reforming energy standing charges would be an easy way to cut costs for consumers, especially those living in rural areas such as in my constituency? It seems absurd that daily standing charges can vary so wildly. Would he agree that they are often higher in areas with huge energy infrastructure, such as my constituency?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. One of things we can do here on the mainland is look at the issue of poor insulation and heating systems that need updating. I know the Minister will look at that and ultimately decrease the amount of energy a particular household has to use, but those are some of the things that we can do to help our constituents. Fuel poverty is still a massive issue across the board and there are few signs of it mellowing. We must do more to support our constituents around energy prices and fuel poverty, especially given that there is a huge section of the population struggling with energy bills.

I genuinely and kindly look to the Minister for direction and support, because I am an MP from Strangford in Northern Ireland, representing my people in this Chamber on an issue that affects us all across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Know something? I want answers as well.

10.17 am

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for bringing this timely debate to the Chamber.

Fuel poverty did not start on 4 July 2024, for heaven's sake. I am not going to take any lectures from anybody who suggests that it did, because let me tell hon. Members that under the last 14 years of Tory Government, tens of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of ordinary people died as a result of fuel poverty. That is the real issue. The Labour Government are now gladly and positively elected, and we look forward to seeing some changes very soon.

What actually is fuel poverty? There are two definitions: the new one from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, and the pre-2015 definition. They are greatly different. The preferred definition of fuel poverty used by the Government until 2015 and still by some parts of the UK, is a household that is “required to spend more than 10% of its income”

to keep sufficiently warm. That definition has advantages; it links directly to the cost of energy prices and can still give credit to energy-efficient homes. If a low-income household in a very modern energy efficient dwelling still finds that it spends 10% of its income on energy, it is a clear reflection of the impact of energy price inflation. That is very important.

We cannot get rid of poverty in this country by rewriting a policy. It cannot be done—whether it is fuel, food, child or pensioner poverty. We cannot get rid of poverty just by rewriting policies; work has to be done on the ground. It is always the less well-off who suffer from fuel poverty and all other types of poverty. In my Blyth and Ashington constituency, according to the House of Commons Library there are 5,211 households in fuel poverty, but that increases to 14,500 using the pre-2015 definition. There is more fuel poverty in the east of my constituency in Newbiggin-by-the-Sea and Blyth itself. That is something the Government should be looking at as a matter of urgency.

Who suffers because of fuel and energy prices? The less well-off, and people in fuel poverty using prepayment electric meters. Of those in fuel poverty, 63% are on some kind of benefit, and there are around 2.5 million

pensioners suffering as a consequence of fuel poverty. We have got to keep people warm. There are lots of things the Government can do. Fuel poverty simply means that people are not warm, but we live in the UK, one of the richest nations in the world. Why on earth are we not ensuring that everyone has a safe and warm home to live in?

It is called decency. It is called respect. It is necessary and extremely important that the Government address this. I urge the Minister to consider the points that have been raised this morning about what the Government can actually do.

10.21 am

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) on securing this important debate. We meet at a time when there is a scourge of fuel poverty across our country. Nearly 20% of households in Leeds East live in fuel poverty. Over 400,000 people in Yorkshire and the Humber live in fuel poverty. To say that the fuel poverty strategy needs reviewing is an understatement. It is necessary that the Government review it, and we need real action.

Before I get on to the winter fuel payment, we have been reminded that we live in the sixth-richest economy on earth. Let us look at the eye-watering, obscene, unjustified and immoral profits made by some of our energy companies. In total, since 2020 energy companies have made £483 billion in profits: Shell made £88 billion in the last four years; BP made £46 billion of profits; E.ON made £33 billion of profits; EDF made £75 billion of profits; and Equinor made £134 billion of profits. The winter fuel payment cuts that I and others voted against were estimated to save the Government £1.4 billion. That is before the increased take-up of pensioner credit and the increased cost to the NHS from people getting cold and needing extra medical treatment. That is the reality we face, but the money is there.

I say that a number of us voted against the winter fuel payment cuts after listening to the voices of our constituents. I do hope that the Government can reconsider the cuts. There was not just concern from those who voted against it; the concern went far wider. I was only 17 years old when Gordon Brown introduced the winter fuel payment. It was one of the key achievements of the last Labour Government. I would argue that the winter fuel payment is a key part of our welfare state. I think the decision should be revised and reversed as soon as possible—certainly before next winter. We can call it something else if we like, if that makes it easier. We do not have to call it the winter fuel payment. We could relabel it as something else and reintroduce it.

On the wider points of the debate, I mentioned the obscene, eye-watering profits from these energy companies. They are the same energy companies, by the way, that have pushed our bills up and pushed us towards climate catastrophe.

We can look at the important issue of retrofitting, which has already been mentioned by colleagues. Of course retrofitting is vital, but on its own it is not the answer, because it will take years; it needs to happen, but it is not the answer to fuel poverty on its own. We need intervention in the market, with real price caps; we need action against these energy companies. And we need Government support.

[Richard Burgon]

That is why this debate is welcome and it is why I welcome the Government's review of the fuel poverty strategy. However, I would argue that the fuel poverty strategy cannot be sufficient without two things: reintroducing the winter fuel payment; and taking real action on these energy companies, which have left people cold and frightened, and left too many people in our country living in misery.

10.25 am

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): It is an honour, Mr Efford, to serve under your chairship. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for securing this hugely important debate; I have enjoyed the contributions to it.

According to the latest data from the House of Commons Library, almost one in five people—17%—in my constituency of Liverpool West Derby are living in fuel poverty, which is a shocking figure. However, that was the figure in 2022. Today the figure will be even higher, because as energy bills have gone up, so have the rates of fuel poverty.

National Energy Action estimates that in October 2021 4.5 million UK households were in fuel poverty. By January of this year, that figure had risen to 6.1 million. For older people, fuel poverty is linked to increased risk of stroke, heart attack, flu and hypothermia, and children growing up in cold, damp and mouldy homes suffer from higher rates of respiratory infections and asthma. I speak to my great friend Dr Ian Sinha from Alder Hey Children's Hospital about the devastating impact of fuel poverty on children's health, and we will always remember Awaab Ishak, who died because he lived in awful conditions.

That is why in September I voted to oppose the means-testing of the winter fuel allowance. In the run-up to that vote, I received more correspondence from constituents than at any other time in my five years as a Member of Parliament. They told me about the devastating impact that the cuts would have. Jennifer was terrified about the impact the cut would have on her and her husband's declining health. Again and again and again, people told me how frightened they were about losing the allowance and the upcoming winter. I was true to my word and voted on their behalf, but I desperately regret that the cut went ahead.

Things are set to get worse. Forecasts suggest that the energy price cap could rise by nearly 3% in April. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on motor neurone disease, I have heard first hand about the impact of the cuts within the motor neurone disease community. Along with 40 other MPs from across Parliament, I signed a letter to the Chancellor about the impact of this cut. Research shows that people living with motor neurone disease spend an estimated £14,500 extra to cope with cold conditions. The decision to restrict the winter fuel payments to those receiving means-tested benefits will acutely impact the MND community. Ian Lev, an MND sufferer, said that

"My bills will increase in the winter because we must keep our bodies warm. This is a real kick in the pants for me, because I need everything I can. In my nine years of motor neurone disease, my expenditure has been approximately £100,000."

And Alex Massey from the Motor Neurone Disease Association says that

"Means-testing the Winter Fuel Payment will take no account of the unavoidable costs of living with a highly disabling condition like MND. People coping with this devastating condition do not deserve to lose the support they rely on this winter."

Even as more people are dragged into fuel poverty, the energy companies, as has been outlined already, continue to make a killing. Just yesterday, BP announced record annual profits of £8 billion. Collectively, 20 energy companies have made a staggering £483 billion in profits since the start of the energy bill crisis. Sky-high energy bills for our constituents equals obscene profits for these giant corporations.

To conclude, I really welcome the Government's review of the fuel poverty strategy. We should tax energy companies and end fuel poverty, reintroduce the winter fuel allowance as a universal benefit to ensure that nobody falls through the cracks, committing to a social tariff—to lower energy bills for low-income households—and to ramping up the warm home plan to insulate homes across the country, in order to cut both bills and carbon. I really hope that all these things are in the Government's review.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): We are bang on time, so thank you very much, everyone. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

10.29 am

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for securing this important debate.

The subject of the debate is vital to my constituents. Fuel poverty has left thousands of people in Eastleigh and across the country in a terrible situation this winter. The Liberal Democrats are gravely concerned that Government delays in tackling poorly insulated homes have left thousands of people cold and living in fuel poverty. The UK has the oldest housing stock in Europe and it is among the least energy-efficient. The previous Government failed to commit to a meaningful renewable energy programme or a decent homes standard to bring down energy bills, reduce emissions and improve public health. As a result, an estimated 6 million households are in fuel poverty.

I have spoken to constituents whose hands are turning blue because they are so afraid to turn on the heating. My constituent Kay wrote to me after discovering that she would lose her winter fuel payment. She told me:

"I have had no heating this winter. I suffer from PHPT, which means I cannot work or move around easily. It is so cold in my maisonette that I can see my own breath."

Another constituent who lost the winter fuel payment told me:

"I am wrapping myself up in blankets and extra layers. I try to stay out of the house longer so I don't have to turn the heating on. Finding that extra £300 last winter was a lifeline".

According to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero sub-regional fuel poverty data, 7.2% of households in my constituency, amounting to nearly 3,000 families, live in fuel poverty. Many pensioners are just over the income threshold for receiving pension credit, but still struggle immensely. Constituents tell me that they have resorted to using only a microwave to cook meals, because it is cheaper than an oven, while

people living in park homes have told me that they have had to turn off their electric heating entirely, even though their walls are just two inches thick and not properly insulated.

According to the Committee on Fuel Poverty, energy efficiency programmes are essential to reducing fuel poverty. Liberal Democrats are concerned that the Government have delayed the new decent homes standard and the warm homes plan, leaving people without support this winter. Citizens Advice in Eastleigh has confirmed that it has seen a massive uptake in energy-related casework among low-income households this year. Their clients are being forced into impossible decisions.

With bills expected to rise again in April, I hope that the Government will do more to protect my constituents and all those in fuel poverty across the UK. I am deeply concerned about the thousands of pensioners who are still waiting to receive their winter fuel payment, even though they applied on time. Can the Minister please update us on when they will receive their payment? They should not be left struggling through the coldest months due to Government delays.

The Government's own analysis has confirmed that cuts to the winter fuel payment could push 100,000 pensioners in England and Wales into relative fuel poverty. That means 100,000 more people who will struggle to afford heating, more elderly people who will face freezing winters in homes they cannot afford to keep warm, and more people suffering preventable illnesses caused by cold and damp conditions, and yet the Government are pushing ahead with this mistaken approach which will put so many more people at risk. Truly to address this ongoing crisis, the Government must be more ambitious.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) tabled an amendment to the Great British Energy Bill that would have ensured that the new body facilitated the home insulation programme, but the Government voted it down. A proper windfall tax on the super-profits of oil and gas companies would help fund support for the most vulnerable, rather than allowing energy giants to continue making billions while families suffer. We must also fundamentally reform how energy is priced. Electricity prices should be decoupled from the wholesale gas price to prevent outdated pricing mechanisms from inflating household bills unfairly.

This winter, thousands of pensioners and vulnerable families in my constituency are suffering in cold homes and struggling to pay their bills. I urge the Minister to rethink cuts to the winter fuel payment, and to introduce meaningful support for those who need it most.

10.34 am

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Efford, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) on securing this important debate.

I hesitate to compete with a Yorkshireman, but it has also been very cold in Suffolk recently, and the stories that the hon. Member told of his constituents will be familiar to all of us in the Chamber today. From the hon. Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson)—who is no longer in the Chamber—to the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), we were reminded that fuel poverty affects urban and rural

constituencies alike. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) rightly talked about the reliance on heating oil in rural constituencies, and the hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) was certainly right to say that pension credit take-up is far too low.

As the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) said, we cannot ignore the hardship caused by the Government's decision to cut the winter fuel payment so aggressively for millions of pensioners. Of course there is a case for means-testing that payment, but the Chancellor is cutting it for not just the richest pensioners, but those on very modest incomes. If the winter fuel payment is to be means-tested, surely the proceeds should go to low-income pensioners and the cost of social care, but they do not, because we know that Labour's spending priorities are to throw the money it is taking from pensioners to the public sector and railway unions that funded it.

Let us remember that during the election campaign, Labour repeatedly promised us that it would protect the winter fuel payment, but we know that the Chancellor planned the cut all along, because she had said that she wanted to do it as far back as 2014. Let us be clear: as my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) said, this policy is a political choice, not an economic necessity as Ministers claim. The Office for Budget Responsibility has blown up the Government's claim that they inherited a fiscal hole. Of the report used by Ministers to justify that claim, Richard Hughes, the OBR chairman, said that

"nothing in our review was a legitimisation"

of that claim. Indeed, the Minister who is with us today must answer this simple question: if the cuts for pensioners and the tax rises were made necessary by fiscal prudence, why did Labour promise in its manifesto to increase spending by £9.5 billion a year by 2028-29, only to actually increase it by £76 billion in its Budget? This was a choice.

The challenge of fuel poverty affects people of all ages throughout the country. Rather than just creating new benefits and schemes to address the high cost of fuel, we need to resolve the root causes of energy costs more generally. Here, the Government are taking the country in a very worrying direction. The Energy Secretary promises to decarbonise the grid by 2030, and the Business Secretary wants to ban petrol and diesel cars by the same year. Tough standards on aviation fuel are being enforced; heat pumps are expected to replace gas boilers; expensive and intermittent renewable technologies funded by huge and hidden subsidies are favoured; and oil and gas fields in the North sea are abandoned, left for the Norwegians to profit from what we choose to ignore.

The Energy Secretary has made much of the National Energy System Operator's report on decarbonising the grid. He says that report shows that he can do so by 2030 without increasing bills, but in fact the report does not say that—and even then, its calculations rest on a carbon price that will rise to £147 per tonne of carbon dioxide. It is no wonder that, in reply to a question I asked him last week, the Energy Secretary would not rule out having a higher carbon price in Britain than in Europe. That will be terrible for families struggling with the cost of heating their home, but it will hurt them—and indeed all of us—in other ways. As long as policy runs

[Nick Timothy]

faster than technology and other countries do not follow our lead on climate change, decarbonisation will inevitably mean deindustrialisation. That will mean a weaker economy with lower growth, fewer jobs, and less spending power to help those who we have been discussing today—those who need support the most.

Of course, it is not just the NESO report that shows us the future consequences of the Government's policies. The OBR says that environmental levies will reach up to £15 billion by the end of this Parliament to pay for net zero policies. As those levies will fall heavily on consumption, they will have a particularly regressive effect, as analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Cornwall Insight has confirmed. It is therefore no wonder that Labour's election promise to cut bills by £300 by the end of the Parliament has vanished without trace, so I challenge the Minister today to do what she has not done since polling day—repeat that promise very clearly. I suspect she will not because, unlike the Secretary of State, she knows the reality of his policies. The Government are adding complexity and contradiction to our energy system and loading extra costs on to families across the country. There is still time for Ministers to think again and put the interests of decent, hard-working people ahead of the Energy Secretary's ideological dogma.

10.39 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) for securing this really important debate. He has a great record of speaking up for low-income and vulnerable families in his constituency and across the country. I share his desire to tackle fuel poverty and his anger that energy is simply unaffordable for too many people in this country. The Government are determined to take the action necessary to lower bills and support the most vulnerable in our society.

I thank all Members for their contributions, and for highlighting the heartbreaking stories of families across the country that are struggling.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): The Minister talks about heartbreaking stories. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) and I have just come off a Public and Commercial Services Union picket line outside a Department, and one of the issues that was raised with us was the cost of living, particularly fuel poverty, because those workers are on low wages and are experiencing poverty. One of the things that Ministers could do now is go back to their Departments, review all their contracts, end the outsourcing and bring those workers back into an insourced service.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We know there is a challenge with the cost of living. We are coming out of the worst cost of living crisis that we have faced in a generation, and tackling it is central to what we are trying to do in my Department and across Government.

It is important that we situate this debate in the context in which we find ourselves. We published a review of our fuel poverty strategy last week, and the headline was staggering: fuel poverty stagnated in this

country under the previous Government. In 2023, an estimated 13% of households in England—3.17 million people—were in fuel poverty according to the low income low energy efficiency metric, which is a narrow statutory definition. We know that out there in the country a lot more people are feeling the pressure of energy bills and have the sense that they cannot cope and cannot afford to heat their homes.

In 2023, about 46% of all low-income households in England lived in properties with an energy efficiency rating of band D or lower. That creates a cycle that is difficult to escape: the poorest in our country live in cold homes. Behind those statistics are lives, and I have heard the stories directly. People are scared to turn on the heat because they fear the bill at the end of the month. Parents are having to make the impossible choice between feeding their kids and heating their homes.

We know that the reality is intolerable for too many people. That is the legacy of the previous Government that we inherited, but we are determined to turn it around. Every family and business in the country has paid the price of our dependence on global fossil fuel markets that we do not control. We inherited sky-high energy bills. Yes, they are down from the crisis peak, but they are still at record highs.

Our clean power mission is not ideological; it is a primary solution to this problem. We are running to deliver clean power at this pace because we see that as our route to delivering home-grown energy that we have more control over, that will deliver energy security for the country and, critically, that will take us off this rollercoaster of price hikes, which are impacting families, and deliver the financial security that families across the country are desperate for. But we recognise that, while we do that, we also need to reform the electricity market. The review of electricity market arrangements, which we are working on at the moment, is looking at the very question of how we decouple gas from clean power prices. Our judgment is that, as we increase the amount of clean power in the system, we will do the job of decoupling, alongside market reforms, so that people can benefit from the big changes we are trying to make.

We recognise that we also have to support struggling families while we make that transition.

Robbie Moore: I thank the Minister for allowing an intervention. I raised concerns in my speech about the fact that 64,000 pensioners are struggling now to make that difficult choice between putting food on the table and heating their homes, and she has rightly acknowledged that. Does she recognise that the choice she and the Government made to remove the winter fuel allowance was wrong, when so many pensioners are in a dire state as a result of that choice?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: The hon. Member raises winter fuel payments, as hon. Members across the House have done. The Chancellor had an impossible job to do and made a tough call, but we have been clear that we will do whatever is needed to support the most vulnerable. Everything I am charged with doing, everything that my Department is trying to do, is to ensure that households struggling with bills can be protected and insulated.

The Government reviewed the fuel poverty strategy, "Sustainable warmth: protecting vulnerable households", because we recognised that the trajectory we were on

was not the right one. The review showed that progress on meeting the statutory target has stalled. Alongside that review, we are consulting on how to up our strategy to respond to that problem.

Jim Shannon: In questions, urgent questions and statements in the Chamber, I have been keen to ensure that every part of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can benefit from strategies in this House and that the ripples go out to everywhere. In my contribution, I asked the Minister again whether there would be an opportunity to discuss the matter with the relevant Minister back home. I know the Minister is committed to that. Will she please update me on where those talks and discussions have gone, so that we can all benefit?

Clive Efford (in the Chair): In relation to England, you mean.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Let me reassure the hon. Member that we are talking to all devolved Administrations. There are common challenges that we all face and common solutions. We are working in collaboration; we have an interministerial working group, and I am having direct conversations with all devolved Administrations as we take forward our plans.

We are also trying to work with everyone. The challenge we face to turn around the trajectory on fuel poverty is huge and the inheritance is tough, so we want to draw on the expertise of consumer groups, industry and academia as we develop our plan on fuel poverty.

Nick Timothy: The Minister talks about the tough job the Chancellor faces. Does she acknowledge that the job is tough because of the Chancellor's own choices? The Minister talks about the inheritance but, as I said in my speech, the Labour manifesto said that Labour would increase spending by £9.5 billion a year, while the Budget increased it by £76 billion a year. That is why the Chancellor faces tough decisions—they originate with her own political choices. Does the Minister acknowledge that?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: That is pretty audacious of the hon. Member, given the record of the previous Government, their financial position and the wrecking ball they took to the economy. We have to clean up the mess of the previous Government, so yes, we have had to make tough choices before that. Candidly, if I were in the hon. Member's position, I would be hanging my head in shame, rather than lecturing this Government on how we clean up the mess they created. What I will say is that, whether on the economy or fuel poverty, we understand that we have been given an atrocious inheritance. We are not complacent about that. Things that the Conservatives were willing to accept, we are not willing to accept.

Robbie Moore: Will the Minister give way?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I will make progress. On the critical issue of fuel poverty, we are consulting in order to improve our strategy, looking at how to make progress on our statutory target for 2030 and asking questions about wide affordability. As we take action, we must ensure that we are dealing with our statutory obligation and the more fundamental problem of affordability across the country.

Alongside our consultation on the fuel poverty strategy, we have also taken steps to try to lift half a million people out of fuel poverty by improving standards in the private rented sector. Last week we published a consultation on increasing minimum energy efficiency standards in the domestic private rented sector by 2030. Our proposals would require landlords to upgrade their homes so that tenants can benefit from warmer homes through insulation, cavity wall insulation and double glazing first, and then through other measures such as solar, batteries and smart meters.

My hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth asked about the impact on renters. I would say two things. Our analysis suggested that if we get this right, it could save renters about £240. We know that there is a risk of landlords potentially hiking bills, but when we have upgraded homes in the past, we have found that landlords have not increased bills, so we do not expect them to do so this time. Critically, we have also been surveying landlords, and the feedback is that the majority would cover the cost of the upgrades, which they know is the right thing to do. I should add that 50% of landlords have already upgraded their homes up to EPC C, so they will pay for this through those savings. We are therefore confident that renters will not be penalised, and we believe that the measures in the Renters' Rights Bill will provide enough safeguards to ensure that renters can benefit from £240 off their energy bills and the security of knowing that their rents will not be increased.

Robbie Moore: Does the Minister recognise that many landlords are not in a sound financial position themselves, and that the challenge of getting the energy performance rating of their rental properties up to C can therefore be incredibly costly and sometimes unachievable, given the old housing stock? Will she outline what support will be available to achieve the Government's ambition of upgrading to an energy performance rating of C?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We have estimated that the average cost of upgrading homes to C is about £6,000. To protect landlords, we have put in place a cap of £15,000 and created mechanisms to provide exemptions for those landlords who we know will genuinely struggle. Alongside that, we are already providing support through our boiler upgrade scheme and warm homes local grant, which landlords can access, and we will be setting out more measures in the warm homes plan to support landlords on this journey. I should say that the vast majority of landlords want to do this—50% have already done so. We need to level the playing field for renters, so that all landlords are delivering homes to a standard that will ensure that they are warmer and cheaper to run for tenants.

A big plank of what we know we need to do to tackle fuel poverty—alongside what we are trying to do on minimum energy efficiency standards in the rental sector—will be our warm homes plan, which will transform homes across the country to make them cheaper and warmer. The idea behind it is simple and will mean upgrading homes with insulation, solar and heat pumps. In response to the points made about delays in rolling out the warm home plan, I would say that we are running at this. This year alone, we have massively increased the number of upgrades that we are expecting

[*Miatta Fahnbulleh*]

to 300,000, backed by £3.2 billion-worth of investment, and we will come forward in the spring with our plans to ramp that up.

The key thing that we are trying to achieve is moving from the hundreds of thousands of upgrades that we have seen—the inheritance of the last Government, who frankly slashed home upgrades, despite knowing their huge impact on bills and the comfort of consumers—to upgrading millions of homes. That will mean taking a comprehensive look at how we increase demand for home upgrades and deliver at scale in different places, working with regional government and suppliers, and, critically, how we ensure that when people go on this journey of upgrading their homes, they have the confidence to know—to the point made earlier—that the work will be done to a quality standard, and that if things go wrong there will be redress and protection. The current system that we inherited was far too fragmented and ad hoc. Consumers are not at its heart, and we absolutely must turn that around.

Ellie Chowns: I thank the Minister for giving way and for her comments so far. On the point about tackling the fragmentation and ad hoc nature of the previous system, does the Minister agree with me that home insulation upgrades are a win-win-win policy. They are good for people's warmth and health, they are really good for jobs and they help to save the climate as well. One key barrier in recent years has been the stop-start, year-on-year type of policy that means that nobody in the supply chain is able to plan and have the strategic direction that they need to make the investments, build the labour force and so forth. Will the Government provide the long-term certainty about the policy direction and level of investment required so that everybody can pull together in the same direction?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I absolutely agree that home insulation is a key part of how we tackle the problem of fuel poverty. Unless we have homes that are insulated, whatever energy we put into people's homes, at whatever price, is going out of their windows. That is why it is so important to what we are trying to do through the warm homes plan. We seek through the plan to provide long-term certainty: for consumers, so that they know there is a programme that will support them through a journey, and, critically, for the supply chain.

I have spoken to many installers who tell me they are living hand to mouth. The ability to build, to plan, to recruit apprenticeships and to build up capacity is constrained by a stop-start approach. We are clear that the plan needs to be long term. We are working to make sure we can underpin that with long-term certainty on funding, so that we can see the level of ramp-up and scale-up that we need to insulate and upgrade millions of homes, rather than hundreds of thousands of homes.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order. Can I just say that I need to bring in the mover of the motion for a couple of minutes at the end? Thank you, Minister.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Let me address the points made by Members from rural constituencies. This plan has to work for every part of the country and we have to have solutions for every house. Rather than the Government dictating solutions from on high in Whitehall, we need to empower the system to figure out the best way to deliver warm homes for people across the country. That means thinking about the range and mix of solutions that go into people's homes, so that they can have low-carbon options, but also options that work for their pockets.

Alongside what we need to do through our warm homes plan, it is important to say that we must also deal with the question of supporting households on bills. That is why going into this winter, wanting to do everything we can to support the most vulnerable, I worked with energy suppliers to get them to commit to £500 million of industry support for people this winter so that we can get help to households that we know are struggling. The Government have also extended the household support fund until 31 March 2026 with an extra £752 million. We are providing the cold weather payment and our Department is providing the warm home discount to more than 3 million households. The Warm Home Discount (England and Wales) Regulations 2022 expire in 2026, so we want to consider options for the future.

Members talked about a social tariff. The challenge with the social tariff, which we are hearing about across the piece, is that it means different things to different people. However, we are looking at all the options to make sure we can provide the support that people need.

In conclusion, I understand Members' passion; I share their passion and their commitment. Energy is not a luxury good. It is not a "nice to have". It is foundational for people, but it is out of reach for some. That is a shame and a stain on us, and we are determined to turn things around.

10.59 am

Jon Trickett: I thank everybody for contributing. The House will have heard the Minister's passion and commitment. I was particularly interested in what she said about warm homes—that she had heard heartbreaking stories and was determined to drive down fuel poverty. Although there was much that was good in her remarks, there were elements missing. In truth, our society is deeply dysfunctional; it needs structural change and a rupture with the existing arrangements. The fact that billions of pounds of profits are made in the energy sector while millions of people are left in poverty leads me to one conclusion: those who drive people into poverty by driving up the prices must pay for the fact that so many people are in poverty, while we get on with retrofitting houses.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Knife Crime in London

11 am

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered knife crime in London.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford.

Violence behaves like a virus. It spreads among a community and wreaks havoc not just on our streets but on our lives. There is a particularly virulent strain in London: knife crime. It was once said by a Prime Minister-in-waiting that real action on this issue means being “tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime.”

Three decades on from those famous words, talking about violent crime as a social issue has fallen out of political fashion, as though sociologists and social workers on the ground are too misguided, too soft and even too woke to address it, but the notion that we have all been too soft on crime has a dangerous implication: that the surging knife crime on London’s streets can be punished away with tougher sentences and stronger deterrents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To my mind, the upward trend is worrying. There must be a zero-tolerance policy, so that if someone leaves the house with a knife in their pocket or coat, a custodial sentence is necessary. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that that has to be part of the strategy?

Luke Taylor: I fully agree. The community-based approaches that I will come to later in my speech recognise that point.

I intend today to state the case that a false premise has been advanced; that successive Governments have failed to invest enough in a whole-of-society approach to reducing knife crime and young people are dying as a result; and that if we are to have any hope of getting a grip on the crisis, we must get serious about a public health approach and the restoration of true, old-fashioned community policing.

The pillars of such an approach are threefold. First, we must reinvigorate visible policing by restoring police budgets and get more beats, not just more bobbies. Secondly, we must rescue the early intervention space, protect it from short-termism and ensure that it has the resource it needs. Thirdly, we must get serious about incorporating a public health approach, with greater cohesion between civil society institutions, and willingness to try community and victim-led solutions such as restorative justice.

Let us start with restoring community policing. The data shows that the number of police community support officers in the Metropolitan police force declined from 4,247 in 2008 to a mere 1,215 in 2023. That failure, which occurred on the watch of consecutive mayors from both main parties, highlights the scale of the crisis.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate on such an important topic. Everyone deserves to feel safe, yet over the last 14 years we have seen police numbers being decimated. In the borough that encompasses my constituency of Ilford South, we used to have five police stations. Now, there is only one, for four constituencies. What we have tried to do is to bring engagement and enforcement hubs into the community. Does the hon. Member agree

with me that bringing police into the communities they serve is a vital part of keeping our communities safe and of restoring pride in the police?

Luke Taylor: I could not agree more. I was interested to hear the hon. Member’s speech the other day about including council enforcement officers in these hubs, too. Having them present in the community and accessible to residents is incredibly important. I am keen to have a conversation with him about the measures that he has achieved.

To follow exactly the point the hon. Member just made, at the time when we should be getting more police embedded in communities to halt knife crime, we have instead let numbers crater. We know that research consistently shows violent crime dropping significantly in areas where the police are present, visible and proactive.

In December 2023, when, tragically, a knife cut short the life of a young man in my constituency, Ilyas Habibi, who was just 17, he was just minutes away from a local police station. Just as worrying is that the fact that in my constituency and across London, we see safer neighbourhood officers being abstracted from their beats—a quirk of the Met police set-up that results in vital officers who should be on our streets, making our neighbourhoods safer, being pulled away for major police operational events, typically in central London. It is, in effect, robbing outer London to pay inner London and it has to stop. These officers want to be doing great work in the community, but the failure to recruit across the Met is letting them and, by extension, us down.

There can be no doubt that recruiting into the Met is challenging. The Casey report outlined the scale of the failures that have occurred in recent years far better than any of us can—the failures to get a grip on damaging internal cultures, to protect the victims of crime, and overall to carry the confidence of the very communities they serve. I have met Commissioner Rowley and I acknowledge his undertakings to reform the Met. Nobody in this place can pretend that his role is easy; we must recognise that he needs the full backing of Government to reinvigorate the force and repair its image.

As yesterday’s ruling on vetting clearance and dismissals shows, the hurdles in front of these reforms are immense, and the single greatest tool to smash through those hurdles is the powers that the Secretary of State holds. To bolster a new Met for London and drive knife crime down, it should be a priority of this Government to expedite the reforms we all know the Met needs. Without these reforms, how can we expect recruitment to bounce back? I urge the Minister to today outline what steps the Government are taking to get back to proper community policing, to work with the Metropolitan police to reduce abstraction rates, and to support Commissioner Rowley as he embarks on his package of reforms.

We cannot look to policing alone, though. The whole-of-society approach that is so desperately needed will require an “it takes a village” attitude, and requires a Government committed to supporting early intervention initiatives. A key first step is diversionary programmes, which we know can cut out knife crime before it can metastasise across our streets. The targeted early help and integrated support teams at Sutton borough council do excellent work with young people in my constituency. Their approach is targeted; once a potential young

[Luke Taylor]

offender reprimanded by the police is brought to their attention, they work tirelessly to build positive relationships with the child to stop the otherwise steady and depressing downward spiral into criminality. It is vital to remember that these schemes offer opportunities to young people who are often not afforded the luxury of such attention elsewhere in their lives.

In London, these intervention programmes rely heavily on grants from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, the Ministry of Justice and the violence reduction unit, but youth services across London often face uncertainty about how and when these grants will be allocated. The team we spoke to at Sutton council is still waiting to see if its grant will be approved for March, which is only a few weeks' time. In addition, these grants are typically only allocated for 18-month to two-year periods, leaving little space for local authorities to plan ahead.

All the evidence shows that young people susceptible to committing this form of violence require sustained relationships with skilled youth workers to help them to choose safer paths. Such a relationship can take months to form, but it acts as a critical antidote to the peer pressure and social circumstances that are otherwise weighing on the child. It is therefore utterly misguided to continue with this short-termism. Skilled youth workers are deterred from engaging in local authority work due to temporary contract conditions and the lingering threat of grant termination, which could see the shattering of crucial relationships between London's youth workers and young people at risk of committing knife-related offences. I am therefore keen to hear from the Minister whether she will consider ringfencing funding for local authority early intervention services in London. Without multi-year funding to improve planning and put these services on a more stable footing, this vital first step in preventing knife crime will fall by the wayside.

Backing early intervention is just one of the arrows in the quiver of a wider approach that we must shift to. Young people will continue to die if we do not take heed of our Scottish counterparts and finally embrace a public health approach. Famously, Glasgow took thousands of knives off the streets, and rallied organisations at every level to intervene before a crime was committed. That approach breaks down the silo walls between bodies, putting teachers, A&E doctors, social workers, sports clubs and many more stakeholders in partnership with law enforcement.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, and he has identified that there is no one solution to this. The Scotland example shows what can be done, but there are some practical measures that can be taken. For example, half of all homicides with sharp instruments are done with kitchen knives, and that simply has not been tackled. It might be tackled, or the problem might at least be alleviated, by encouraging the transition to blunted knives rather than pointed knives. Does he support that?

Luke Taylor: Introducing blunted knives is a very good example of thinking differently about this crime. The tabloid approach of looking for popular, big and

visible solutions, such as banning zombie knives, while important, often ignores the statistics of how crimes are most often committed. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, so I thank him.

The public health approach sees the problem of knife crime in three dimensions and recognises that violence begets violence like an illness. Returning to my argument that violent crime is like a virus, I remind hon. Members that when a contagious, dangerous virus broke out in this country half a decade ago, we rallied every aspect of civil society to fight it. Public services, the police and the third sector were all brought together to work as partners rather than in silos. Implicitly, we recognise that this is the right way to tackle an emergency that threatens life and limb, so why do we fail so consistently to bring that approach to bear in dealing with knife crime in the capital?

A hallmark of this approach is the creation of violence reduction units and the provision of serious financial support by Government to make them the hubs of proactive action they need to be. In London, we have done the first part by creating a violence reduction unit in 2018, but its potential remains woefully unrealised. The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies told me that it fears that the unit remains limited in its ability to engage with wider civil society and is still entangled in the paradigm of enforcement rather than engagement. Funding for the VRUs, including the one in London, is just too low to make this strategy a reality, so it should surprise none of us that it has not borne fruit.

There is a wider problem in that politicians of all stripes have paid lip service to the idea of a public health approach, but have utterly failed to implement it. The last Conservative Government, keen to be seen to do something, embraced the language of public health and crime reduction, but we have seen none of this effectively put into practice. Instead, they piloted controversial new powers that increased suspicionless stop and search, which evidently did little to stop knife crime, although the findings from the pilots have yet to be brought before Parliament.

It just is not good enough—not for mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters all over London whose lives have been ripped apart by knife crime. They deserve a public health approach. We must join up public bodies, the police and the third sector so that young people are supported before they slip through the cracks. We have to consider the principles of restorative practice, too, because they underlie and echo everything that is good about the public health approach.

Earlier this week, I met with Ray and Vi Donovan, who lost their son in a violent attack in 2001. In his memory, they created and have for many years run the award-winning Chris Donovan Trust, which works with police, public bodies and charities across the board to highlight the value of restorative justice in preventing reoffending. They told me that their work takes the restorative principles not just into prisons but schools. That approach, which is grounded in embedding empathy and victim awareness in young people, is like a light in the dark in London. It awakens in young people on the cusp of gang life, and even in young people already drowning silently within it, an awareness that carrying a knife will inevitably one day ruin their life and the lives of others. Restorative practice is too often overlooked, even as part of the wider package of public health

reforms to tackle crime, yet it is vital to winning the war for the hearts and minds of young people at risk of picking up a knife.

Will the Minister consider putting victim awareness on the curriculum? I encourage the Government to publish all the findings from the serious violence reduction orders that were trialled by the last Government, as well as detailed conclusions about the impact of suspicionless stop and search trials under the knife crime prevention orders. If these punitive and controversial methods worked, surely this information would have already been shared; none the less, Parliament deserves to see the findings in writing, so that we can hasten the end of this troubled approach and speed up the saving of young lives through a better approach, grounded in public health.

Too many young people are being failed before they even set foot into adulthood, and Londoners have had enough of senseless stabbing after senseless stabbing, but the truth at the heart of this crisis is that people carry knives because they fear becoming a victim themselves. The only way to combat that climate of fear is with a public health approach that actually gets results. I reminded the House earlier this month, and I do so again now, that success in this area is measured in something more important than profit or efficiency; it is measured in lives saved, lives nourished and lives reinvigorated.

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister to respond, I remind the Member in charge that he will not have the opportunity to wind up the debate, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

11.16 am

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Efford.

I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) for securing this very important debate. I think that we both took part in a Westminster Hall debate a little while ago about knife crime in the west midlands, which was another important opportunity to shine a light on this very concerning problem.

I want to mention the other hon. Members who have spoken, too. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about zero tolerance, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) talked about how important it is to have the police in our communities, because they are vital to keeping those communities safe, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) talked about practical suggestions to address knife crime. I have said before that I am willing to look at any of the issues that might help us to address knife crime.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful to the Minister for being so generous with her time, as she was in meeting the safer knives group to discuss this issue. I am not expecting a policy position today, but perhaps she could say when the Government are likely to come forward with proposals on the scourge of knife crime that is affecting us.

Dame Diana Johnson: It is fair to say that we are looking constantly at what more we can do. Although I cannot give a timetable, perhaps I can reassure my

hon. Friend by saying that the issue is under active consideration, and we are keen to look at evidence and consider what more we might be able to do on the particular point that I know he is interested in.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam powerfully illustrated the depth of concern about knife crime, and I am grateful for this opportunity to set out the Government's approach to tackling it. It is important to say that it is a whole-of-Government approach, which fits very well within our safer streets mission and with our clear objective to halve knife crime over the course of the next 10 years.

Before I talk a little more about the particular policies that we will adopt, I want to remind all hon. Members that we must keep at the forefront of our minds the people who are directly affected by this dangerous and, in the worst cases, deadly threat. The victims of knife crime and their loved ones must all be in our thoughts and prayers, today and always. I was really interested to hear about the excellent work of the Chris Donovan Trust. I really would like to find out more about that, and perhaps meet the trust to see what more I can do to support it.

First and foremost, as I said, this has to be about keeping people safe. It is about ensuring that more families do not go through the agony of that empty chair at the dining table. The tragic truth is that knife crime destroys lives and, too often, young lives with futures that should have been filled with hope and potential are lost. That is why we described it as a national crisis in our manifesto and why, as I said, we set ourselves the aim of halving knife crime in a decade, as part of the safer streets mission.

I will talk a little about the coalition to tackle knife crime, to set the context. The Prime Minister launched the coalition in September. It brings together campaign groups, families of those who have tragically lost their lives to knife crime, young people who have been impacted, and community leaders—united in their mission to save lives. We are very pleased that there is representation from London in the coalition. It will work with the Government to help us identify the children and young people at risk of being affected by knife crime. It will help us to design policy changes and reforms based on the best possible evidence and, most importantly, tackle the root causes of knife crime.

I heard what the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said about the importance of education. I recently wrote to the Secretary of State for Education about the curriculum review, including on relationships and sex education, to ensure that knife crime and what it means can be part of that review. I must also say to the hon. Gentleman that, to be frank, half an hour is not long enough for this debate, so I will take away a number of his asks and come back to him with information and a way forward.

When it comes to tackling this most dangerous of threats, it is essential that we have resources going into our neighbourhood policing. Few things matter more than the presence of community policing, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South referred. That is why the restoration of neighbourhood policing is at the heart of our plans to reform policing, and why we have committed to delivering an additional 13,000 police officers, PCSOs and specials in neighbourhood policing roles.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

As the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam will know, as part of the police settlement, we have doubled to £200 million the amount of money going into neighbourhood policing for next year to kick-start the neighbourhood policing guarantee. That will apply to the Metropolitan police as well. I heard loud and clear his concerns about abstraction, but the neighbourhood policing guarantee is about those additional officers who will be in neighbourhoods. They will not be abstracted. There will be a named police officer that the community can reach out to.

I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Metropolitan police faces some very big challenges. It is important to note that progress has been made on the “A New Met for London” plan. In recent weeks, the Met came out of the “engage” process with the police inspectorate, so progress is being made. As a Minister, I have regular meetings with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and other officers to ensure that the Home Office is providing all that we can to support Sir Mark in his work.

This morning, I heard Sir Mark on the radio talking about the judicial review case yesterday. I assure the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam that work is ongoing to deal with the particular issue that Sir Mark was talking about this morning. I think we all agree that we want to have police officers—in the Met and every police force—who are able to do their job effectively and are properly vetted, and that anyone who cannot hold vetting as a police officer should not be in the police force. Please rest assured that that work is ongoing.

I want to talk a little bit about Young Futures, which the Government are putting forward as part of the solution to knife crime. Too many children and young people today face poorer life outcomes, including becoming involved in knife crime, because they are not effectively identified and supported early enough through early intervention. To address that issue, we have committed to creating the Young Futures programme, which will establish a network of Young Futures hubs and Young Futures prevention partnerships to intervene earlier to ensure that this cohort is identified and offered support, as well as creating more opportunities for young people in their communities through the provision of open access to, for example, mental health, careers and mentoring support.

Young Futures hubs will bring together the support services that tackle the underlying needs of vulnerable children and young people, making them more accessible to those who need them. The hubs will promote children's and young people's development, improve their mental health and wellbeing, and prevent them from being drawn into crime.

Young Futures prevention partnerships will bring together key partners in local areas across England and Wales to identify vulnerable children and young people at risk of being drawn into crime, map local youth service provision, and offer support in a more systematic way to divert them. I also note the comments that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam made about securing funding for the long term, and I will reflect on those.

I also want to mention violence reduction units. One of the issues that we face, especially in the prevention sphere, is the number of agencies that are involved. By

bringing together partners and mobilising them behind the same goals at local level, violence reduction units perform a really important role. In response to the drivers of violence and knife crime, they have been delivering a range of early intervention and prevention programmes to support young people away from a life of crime, including activity across all 32 boroughs through the London crime prevention fund, enabling the local adoption of a public health approach and borough-level violence reduction interventions.

Violence reduction unit programmes span from police custody to the community—some of which Members might have seen featured in Idris Elba's recent knife crime documentary for the BBC. They include the excellent work under way at the Royal London hospital, which I had the great privilege of visiting yesterday. I met the dedicated team of youth workers who provide support to young people at a critical teachable moment—when they are admitted for violent injuries—and provide positive routes out. The confirmed police funding settlement for next year includes over £49 million for the continuation of this work to prevent serious violence, delivered through violence reduction units. In London, that amounts to £9.4 million, which was announced yesterday.

The Labour Government have also made a commitment on youth offending team referrals for young knife carriers. We are working closely with the Ministry of Justice to deliver that manifesto commitment to ensure that every young person found in possession of a knife is referred to a youth offending team, with mandatory plans in place. That can include electronic monitoring and custody where appropriate to prevent reoffending.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam referred to stop and search, which is an important tool. I am well aware of issues around different communities being searched in different ways, but, used in an intelligence-led way, it can be very fair and effective. It is worth reflecting on the fact that in the 12 months to March 2024, stop and search led to 4,048 offensive weapons and firearms being found by the police in London. It has its place in the arsenal that the police can access.

We have already started to deal with some other issues around knives. For example, we have implemented a ban on zombie knives and zombie-style machetes, which came into force on 24 September. We have consulted on a ban on ninja swords, and we hope to bring that forward shortly. We have had Commander Stephen Clayman at the National Police Chiefs' Council leading a review of online sales, and the Home Secretary has announced in the last few weeks that the Government intend to strengthen age verification controls and checks for all online sellers of knives at the point of purchase and on delivery. We have also consulted on introducing personal liability measures on senior executives of online platforms or marketplaces who fail to take action to remove illegal content relating to knives and offensive weapons.

I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam for securing this important debate. I think we are all seeking the same outcomes: a reduction in knife crime and safer streets. Those objectives are central to the Government's plan for change, and we will do everything in our power to achieve them.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Support for Pensioners

[DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH in the Chair]

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Work and Pensions Committee on 18 December 2024 and 22 January 2025, on Pensioner Poverty: challenges and mitigations, HC 465; Written evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, on Pensioner Poverty: challenges and mitigations, reported to the House on 22 January and 5 February 2025, HC 465; e-petition 700120, Stop Means Testing Pensioners and increase the State Pension; e-petition 700113, Give State Pension to all at 60 and increase it to equal 48hrs at Living Wage; and e-petition 700074, Reverse changes to Winter Fuel Payment.]

2.30 pm

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for pensioners.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I have secured this debate because not only do pensioners represent an enormous portion of our population—over 10 million people—but the way we support them impacts every single person in this country.

From the start to the end of our careers, we should all aspire to a comfortable retirement for ourselves and our loved ones. I know the Government understand that, because before the election they made big pitches to pensioners. The now Work and Pensions Secretary said:

“Labour are determined to once again be the Pensioners Party.”

The now Prime Minister said:

“My Labour Party will always be on the side of pensioners”.

Members may recall that Labour’s manifesto featured the heartbreaking story of Gary, a pensioner who was struggling to heat his house on his pension. I feel immensely for people like Gary, who have struggled when times were really tough, and who voted with hope for a Government that they believed would reduce their energy bills and look after vulnerable pensioners.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the excellent speech that he is making. Only today I heard from a pensioner in West Worcestershire on an income of £13,500 who was stripped of his winter fuel allowance last year. He is having to live in only one room, as that is all he can afford to heat. Is my hon. Friend as shocked as I was to hear that example?

Blake Stephenson: I am absolutely shocked, and I will come on to mention a few stories from my own constituents. They are very similar, and I think we are hearing these stories up and down the country.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking very well about the challenges that older people are facing. I note that there are no Labour Back Benchers here to contribute to the debate. We have the Minister and his Parliamentary Private Secretary, so the payroll are here, but despite all the rhetoric during the general election campaign about supporting pensioners, Labour Back Benchers do not seem to be willing to stand up for them in this debate.

Blake Stephenson: I had noted the same, but I was going to wait until the end of the debate to see if any sneaked in. Perhaps the Whips are calling them now—who knows? We will see whether any turn up to defend the current Government’s record.

The simple reality is that hope for more support was misplaced. Instead, energy bills are up and support for vulnerable pensioners has been cut. The Prime Minister said in April that Britain’s pensioners want politicians who will be straight with them, and I agree. Here is the truth: whatever the failings of the previous Government, and whatever difficulties they had grappling with the impacts of covid, the invasion of Ukraine and their own missteps at times, they always tried to support pensioners. As recently as March last year, the now Pensions Minister, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), admitted on social media that

“pensioners are an average of £1,000 better off”

as a result of policies since 2010. He may want to reflect on that when he sums up this debate.

Last winter, Gary might well have received £600 from his winter fuel payment and his pensioner cost of living payment; this winter, he might well have received nothing. Like an estimated 9.2 million pensioners who lost their winter fuel payment this winter, Gary may have found himself without the vital support he received last winter to make that choice between heating and eating a little less difficult.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some really important points, particularly with the examples of pensioners who find themselves trapped. The crux of this issue the unfairness, but it is also about the speed with which this policy decision—this political choice—was made. Even as recently as 27 April 2024, the now Prime Minister was saying:

“Britain’s pensioners deserve better. They deserve certainty, and for politicians to be straight with them so they can plan their lives.”

This is not an example of fairness, it is not an example of certainty, and it is certainly not an example of being straight with pensioners.

Blake Stephenson: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, and I will come on to the importance of certainty and stability when it comes to pensions, so that people can plan for their futures, regardless of their age. For the Government to pull the rug out from under the feet of vulnerable pensioners with little or no notice at all is absolutely shameful.

Gary has seen the Government that he voted for with hope and optimism for a better life snatch away the lifeline he relied on. If he is on the old basic state pension, he will have seen 86.5% of his triple lock-backed increase snatched back. Indeed, he could well find that it will take until 2027-28 for his income to reach the level that he might have expected to see this winter.

Gary is not alone, because although this Government talk about millionaire pensioners being able to cope, for many of the 9.2 million pensioners losing their winter fuel payment, that really was vital support. The average pensioner, far from being the millionaire fat cat that the Government would like us all to imagine, earns just over £22,000 per year—similar to the income of a worker on the living wage. The level at which the threshold to keep winter fuel payments was set for a single pensioner

[Blake Stephenson]

means that someone could be bringing in less than £1,000 per month and now be one of the “millionaire pensioners” on whose shoulders the Government have chosen to balance the books.

Age UK estimates that 2.5 million pensioners living in poverty or just above the poverty line, including 1.1 million pensioners with a disability, will lose their winter fuel payment. I have heard so many stories from constituents in Mid Bedfordshire about the impact that that will have on them—stories of people who have had to make the stark choice between heating and eating this winter. I heard from a constituent who now cannot shower, who cooks a hot meal just once a week, and who can turn on their heating only when it is “unbearably freezing”. One constituent told me of the struggles to keep their 92-year-old father warm. Their father has dementia, and he keeps worrying about the bills.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions dementia. Nearly 1 million pensioners in this country are living with dementia. Two weeks ago, NHS England published its priorities, and dementia had been removed, as had the target for diagnosing it. Does he agree that that is a huge concern, not only for those living with dementia, but for the millions of family members and friends who support them?

Blake Stephenson: I know that my hon. Friend cares passionately for people living with dementia and their families, and he makes a very important point. It is another shameful decision by this Government not to support the most vulnerable in our society, and people should be shocked by it.

Another constituent told me that they have stopped using their cooker and that they now find it difficult even to dry their washing. This Government promised that they would be on the side of pensioners. However, as a constituent recently summed it up for me, they feel “terribly let down by the Government”.

They are right to feel like that. This Government have let my constituents—indeed, all our pensioners—down. They have balanced the books on the backs of people earning less than £1,000 per month. Even if someone is still eligible for winter fuel payments, they will get them only if they have signed up for pension credit.

The arbitrary barrier of the pension credit threshold will mean that many of our poorest pensioners—Age UK estimates that around 1 million people have weekly incomes of less than £50 above the poverty line—will not receive their winter fuel payment this winter. Potentially hundreds of thousands of even poorer pensioners will miss out on vital support, because the Government expect them to answer over 200 questions—two hundred questions—to access the help they need.

Perhaps I am being unfair.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): No.

Blake Stephenson: My hon. Friend says no, but I was making a rhetorical statement.

Perhaps I am being unfair. Perhaps the Government care deeply about supporting pensioners and have been working tirelessly to help them. Well, there is another

problem there, because a Government working tirelessly to support the most vulnerable pensioners would know exactly how many needed support and how many were missing. They would have a tracker counting down towards zero, and a working culture in the Department for Work and Pensions that meant it did not rest until everyone who needed support received it. Do they have that culture? No, they do not. The Government have already admitted that they have set no targets for pension credit sign-ups, and last month they could not even give me an estimate of how many pensioners below the pension credit threshold will not receive their winter fuel payment this winter. These are the most vulnerable people in our society. It is utterly shameful.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is being generous with his time. He is rightly highlighting the weaknesses of the Labour Government in supporting pensioners. Does he agree that in many communities, the voluntary and third sector is now stepping forward to provide that support? In my area we have the Borders Older People’s Forum, the warm-ups in St Boswells village hall, the Hawick dementia café and multiple other examples of the voluntary and third sector stepping forward to provide the support that the Government should be providing.

Blake Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for making such an important point. Yes, the third sector has come forward to support, but what have the Government done to the third sector? They have applied national insurance increases and reduced the threshold, causing pain and suffering for the sector that our constituents now rely on because the Government have stepped away from their responsibilities.

The support that the Government have given pensioners to cover off the impacts of their decision to cut winter fuel payments is merely the thinnest of political spin. The most prominent such cover is the extension of the household support fund, which itself is an attempt to outsource the protection of vulnerable residents to already under-pressure local authorities that should be focused on delivering high-quality public services.

But it is worse than just outsourcing the problem, because a bit of examination showed that up to be the most disappointing example of the empty words our constituents hate. Despite the spin, the truth is that the household support fund simply has not been designed with pensioners in mind. The east of England receives £32.90 per pensioner. London receives double that: £66.73. When I first saw those numbers and the Government’s description of the household support fund as mitigation for pensioners, I wondered why London’s pensioners had been deemed so much more deserving of support, so I wrote to the Secretary of State. I got the simple answer that the fund is not intended to be targeted at pensioners. The Government have even admitted to me that they do not know how much of the household support fund went to pensioners this winter. Age UK estimates that typically, £1 in every £10 the household support fund pays out goes to pensioners.

What does all that mean for our pensioners? It means more pensioners in hospital—nearly 20,000 more in November and December 2024 than in the same months in 2023, a 6.6% increase. That is 6.6% more stress on our already overstretched health services, and it is nearly

20,000 more pensioners suffering in hospital and potentially suffering lasting ill health, because this Government, which some of them voted for in the belief that they would look after them, forced them to make a choice between heating and eating. It means tens of thousands more pensioners in poverty. Those are the Government's own statistics.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend think it is notable that current chief medical officer, who remains in post under this Government, in his 2023 annual report, cited specifically the concern that cold homes were a driver of hospital admissions? My hon. Friend will also note that delayed discharge from hospital is often a cause of pressure in urgent and emergency care departments, yet the Government have again delayed any changes to social care. While we all recognise that there are often challenges—indeed, as a Minister, I faced them myself—the hypocrisy of those who suggested before the election that there were simple solutions, and yet are now taking decisions that are actively leading to elderly, frail patients being admitted to hospital, at the same time as other decisions are deliberately delayed, is striking.

Blake Stephenson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. My original speech had an element of social care in it, but I took it out, so I am pleased that he brought that up. This Government have kicked social care reform down the road, and we can kick it down the road no longer. We have to face up to these difficult and tough decisions. There are no simple answers to these things, but my right hon. Friend makes a good point and I agree with him.

I have used the example of winter fuel payments to demonstrate a simple truth. This Government told pensioners that they were on their side. They campaigned for their votes. The Pensions Minister—again, I have been watching his X or Twitter—was even at the pensioners club in Swansea just days before the general election, no doubt reassuring them that he was on their side. Perhaps when he comes to respond he will tell us what he was doing. They have let our pensioners down, without apology, without owning their decision, and without any care for what it might mean for millions of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Now the 9.2 million pensioners—13.5% of the UK population—who are losing their winter fuel payment see the Government talking about sending money that could pay for it many times over to Mauritius. If they care about helping pensioners, they are out of their depth. They did not think about the impact of their decisions and have not bothered to monitor it. If they do not care, they gave pensioners false hope and took it away as soon as the votes were counted. What a sad state of affairs.

On too many issues, the Labour party was happy to talk the talk in opposition, but is unwilling to, or perhaps incapable of, walking the walk in government. In June, the now Work and Pensions Secretary decried the number of pensioners paying tax going up under the Conservatives. In November 2023, the now Chancellor said that the Government were picking people's pockets by not increasing tax thresholds. Now that the Labour Government are in charge, an estimated 2 million more pensioners will be paying tax by 2032. Time and again we see the same old Labour party, which will say anything to get votes and nothing to help when in government.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): On the subject of broken promises, before the general election, the now Prime Minister said that there would be no increases in council tax. However, many of the 64,000 pensioners across the Bradford district who will be impacted by the winter fuel allowance will also have a 10% increase in their council tax as a result of our local Labour-run administration. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just the broken promise of the winter fuel allowance that will impact pensioners, but the broken promise of increased council tax?

Blake Stephenson: Indeed, the winter fuel allowance is one example of many broken promises. I know that my constituents feel let down by this Labour Government, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising some pertinent examples from his constituency.

Where do we go from here? Well, I am here to help the Government with some simple ways in which they can help our pensioners.

Wendy Morton: I don't think they are listening.

Blake Stephenson: I do not think they are listening either, but let's try. The Minister for Employment has told me previously about the Government's desire to help pensioners reduce their energy bills, and I agree. There was a flagship policy in Labour's manifesto, but good intentions alone are not enough to reduce energy bills. The Government's Great British Energy pet project will not produce any energy. It will not employ anything near the number of people they said it would, and its boss cannot say when it will reduce energy bills. For many pensioners, that simply will not be soon enough. It is not just the Government's GB Energy plans that are a mirage. They want to improve energy efficiency, but they cannot say where their warm home grants will be spent. They cannot say how many of the worst impacted properties off the energy grid are listed buildings that would need more specialist support.

All the energy wasted on plans that will not bring down energy bills could have been better spent taking real steps to reduce them. While the Government have been talking about reducing energy bills, they have gone up by £170. Our pensioners deserve better. They deserve real, focused action to drive up energy efficiency and drive down energy bills.

From the private sector I know that the old axiom "what gets measured gets done" is more than a cliché. The Government need to start taking seriously getting every single person eligible for pension credit signed up for it. To do that, they need to set out a credible, measurable plan with targets that we can all hold them to account on. Our pensioners deserve better. They deserve a real focus to make sure that the most vulnerable pensioners get the help they need. Getting them that help will also help the Government in their mission to grow the economy.

Independent Age found that spending an additional £2.1 billion on pension credit for all eligible pensioners would save the NHS and social care around £4 billion. That is extra money to spend on the Government's priorities—growing the economy and delivering better public services while protecting the most vulnerable pensioners. We must also go further to ensure that the Government are able to support both the pensioners of

[Blake Stephenson]

today and the pensioners of tomorrow. People need confidence and certainty in pensions to plan. That is a lesson we must learn from the winter fuel fiasco, and indeed from the legacy of the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. Politicians cannot continue to promise things that cannot be delivered. We have a duty in this place to deliver the things we promise. That means ensuring that we put the state pension on a long-term sustainable footing with a plan that looks to the future.

During this Parliament we must clearly communicate to the young people starting work now the support that they can expect to receive from the state when they retire, so that from their first days in work young people can start to plan for a comfortable retirement. We must get pensions reform right—I think the Minister will agree with that—so that young people have good choices available to them as they build financially secure futures. In doing so, we can build greater financial resilience so that the next generation of pensioners, and those that come after, will never have to worry about choosing between heating and eating again. To do anything else would be a dereliction of the duty we have been entrusted with by our constituents.

The Government promised pensioners that they would deliver for them. Instead, they have chosen to balance the books on the backs of people who cannot simply turn around and go back to work, and who cannot find an extra £50 behind the sofa to turn on the heating this week. Although the Government can hide behind shameful, politically driven characterisations of some of the poorest in our society as millionaire pensioners to justify snatching away vital support, pensioners know the truth. Labour were elected on a promise to make pensioners' lives easier; they have done the opposite. Over the next four years we all have a duty to do better for the pensioners of today and the pensioners of tomorrow. I hope that the Government will get a grip quickly and rise to that challenge.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak in the debate.

2.53 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing this important debate.

Adequate Government support for pensioners is vital to ensuring dignity in old age. Indeed, the mark of a civilised society is the extent to which it looks after vulnerable people. Many, many pensioners have only the state pension as their main source of income. The UK Government's recent action to cut support for pensioners has rightfully been met with anger. Labour MPs, including all Scottish Labour MPs, voted to cut the winter fuel payment for 900,000 Scots. Weeks later, Scottish Labour MSPs voted against an SNP Government motion demanding that the UK Government reverse the introduction of means-testing of the winter fuel payment. Now Anas Sarwar claims they are going to deliver it if he is elected next year. Pensioners do not have time for that kind of Scottish Labour false promise while their benefits are being cut.

Ministers point to the uptake in pension credit as some sort of mitigation for the cut in the winter fuel payment, but it seems ridiculous that the cut was not delayed to allow for a longer uptake campaign. I hope the Minister will tell us, because I do not understand yet, what the trade-off is between the revenue raised by the cut in the winter fuel payment and the uptake of pension credit. If the uptake increases to, say, 50% or 60%, what does that do to the money that the cut is supposed to be raising?

If the Government had delayed the cut, that would have ensured that pensioners do not miss out and would have reduced the number of pensioners going cold this winter. I come from one of the coldest parts of these islands. Hon. Members have probably heard of Braemar, which is often said to be one of the coldest parts of the UK. It is in the north-east, close to Balmoral, the King's private estate. Many, many pensioners in the north-east are feeling the effects of this cold winter. I totally endorse the comments that were made about the impact that has on people's health, the increased admission rate to hospital, the increased number of delayed discharges, and the increased number of avoidable deaths.

In the general election, Labour was elected on a platform of change, but I and many voters had no idea that that change would be to cut the winter fuel payment for pensioners. I am old enough to remember previous Labour Governments, and I do not recognise this Government as a real Labour Government. They just do not seem like the kind of Government I was expecting.

At least one colleague in this Chamber was with me when we had a debate on fuel poverty in England. We heard about all sorts of measures that the Government could be taking, such as social tariffs, social prescribing and, perhaps more importantly, some form of windfall tax on the obscene profits that energy companies are making—I think the figure cited was £423 billion or something of that order. A windfall tax on that level of profit would absolutely dwarf any saving from the cut to the winter fuel payment.

In contrast to the UK Government, the Scottish SNP Government will provide universal support through the introduction of the pension-age winter heating payments next year, which will ensure a payment for every pensioner household in the winter of 2025-26. Pensioners in receipt of a qualifying benefit such as pension credit will receive that benefit at a rate of £300 or £200, depending on their age. Meanwhile, all other pensioners will receive £100 from next winter, providing them with support not available anywhere else in the UK. The SNP Government in Scotland have shown that the UK Government's choice to cut the winter fuel payment was wholly political. For reasons that I do not understand, they chose to punish pensioners, especially those just above benefit thresholds.

As already said, another failure of pensioner support from the UK Government—both Labour and Conservative, I must add—was on WASPI compensation. I was shocked to see that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who happily posed for a photograph with WASPI women while in opposition, ignored them and the ombudsman report, which demanded compensation, as soon as she came to power.

Other policy decisions are hurting pensioners. For example, the employer's national insurance contribution charges are leading to reduced third-sector service provision.

The farmers family tax is leading to higher prices at the supermarket, and that hits the most vulnerable people in society, including pensioners.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman mentions the important role that third-sector organisations play in our society. Was he as shocked as I was to learn from Marie Curie cancer care not only that the increase in national insurance will cost it several million pounds a year, but that the winter fuel allowance is being taken from 44,000 terminally ill pensioners?

Seamus Logan: I completely agree with the hon. Member—that is absolutely shocking. I was not aware of that particular statistic, but I have spoken several times on the Floor of the House about the plight of hospices. Only this morning, I heard from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland, which is facing a cut of £250,000 as a result of those extra employer's national insurance contributions. That association does not yet know what the impact of that cut will be, but the two people on my call this morning might well lose their jobs. We are speaking here about nurses and other support workers who provide essential support to people after a stroke. That is the impact of those national insurance changes on such organisations.

I will wind up by simply saying—as I said earlier—that to me, all of this shows that this Government fundamentally do not understand the situation of so many pensioners throughout the UK.

3 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing today's debate. As others have pointed out, it is rather sad that the Labour Benches are empty today. I can only guess that Labour Members are not interested in this issue, or perhaps they did not receive the message from the Whips suggesting that they come along.

We on the Conservative Benches speak to our constituents day in, day out. We knock on doors and listen to people, and we know that this issue is not going away. Thousands and thousands—millions—of pensioners out there are hurting, and they are worried about the lack of the winter fuel payment. To some, £300 may not seem like very much, but perhaps the Minister needs to be made aware that to someone on a fixed or low income, £300 is literally the difference between heating and eating. It enables them to turn their heating up when the winter weather hits. People who do not get the winter fuel payment will not get the cold weather payment either, so it is not just a single whammy; it has a multiplying effect.

One of the most shocking, or saddest, things about this issue is that it was literally days into this Labour Government's tenure that the Chancellor announced that she was scrapping the winter fuel payment, and just weeks ahead of the winter. We are still only in February—we have not seen the winter through yet—and we have already witnessed and felt plummeting temperatures. Our pensioners have had no time to prepare for this; no time to try to save, or to work out whether they can afford to have a bit of extra insulation in their homes. They have had no time to even fill in the form to apply for pension credit, hoping that they might be eligible for it.

We have spoken today about the third sector helping our pensioners. Some pensioners go to the third sector for help with filling in their pension credit application form. I do not know whether the Minister has actually seen that form, but believe you me, I have. It is pages and pages—questions upon questions. I opened that document and thought, “Oh my goodness, where do I start?” I would like to think that I am quite intelligent and technologically minded, but even I found that form to be an absolute nightmare, so how does a person who is 83 and is sitting at home feel? Those pensioners might not have somebody who can help them to fill in that form, so they are excluded—not just digitally excluded, but excluded from being kept warm. I hope that the Government are listening today.

I have also tabled a series of written parliamentary questions, because it was clear from the very beginning that the Government had not made a full assessment of what the situation looked like and what it might look like. That includes the impact on our health services and on social care, but fundamentally, this is about the impact on pensioners sitting at home and on their health. I have often struggled to get meaningful answers out of the DWP. I must admit that I table quite a lot of written questions and ask a lot of questions in the main Chamber, as my constituents would expect me to do, but of late, I have been trying to find out something really important: how many people who are eligible for pension credit were waiting for their winter fuel payment at the end of last year, and again as of 31 January. The DWP replied:

“Where the customer is eligible for a Winter Fuel Payment, the Department aims to make this payment within 2 weeks of the award of Pension Credit. Customers won't miss out on Winter Fuel Payments even if their qualifying benefit takes longer to process than usual.”

I remind the Department and Ministers that some people cannot wait—they need that money. They need that payment to be processed now, while we are in the winter period. Those people have their bills to pay now, so I gently urge the Minister to do anything that he can to speed up payments to those who are eligible. That would be one tiny thing that might help some people.

We rightly talk a lot about the people who are eligible, but there is also a big group of pensioners who are just over the threshold. They are the ones who are really hurting because they qualify for nothing. Pension credit is, I think, classed as a trigger benefit. If someone gets pension credit, it triggers the winter fuel payment. It is all means-tested. I completely understand that, but as I say, there are pensioners who are getting absolutely nothing. They are the ones who are really facing hard decisions. “Shall I put the heating on today? Shall I put the oven on today? Actually, I can't afford to put the oven on. I don't have a microwave. I might have to have a cold lunch.” That is no good if you are ageing and in ill health.

The other anomaly that I want to raise is someone who is on attendance allowance but seriously ill. They do not have a huge amount of money, but are over the current eligibility level for pension credit. They are missing out on winter fuel payments as well, and they are often the people who really need extra heating at home. Again, it is the difference between keeping warm or not. We know that some people spend more time in bed in the hope that they can keep warm. For all the wonderful work that our churches and community

[Wendy Morton]

organisations do providing places of welcome and helping in the community, a whole group of people cannot even leave their homes because of mobility and health issues. If we are not there to support them, what is their life like? Does it mean just lying in bed, feeling more and more isolated? We already know that social isolation is a problem among older people.

I could go on and on, but I will resist doing so. We know that 14% of pensioners are in destitute poverty. Can we imagine what that must be like? I find it incredible that a Labour Government have made this callous decision on winter fuel. For those who are in receipt of pension credit, how can the Government continue to justify this policy? People are not being treated fairly, while at the same time the Government are in discussions with the Mauritian Government. We hear the sum of £18 billion talked about. The Government deny that, often saying that it is £9 billion. I frankly do not care whether it is £9 billion or £18 billion. I have strong views on what is happening with regard to the Chagos islands, but when we relate it to the winter fuel allowance, as I believe my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) did in the House the other day, when she highlighted that that money is enough to pay winter fuel payments to all pensioners for the next 12 years, I think that starts to give some context about where the Government's priorities lie.

3.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for setting the scene incredibly well. I hate to say this, and apologise for doing so, but I am disappointed that no Labour Back Benchers are present because, as the Minister will know, my allegiance lies to the left of politics. That is who I am, but the party that I expected to be the party of conscience is no longer that party. I spoke to my friend, the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), before I rose to speak. I am very conscious that it is not Opposition Members that put it into law that the winter fuel allowance would be withdrawn from pensioners; it is Government Members. That is incredibly disappointing for me. The party of conscience, as I saw it, is no longer the party of conscience. I say that with deep regret, but I say it honestly, because that is how I feel, and I have to put it on the record.

Although the previous Government did it, we will take the credit for it. Remember that the DUP was in partnership with the Conservative party. As part of that deal, we secured the triple lock on pensions for our people. Everybody gains from that. To be fair to the Labour party, it is committed to it, and I do not see any changes coming in that regard—at least I hope to goodness that no changes are coming. For a certain period of time, that helped to keep pensioners out of poverty due to cost of living increases, not least the ever-escalating fuel bills. Even the triple lock cannot keep up with prices.

Poverty among older people is the highest it has been since the 2008 recession. Northern Ireland, where oil instead of gas is more often used to warm houses, has seen sharp price rises. Indeed, I understand that 68% of

houses in Northern Ireland depend on oil. Over the past three years, National Energy Action has experienced a significant rise in the number of households seeking emergency support because high energy prices and wider cost of living pressures mean they can no longer afford to keep their homes warm and safe.

That is something to which I can testify. Many people get food bank vouchers from my office in Newtownards. My constituency had the first food bank in all of Northern Ireland. A good thing about the food bank is that it brings together the churches, individuals and organisations that wish to help. Sometimes we can focus on the dire need, but we should also focus on the fact that it brings good people together to help. There is a goodness out of it, and one that I am pleased to support. My office is the biggest referrer for food bank vouchers in the whole of the constituency. The food bank does wonderful things and helps people in their hour of need.

Seamus Logan: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the wonderful work that food banks do, but does he agree that it is a source of shame to this country that food bank usage is growing?

Jim Shannon: Yes, it is disappointing, and I cannot ignore that fact. I always like to think that good people come together, reach out and try to address those issues, but the hon. Gentleman is right that they should not have to.

In September 2023, NEA undertook a Northern Ireland-wide representative survey to assess the impact of energy prices on households. The survey found that 41% of households in Northern Ireland were spending at least 10% of their total household expenditure on energy costs, and were therefore in fuel poverty. The continued pressure on household budgets has led to a rise in detrimental coping mechanisms. Those systems that should be in place to help are clearly unable to. For example, 19% of households told the survey that they had gone without heating oil, gas or electricity in the past 24 months because they were unable to afford energy. One in 10 households admitted to skipping meals to ensure they had enough money to pay for energy. Others have referred to that.

The pensioners I speak to are vulnerable, have complex health needs and have disability issues. Sometimes they have no family. As others have said, they have to look after themselves, but they are unable to. That dismays me greatly. Data shows that close to one in five households over over-60s are now in such severe fuel poverty that their homes are being kept in a condition that “endangers the health” of the inhabitants.

What happens when someone cannot heat their house? The house deteriorates, the mould grows and the damp grows. It is a fact: people have to have a level of heat in their houses; otherwise, they will deteriorate. That is an impact that is perhaps not often seen. The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East will remember the debate this morning in which a constituent was mentioned: an elderly person, over 70, who was living in a house with a leak in the roof. He did not have the ability to fix it, had no family to fall back on and did not qualify for any grants for it. The deterioration of houses cannot be ignored.

Fuel poverty among pensioners is dangerous and must be addressed. I recently went to the home of a lady who was applying for attendance allowance. I am no better than anybody else, but I know how to fill in forms—I know how to do all the benefit forms, and I have done them for umpteen years; I know how they work, and I know the right words to say on behalf of a deserving constituent. When I was on the election trail in July, going round the doors, I acquired between 80 and 90 attendance allowance forms. Those constituents did not qualify for pension credit, but we were able to get them on to attendance allowance, as I will explain with one of my examples. Those forms take at least an hour to fill in, and I have a staff member who does nothing but fill in forms five days a week—sometimes six.

Let us be honest: I am no spring chicken any more. I am a pensioner and I will be reaching quite a significant figure shortly, but I am pretty strong. I think I am strapping, although I am not sure whether my wife agrees—she is the one who really matters. I know that the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East has a great interest in shooting; I could probably stand shooting for the best part of the day in cold weather, as long as the pheasants and the pigeons kept coming over my head.

Steve Barclay: Not only standing, but I recall that in the debate on Monday, the hon. Gentleman was sitting next to the Minister, such was the pressure on seats. Given that none of the Minister's colleagues have bothered to come to the debate, perhaps he might consider sitting over there again and giving the Minister a little company.

As other hon. Members did, the hon. Gentleman is talking quite rightly about the speed and the targeting of the policy. The point is that it was a choice. There is a debate to be had about universal benefits and targeted benefits, but the speed with which it was done meant that some of the targeting, such as for pension credit, was not addressed. That has caused the cliff edge that hon. Members on both sides of the House have spoken about, so that if someone is just over the threshold, they lose out entirely.

On choices, the Government have chosen to fund not just the Chagos deal, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) said, but the above-inflation pay rises to trade union workforces such as train drivers. The hardship cases set out by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and others show that this issue is not about a wider debate on the economy, the mistakes made in the Budget or their effect on our growth projections, but about choice. The Government have chosen to give money to their other priorities—but before the election, they told pensioners that they would choose to prioritise them.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. The right hon. Member is a man of great of experience and he knows that this is an intervention, rather than a speech.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman was doing so well that I felt like leaving him in full flow. He is absolutely right that we need to focus on that issue.

I was successful with that lady's attendance allowance form, and I am pleased that the benefits system justified her claim given her complex health needs, including mobility issues. In that lady's case, it enables her to get

£436 per month, or £5,130 a year, which fills the gap from not getting the pension credit. However, not everyone qualifies for that allowance, which is what the right hon. Member referred to.

The lady's home was on the brink of freezing, and she very openly said that she was hopeful of getting the attendance allowance to fill the tank with oil, which she did. She justified her claim and she deserved it, but she should have got it years ago. She did not apply because she did not know about the allowance, so perhaps the Minister could look into contacting pensioners directly.

I find the pensioners who I deal with regularly to be very independent, and they are nearly apologetic for applying for a benefit. They say, "Oh no, I don't think I'd qualify for that," but when we ask them questions, we suddenly find out that they do. My office staff were able to secure a Bryson energy grant to put some oil in that lady's tank in the short term. When people say that pensioners are getting more than ever, I can only think of that wee lady in her cold home, who quite clearly was not.

That lady is not the only one. Local churches, such as the House Church and Christian Fellowship Church, make their facilities available to people for food and meals, as well as to come and read—or "sit and knit", as they call it—in their warm facilities in Newtownards town. I am greatly encouraged by people's goodness, so I am thankful for the churches and the voluntary sector that step up when the Government fail.

I want to clarify one final issue, although I am very conscious that somebody else wants to speak and I do not want to take up their time. A further issue of concern for pensioners are the letters that come from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, with no explanation, and ask women in their 80s to go online, fill out a tax application and pay back taxes. I have one lady whose husband's pension is £50 per month and that puts her over the threshold. Honestly, I get so frustrated, and I know that wee lady was even more frustrated than me. She had to pay back a tax bill of £280, and of course, she said, "Look, take my husband's pension. I don't want it any more. It's only giving me bother. I don't know how to fill the forms in." So there is an issue about pursuing that, and we have to reach out and help people who get those sudden letters.

I conclude with this: my party has sought to divert some of the block grant as a small help for pensioners in fuel poverty, recognising that they need that help. I understand that the Government cannot pay all of the fuel bills, but I believe that we can do better, and help more, and I look to the Minister to do just that.

3.20 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing this debate, and indeed for his strong speech. It is also always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), or "strapping of Strangford", as I think we are going to have to call him now. As other hon. Members have alluded to—not only alluded to; it has been stated quite openly—it is appalling that not a single Labour Back Bencher is here to defend the Government's policy. That is because,

[Gregory Stafford]

thus far, I have not heard any credible defence from the Labour Benches for the removal of the winter fuel payment.

I remember the Minister from Oxford, and I know he is a doughty champion of all things socialist, so I look forward to an equally strong defence of this policy. I say to him gently that it is clearly the wrong policy, and I am afraid that he has been given a hospital pass, to be frank, to have to come here today to try to defend it.

Under the last Government, more than 20,000 pensioners across my constituency of Farnham, Bordon, Haslemere, Liphook and the surrounding villages received Government support to assist them financially with energy bills and daily costs through the most challenging of times, such as covid-19 and the war in Ukraine. Now, since only 1,200 pensioners in my constituency are eligible for pension credit, nearly 19,000 pensioners have been left in the cold by the Government.

At a pension credit surgery that I held in October to assist with pension credit applications for those who might not have access to the right technology, I met Diana. She told me that the extra money from the winter fuel payment was essential to heating her home—for her and for her husband, who suffers from multiple sclerosis. Now that it has been withdrawn, Diana told me that she has to choose between heating her home and eating food.

The scale of this issue is hugely concerning. Age UK has reported that 82% of all pensioners living on or just above the poverty line will lose that payment—a total of 2.5 million people. Independent Age has confirmed that raising the pension credit take-up from 60% to 100% would raise 440,000 pensioners out of poverty.

Energy costs continue to rise under this Labour Government—by 10% in October, when I was running that pension credit surgery, and again in January—meaning that pensioners are paying, on average, an extra £170 since the beginning of this Labour Government. It is remarkable that the Government are not taking advice from industry experts and from charities on how to reduce the healthcare strains and increase the welfare of our pensioners.

Currently, our pensioners are having to make difficult choices, as other hon. Members have said, including opting to stay at home to ensure that they are not taken ill by the cold weather, or indeed choosing not to eat at all for days. I have heard that at first hand, through a survey that I ran to assess the impact that the withdrawal of the winter fuel payment is having on pensioners in my constituency. I am not going to go through every single response, but Sheila, a talented craftswoman, told me that the cold is forcing her to have to sit in multiple layers of jumpers and is heavily affecting her ability to sew and knit, with the cold worsening her arthritis.

Now that my constituents are unable to rely on Government support, I am routinely attending local pensioner support groups across my constituency, including those run by the brilliant Farnham Assist and the Hindhead lunch club, which brings people together fortnightly to provide them with a hot meal, conversation and the opportunity to socialise in a warm community hall.

As someone who spent their career prior to becoming a Member of Parliament working in the healthcare system—including, latterly, in NHS England—I am hugely concerned about the pressure that withdrawing the winter fuel payment is putting on our NHS. The Labour party's own assessment of the issue when it was in opposition said that it would cause 4,000 deaths. When I pushed the Health Secretary on that figure at the Health and Social Care Committee some weeks ago, he could not give me an answer as to why those 4,000 deaths were suddenly not going to happen. On top of that, we know that the £10.6 billion that the Government allocated to NHS England in the Budget will be eaten up by national insurance rises, inflation and pay increases for staff. Not a single penny of it will go to improving patient care, including patient care for pensioners.

Last October, my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) asked the Department of Health and Social Care what the potential impact of introducing means testing for the winter fuel payment was on hospital admissions. The Minister's response pointed him to the extra funding given to the household support fund in the October Budget. However, as has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire, the Minister has since admitted in a letter that the fund was not designed to support pensioners.

If the Government are unsure on the impacts of the household support fund in my constituency, perhaps I can help them. The south-east receives the second-lowest funding amount from the household support fund at £30.57 per pensioner per year, whereas the winter fuel payment gave pensioners up to £600 depending on their circumstances. I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify how pensioners such as Diana and Sheila can be supported through the loss of the winter fuel payment when they are not eligible for pension credit.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I remind the Member that she came into the debate very late. I do not wish to embarrass her in any way, but if she wants to intervene, she needs to be here at the start of the debate.

Gregory Stafford: I am sure that I would have agreed with whatever point the hon. Lady was about to make.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the hypocrisy of this Government telling pensioners prior to the election that they were going to be fine—indeed, they were told that things would get better for them. Instead, things have become markedly worse. As other hon. Members have also mentioned, we have also seen that with WASPI women. To be frank, Diana and Sheila are just the canaries in the coalmine for the larger issue of the Government's worrying treatment of our pensioners.

At my Monday morning surgery, a pensioner asked me, "Why does Labour hate pensioners?" I could not give her an answer. I have no idea why the Government have decided to punish pensioners—perhaps we can understand that from the text messages of the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne). That is why the Government must listen to the experts in the industry, in the charitable sector and in the health and social care sector who are raising the issues and presenting them with the figures.

The Government must reverse this treatment of our elderly and vulnerable and ensure that this winter, next winter and every winter that this terrible Government are still in power, every pensioner is warm, safe and looked after.

3.28 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this important debate. I declare my interest as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital.

My constituency is home to 18,164 people aged 65 and over. Whether under the Conservatives or Labour, Britain's pensioners have been a political football for successive Governments to mistreat, kick around and turn their back on. That has been the case from the winter fuel allowance under this Government to the betrayal on the triple lock by the previous Government and the failure to compensate WASPI women by both the Conservatives and Labour.

Pensioners are some of the most vulnerable in our society. They have worked hard all their lives, and they should have an opportunity for some much-deserved rest and relaxation. Instead, they are forced to stress about finances and to make impossible decisions that threaten their health. I am sure every MP of every political party will have received casework or correspondence about older people being forced to choose between heating and eating. Fuel poverty is a blight on our nation and a sign that our welfare state is failing—and it will get worse. The energy price cap is forecast to rise for the third consecutive period in April 2025, and the average energy bill is already 57% higher than it was in 2021.

The Chancellor's cuts to winter fuel payments have only exacerbated the problem that poor pensioners face. The Government are attempting to clear up the horrific mess the Conservatives left the economy in, and they have picked up the pieces—but they have dropped them all over again. In October 2024, a YouGov poll commissioned by Independent Age found that 43% of older people who had lost their winter fuel payments would go to bed earlier to avoid having to heat their homes, while 23% said they would not turn on their heating at all. That poses a clear and direct threat to their health, with Independent Age estimating that it would cost roughly £4 billion in increased NHS and social care costs. Locally, that could fund two new Royal Berkshire hospitals.

One of my constituents, Philippa, came all the way to Parliament to talk to me about the impact of the cuts. Many of the people with her remarked how few Labour MPs took an interest in meeting pensioners from their constituencies face to face to hear about the effects of the policies they ended up supporting—I will let the evidence speak for itself. Philippa is not the only one who made contact. Mark, Pauline, Maxine and many others all wrote to tell me how worried they were. The Government have made the wrong decision in trying to cut spending, and they should have taxed the banks, social media giants and online gambling companies instead.

Liberal Democrat Wokingham borough council has done a great job trying to make the best of a difficult situation. It has encouraged eligible pensioners to sign

up for pension credit before Christmas, including by sending 1,000 letters to people identified as potentially eligible. That exercise revealed that, although the DWP knows which individuals are eligible for pension credit, it does not release that information to councils. Having that information would have supported the great effort by Wokingham borough council, so will the Minister commit to changing that policy, to allow councils to inform those eligible for pension credit more effectively? If I am wrong on that, the Minister can write and tell me, but I do not think I am.

What steps are the Government taking to support people with their energy bills who are above the threshold for pension credit and other means-tested benefits? Will the Minister commit to launching an emergency home energy upgrade programme to provide free insulation and heat pumps for low-income households?

When many pensioners were already suffering through the loss of the winter fuel allowance, the Government decided to turn their back on hundreds of thousands of WASPI women. It was a shameful decision to betray millions of pension-age women, who were wronged through no fault of their own, and to ignore the independent ombudsman's recommendation. The ombudsman concluded that just 43% of people knew that the planned change to the state pension age would affect them personally. The Liberal Democrats pushed the Government for years to compensate WASPI women fairly. That tone-deaf decision cannot be allowed to stand. Will the Minister state precisely why he does not believe that WASPI women are owed compensation? Will he do the right thing and agree to a parliamentary vote on this issue?

On a related matter, my constituent Alan sadly lost his wife recently. She was one of the many women affected by the increase in pension age. To add to that injustice, there was a change in 2016, and Alan has been told that he is no longer entitled to any form of widower's state pension. Therefore, he is losing money that his wife received, even though his normal living expenses are pretty much the same. I wrote to the Minister some months ago, and I still look forward to a response. I hope he will be able to dig further into this matter and send me a reply soon.

Finally, let us not forget that the Conservatives have failed pensioners, both when they were in government and, more recently, outside of government. The Leader of the Opposition has many low moments to point to from her first 100 days, and the right hon. Member for Braintree (Mr Cleverly) must rub his hands together excitedly after Prime Minister's questions most weeks. For me, however, the most obvious low moment was when the Leader of the Opposition decided to go after the triple lock on pensions. One moment, when it is politically convenient, the Conservatives are all for means-testing benefits, but suddenly, when they are starved of new ideas, they are against it. The Conservative leader promised not to have too many policies, yet one of her first was to advocate slashing the state pension.

The Liberal Democrats are proud that we introduced the triple lock for pensions, and we will fight tooth and nail against any attempt by the Conservatives to weaken it, or if the Minister and the Labour Government decide to do what the Tories did in 2022 and temporarily suspend it. Will the Minister commit today to never make that mistake?

3.36 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing this important debate. It is the second on this topic today, but it puts a particular focus on the support that the Government should be providing.

I also thank hon. Members for the many contributions that we have had, and I will briefly touch on a couple that raised points that I was not planning to raise. My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) highlighted the lack of notice that pensioners had about the change to the winter fuel payment. That highlights the fact that nobody could be expected to do any planning, as well as the lack of a wider impact assessment of what this change would actually mean for real people's lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) is no longer in his place, but he talked about the council tax increase that many pensioners will also face in the coming months. My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) highlighted the knock-on impacts of the change to winter fuel payment on our health and social care systems. My hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) talked about the impact on 44,000 terminally ill patients.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted the lack of heating in damp homes. It is interesting to note the cross-reference to the Government's Renters' Rights Bill, where there was a huge emphasis on tackling mould. Yet what we have here is the knock-on impact of the challenges faced by pensioners, which may instead lead to an increase in mould in their homes.

Finally, I will just highlight the rather humorous point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), who I think will go down in history for coining the phrase, "Strapping of Strangford", which could well be the highlight of this whole debate, alongside the lots of equally great points that he made about his constituency. Sorry—I digress.

What has really been highlighted this afternoon is Labour's broken promises, particularly to pensioners. They fought the election claiming that they were on the side of pensioners, but this entire debate has highlighted that that may not be the case. Actually, I should also refer to the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), who made a whole load of claims about the Conservative party and who seemed to forget the successes that I am about to highlight. I also wholeheartedly refute his claims about what has been happening since the election.

Clive Jones: I am not the MP for Swansea West; I am the MP for Wokingham.

Rebecca Smith: Sorry, I meant to say Wokingham. I had circled "Swansea West" in my notes; I was trying to be clever—forgive me. Anyway, I will go back to my notes; that would be much better.

In the same way that the Government are coming after farmers, with the family farm tax, they have also gone after pensioners right across the country—and all

of that on the back Labour wiping £118 billion off the value of people's pensions the last time it was in government. So, many of these pensioners have already seen their pensions being devalued.

At the same time, the Government are finding the money to launch the vanity project GB Energy—if we are lucky, we will see lower energy bills by 2030—and pouring money into public pay packets, with no expectation of improving productivity. Pensioners and farmers seem to be the easy targets, and some Labour members seem to believe that that is the case—or perhaps I should say former members, given that they are perhaps less likely to vote Labour.

Labour has come to power against the backdrop of a Conservative record of improving dignity in people's retirement. We protected the triple lock; uprated the state pension by £3,700; drove up pension credit applications earlier in our time in office; and abolished the pension lifetime tax allowance, which we need some credit for, because it incentivised more experienced workers, including GPs, to stay in work for longer. The Resolution Foundation, which the Minister previously worked for, has confirmed that pensioners are £1,000 better off since 2010, thanks to the decisions made by successive Conservative Governments.

As other Members have said, among the more disappointing policy decisions the Government have made since they came into office is the decision to scrap winter fuel allowance for pensioners who are not in receipt of pension credit—that is the key point. The decision to means-test the winter fuel allowance has seen 10 million pensioners lose access to payments they were previously eligible for. I note the excellent research published by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), which shows that my constituency of South West Devon is likely to be among the hardest hit. Previously just over 22,000 people received winter fuel allowance, but now only about 1,600 would be eligible through pension credit. Some 21,301 pensioners in my constituency would lose out.

Many of us have had representations from constituents, and I want to particularly highlight single pensioners, who are the hardest hit in many cases. We have heard that some earning as little as £11,344—less than £1,000 a month—are no longer eligible for winter fuel payments. There is also an undue hit on the disabled and those whose modest savings lift them out of the bracket. That is completely immoral.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]* I beg my hon. Friend's pardon; I promoted her there, but I am sure that it is only a matter of time. Does she agree that when a political choice such as this is put in place, it removes the incentive from working people to get on in life, do well, do the right thing and save a little, because they know they will get kicked by a Labour Government?

Rebecca Smith: Yes, absolutely, and I think we see that right across the piece of DWP benefits. That is one reason why we think getting people into work, in particular, is so important. The lack of notice, particularly for those with savings, who are doing the right thing, but who are now having to choose whether to do work on their home or heat it, is definitely not a good move.

It was projected that 880,000 pensioners eligible for pension credit, but not yet claiming it, would lose access to the winter fuel allowance when the policy was first announced. By November 2024, the Government had improved pension credit uptake by only 81,000, so the debate will have been put to good use if they commit to take further steps to raise awareness to increase those numbers. Equally, it would be great if we could see the number of applications per constituency, because many of us cannot find that data at the moment, so it would be good if it could be released in due course.

Lastly, I want to highlight the household support fund, which is a very welcome pot of money instituted by the previous Conservative Government. However, it is not enough to tackle the gap between those who receive winter fuel payment and those who do not because, as we have heard time and again this afternoon, it is there for the entire community, not just pensioners. As has also been highlighted, there is a real disparity across the country, and my region receives the smallest amount if the funding is split per pensioner, with just £30.10 in the south-west, compared to £66.73 in London. I want to give a shout-out to the warm, welcoming places in my constituency, such as the Rees centre family and wellbeing hub, the Sir Joshua Reynolds pub, Plymstock library and Hooe Baptist church. They all do a great job to provide those spaces but, ultimately, if that is all we can do in the south-west, it is just not fair that that funding is not split across the board.

Finally, I have a couple more questions. Will the Minister look at why the household support fund is distributed so unequally, whether to pensioners, working families or individuals? It is particularly difficult for our rural communities, which will be the hardest hit because their heating costs are even higher, so the lack of the £300 or £600 that they would have got will be felt even harder.

Will the Minister commit to delivering a credible plan to ensure that all eligible pensioners can secure pension credit and the services that go with it, which I have mentioned? As we have heard, it is a gateway benefit: if someone can unlock it, they get a whole load of other support.

Finally, will the Minister commit to a long-term focus to make sure that we think clearly about what we do for those who might be just outside the brackets at the moment? In 1997, when the previous Labour Government introduced student fees, they did so with no notice; that was just put on people, with no expectation that it was going to happen. Within two years, students went from no fees to full fees, and if we do not think ahead, this policy risks leaving us in exactly the same situation.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Dame Siobhain, in a debate on such an important topic. We owe thanks to the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for securing it, and I thank everybody who has contributed to it.

Recent years have been difficult for pensioners. They, along with the rest of Britain, have had to wrestle with a cost of living crisis, inflation in double digits for the first time in four decades, food prices rising even faster,

and energy bills that have shot up—as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, before he mentioned that he is approaching a significant birthday. The debate is focused on whether it is 40 or 50, but we will celebrate whatever it is, as well as celebrating his form-filling success.

Everyone who has spoken in the debate will have spoken to constituents about the challenges posed by the cost of living crisis. I have certainly spoken to some of the 17,000 pensioners in Swansea West. This is an important debate and, as well as responding to the points that Members have raised, I will cover: what lessons we can learn from the past, celebrating some things that have worked and recognising where they have not; what the Government are doing today to support pensioners, covering lots of the points raised by Members; and, briefly, our future priorities, as requested by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith).

First, I will address the good news. In the 1990s, pensioner poverty was rampant. Almost 30% of UK pensioners were living in relative poverty. The old and the young—children—bore the brunt of the rise in poverty in the 1980s and early 1990s, but under the last Labour Government, not only did rates of pensioner poverty fall, but they had halved by the 2010 election. That did not happen by accident. Policy—including the introduction of pension credit, which we have discussed today—drove lots of that change, especially for women and older pensioners, and higher private pensions and employment rates further boosted pension incomes. But no one, of any party, thought that it was job done at that point, and I am sure that none of us thinks that today, not least because, in recent years, progress on pensioner poverty has stalled and relative pensioner poverty has risen by 300,000 since 2010.

Even though today the UK has a lower rate of relative poverty among pensioners than the OECD average, the fact remains that, as Members have said, pensioner poverty is still too high. It is 16% in Wales, and it is especially high for renters. Almost 40% of all pensioners in poverty are renters, and with growing numbers of private renters, the challenge looks likely to grow, reinforcing the point that the hon. Members for South West Devon and for Mid Bedfordshire made about the need for long-term planning.

There is another lesson from the last decade and a half: when growth stalls, the reductions in absolute pensioner poverty that we all used to take for granted slow or even grind to a halt, so growth matters for pensioners as it does for workers.

Rebecca Smith: Does the Minister not agree that, from 2010, the previous Government secured a 200,000 reduction in the number of pensioners in absolute poverty? I do not have details of what the figure might have been otherwise, but it is important to put that on the record, because nearly a quarter of a million is still a significant number.

Torsten Bell: I am loath to do this, but the honest answer is no—it is far too small a reduction. Absolutely poverty should be falling every year, very significantly. We should really only need to debate relative poverty measures because, in a growing economy, we should all be taking it for granted that absolute poverty is falling.

[Torsten Bell]

I hope that we can agree on two things: first—I think we do agree on this—that we must do better, and secondly, and more positively, that there are lessons to learn from what has worked over the last quarter of a century. While we are on a positive note, I can agree with the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) about the importance of community groups that support our pensioners, through Ageing Well in Swansea and, I am sure, lots of other devices around the country.

I am not under any illusions—even if I was, I could no longer be after the last hour and a quarter—about hon. Members' views on the Government's decision to target winter fuel payments at those on the lowest incomes. I will not rehearse all the arguments for that policy, but our dire fiscal inheritance is no secret. We owe it to the country—to all generations, young and old—to put that right, and that has involved wider tough decisions on tax and spending. I say gently to Members who oppose not just the targeting of winter fuel payments, but every tax rise proposed, that that has consequences. If they oppose every tough choice, they propose leaving our public finances on an unsustainable footing, and leaving our public services in a state that far too often lets down those who rely on them, not least pensioners.

Although we can no longer justify paying winter fuel payments to all pensioners, it is, as all Members have said, important that we do more to make sure pensioners receive the support they are entitled to. In recent months, we have run the biggest ever pension credit take-up campaign, because, although around 1.4 million pensioners currently receive pension credit, too many are missing out. I urge all pensioners to check whether they are entitled to support.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) mentioned the complexity of the pension credit form. I have considered that, and there is more that we can do to simplify it. All I would say is that in our messaging to pensioners, we should be clear that most of the questions do not need to be answered by the people filling in the form. Currently, 90% fill in the form online or over the phone, and the average time taken to fill it in online is 16 minutes.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to the Minister for providing that clarity, but it took me longer than 16 minutes, so perhaps I am not as articulate as others.

Torsten Bell: It is the average.

Wendy Morton: Does he agree, though, that the 10% who cannot do it themselves in that way are potentially really losing out? There is also a group of pensioners who have worked hard all their lives and done the right things, but are too proud to apply for pension credit, let alone to go online to fill in a form.

Torsten Bell: The right hon. Member is absolutely right to raise the case of those who might need support to complete the form. That is why one of the elements of the campaign we have run this year is targeting not pensioners directly, but friends and family, to encourage them to help people to apply for pension credit themselves.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Torsten Bell: I want to make a bit progress, and then I will take some more interventions.

I will be updating Members later this month on the impact of the campaign so far. The hon. Member for South West Devon asked about constituency-level data on winter fuel payments. We will be publishing that in the usual way in September. The hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) asked about the DWP and councils working closely together to drive pension credit uptake. He was completely right to do so. I will write to him on the specific point he raised, because it is not true, but on the generality, he is completely right that the onus is on the DWP to work with councils, and on councils to work with the DWP.

Wider support is also available for pensioners: direct financial help through cold weather payments in England and Wales, and help with energy bills through the warm home discount, which we expect to benefit over 3 million households, including over 1 million pensioners, this winter. The right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) and several others raised the need for energy efficiency in homes. They were completely right to do so, but I note very gently that there was a 90% fall in energy efficiency installations in the early years of the previous Government. Someone wanted to “cut the green”—and that was the result. We are trying to do better than the previous Government did on that front.

We are committed to maintaining the triple lock on the state pension throughout this Parliament. The hon. Member for South West Devon rightly noted that that was introduced under the previous Government.

Seamus Logan: The Minister promises to maintain the triple lock, but the Government have broken promises on WASPI women and on farmers, so how can anybody believe that they are going to keep their promise on this?

Torsten Bell: We will be maintaining the triple lock throughout this Parliament, as promised in our manifesto. In April, the basic and new state pensions will increase by 4.1% and 12 million pensioners will see a concrete increase—whether Members believe it or not—of up to £470.

Several Members mentioned the need for long-term planning. That commitment to the triple lock means that spending on the state pension is forecast to rise by over £31 billion this Parliament. At the individual level, that translates into the new state pension being on track to rise by up to £1,900 a year, and the basic state pension—the pension that is relevant to those who hit the state pension age before 2016—by £1,500. But the last 15 years tell us that we need to do more for pensioners.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution I hinted that attendance allowance might be another method of giving benefit entitlements to qualifying pensioners. Not every pensioner would qualify, but many would. I suggest a concerted campaign by the Government to make every pensioner aware of all the benefits. As the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) said, sometimes they are shy, sometimes they are independent, and sometimes they do not know they are entitled to things.

Torsten Bell: The hon. Member raises an important point. Attendance allowance would entitle a pensioner to extra income to pay for extra costs, including heating

if required, but it would also lead to a higher threshold for qualification for pension credit. However, he is right that we need to see people applying for those benefits.

As I was saying, the last 15 years tell us that we need to do more for pensioners, and that returns on private pension savings matter too. We are undertaking a comprehensive pensions review to ensure that the pensions system is fit for the future, building on the success of auto-enrolment, which was introduced under the last Government and has seen over 11 million employees saving into a workplace pension. That is one of the big areas of progress in the pensions landscape in the last 25 years.

The Government are committed to further reforming our pensions landscape, so that it drives up both economic growth and returns to savers, via the upcoming pension schemes Bill. We need bigger and better pension funds investing in productive assets such as infrastructure. We need to help individuals consolidate small pension pots and have sight of them via the pensions dashboard, so that they can plan for security in retirement. The measures in the Bill could help the average earner who saves over their lifetime have over £11,000 more in their pension pot when they come to retire.

Steve Barclay: The central justification that the Government give for taking away winter fuel payments is the fiscal position, but then they say that they want people to take up pension credit, which comes at a cost. Could the Minister say how many people would need to take up pension credit to cancel out the fiscal benefit? If that were to happen, it would undermine the central premise on which he is putting forward the policy.

Torsten Bell: That argument is made a lot. All I would say is that all of us should want all pensioners to receive the benefits they are entitled to and to drive pension credit take-up. We are confident that this policy will deliver significant savings, and the costings put into the Budget in the autumn take into account an increase in pension credit take-up.

For most pensioners I speak to, concerns about the state of the health service are front of mind. The biggest betrayal of pensioners today is the state of our NHS—run down in England and undermined in Wales, with the capital budgets handed down by the UK Government

to the Welsh Government not remotely sufficient to maintain the NHS estate or to invest in badly needed diagnostic equipment.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: Will the Minister give way?

Torsten Bell: No.

That is why this Government are investing £22 billion in the English NHS this year and next, with consequential for the Welsh and Scottish Governments. The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan)—

Dame Harriett Baldwin: Will the Minister give way?

Torsten Bell: No.

The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East rightly says that society will be judged on how it treats its pensioners, particularly with regard to the NHS, but in Scotland we have now seen five new NHS recovery plans announced in four years. That is not a tribute to our older generations. Supporting pensioners in the 2020s is about more than opposing every tough choice—

Dame Harriett Baldwin: On a point of order, Dame Siobhain. Is it orderly for me to point out that the NHS is suffering from a number of over-65s who sadly have a high level of mortality—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I do apologise to the hon. Member, but that is not a point of order, and she knows it. I call the Minister.

Torsten Bell: Thank you, Dame Siobhain.

Supporting pensioners in the 2020s is about more than opposing every tough choice that the Government have to make. It means directly raising pensioner incomes via the state pension and pension credit, but it also requires us to reform our private pension system, grow our economy and rescue our public services—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. We are out of time, but I want to make a public apology to the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire). I should have allowed her to intervene, and I certainly meant no discourtesy to her.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Support for the Scotch Whisky Industry

4.1 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I will call Graham Leadbitter to move the motion. Unusually, two further Members will make a contribution in this half-hour debate. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to sum up at the end.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for the Scotch whisky industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. Today I seek to address the critical role of the Scotch whisky industry in the UK economy and to outline the essential support that it requires from the UK Government.

Scotch whisky is more than just a drink; it is a cultural and economic asset that is enjoyed around the world. We all share the desire to ensure that it is enjoyed responsibly and sustainably for generations to come. Each bottle shipped from Scotland to every corner of the world leaves behind a measurable impact on our economy. The numbers speak for themselves. The industry provides £7.1 billion in gross value added to the UK economy. It supports 41,000 jobs across Scotland and more than 25,000 more jobs across the UK. Scotch whisky accounts for 74% of Scottish food and drink exports and 22% of UK food and drink exports.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. He is right to highlight the importance of Scotch whisky in his constituency. In my constituency, the Hinch distillery is becoming a globally recognised, award-winning whiskey brand. These home distilleries provide for each and every person's constituency, including the hon. Gentleman's, mine and others. They grow the local economy and should receive support to further their success from the Government here at Westminster.

Graham Leadbitter: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I enjoy a dram now and again as well.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. I do not want this to become a promotion for every drink across these islands, but the challenges that Irish and Scottish whisky face are also faced by Baileys. Maybe not many people know this, but 70% of the world's Baileys is produced in a factory in Mallusk in my constituency. It is exported to 100 countries worldwide, providing good jobs in the economy. I know the hon. Member enjoys a glass as well.

Graham Leadbitter: I do not know whether I need to comment on how many different types of drink I consume. Returning to the matters at hand, exports are valued at more than £5 billion, with 43 bottles of Scotch whisky exported every second.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Would the hon. Gentleman allow a non-promotional intervention?

Graham Leadbitter: Yes.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman is speaking about exports. We know the damage done to the Scotch whisky industry when we last suffered tariffs as a consequence of US trade policy—nothing to do with President Trump, it has to be said, but due to an old trade dispute. Surely this is the point at which the Government should be thinking ahead and putting a strategy in place to help the industry should, heaven forfend, we find ourselves back to that place as a consequence of the new regime in the White House?

Graham Leadbitter: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making that point, which I will come on to a little bit later in my speech.

In 2022, Scotch whisky distilleries attracted 2 million visitors, making them the most popular tourist attraction in Scotland. Between 2018 and 2022, the industry invested £2.1 billion in capital projects, with many more such projects in the pipeline as we speak.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is perplexing to see the Prime Minister commit that he will “back Scotch producers to the hilt”

—I believe those were his words—while enforcing the highest excise duty in the G7 on Scotch? Surely now is the time for the Prime Minister to back up his words with action.

Graham Leadbitter: I agree entirely with those sentiments. Again, I will touch on that issue shortly.

The success of the Scotch whisky industry relies on firm foundations and support. Support can take many forms, and I will endeavour to outline the key areas in which the UK Government can take positive and beneficial action. First, on trade, securing beneficial free trade agreements is absolutely paramount. For example, a free trade agreement with India that reduces the 150% tariff on Scotch whisky could generate up to £1 billion in additional exports over the next five years and create 1,200 jobs. We must also continue to strengthen our trade relationships with the US, recognising the significant investment that the Scotch whisky industry already brings to the US economy.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab) *rose*—

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab) *rose*—

Graham Leadbitter: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker).

Richard Baker: Does the hon. Member agree that the work undertaken by Ministers to open up new markets for Scotch whisky is vital, and that the new special status for Scotch whisky in Brazil is great news for the industry? Does he also agree that the InchDairnie distillery in my constituency should be supported in launching its new rye whisky brand, through consideration of the current legislation regarding labelling, which is vital, but is creating a barrier to its accessing the rapidly growing market for rye whisky?

Graham Leadbitter: I totally agree with the hon. Member. It is really interesting that the industry is diversifying into new brands, new products and new styles of whisky being produced in traditional distilleries.

Douglas McAllister: The hon. Member will be aware that 90% of Scotch whisky is exported. Does he welcome this Government's decision to give Scotch whisky protected status? Following on from that, Brazil granting special status to Scotch whisky is set to give the industry a boost of at least £25 million. Does the hon. Member agree that the UK Government are removing trade barriers and unlocking global markets, and does he welcome selling Scotland to the world, rather than just selling Scotland to itself?

Graham Leadbitter: Absolutely. As I have mentioned, 43 bottles of whisky are exported every second—that will be 75,000 bottles of whisky by the time we have finished this debate. That is a phenomenal export contribution not just to Scotland's economy, but to the wider UK economy at the moment. I welcome the efforts made by the UK Government in the area of trade; the question is whether more can be done, and whether those efforts can be made more quickly.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is right to give credit to the UK Government for some of the work happening on exports. However, does the hon. Member agree that the changes that the previous Government made to spirits duty, which this Government have refused to change, mean that the Treasury is losing out on money by not treating alcohol as alcohol across the different categories?

Graham Leadbitter: Absolutely. That is another point that I will expand on in a bit more detail shortly.

We must continue to strengthen our trade relationships. While this debate is rightly focused on UK actions, it will not have bypassed hon. Members that there has been significant media comment on tariff actions taken by the US Administration in recent weeks, and on what potential future actions may be taken. Combined with global headwinds affecting the wider luxury brands market, it has unsurprisingly generated comment and speculation, both from within the sector and elsewhere. Maintaining a watchful eye and accentuating the positives of the existing trade relationships remain vital.

On excise duty, the current tax regime is unsustainable. Scotch whisky and other spirits have faced a 14% increase in excise duty in just 18 months. Over the past 18 months the Treasury has lost £255 million, or £500,000 per day, in spirits revenue—a far cry from the £600 million that the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast that the increase in spirits duty would raise. That Treasury loss from lower sales was projected by the industry to increase as the Chancellor's recent decisions start to bite.

If we want to examine the impact higher taxes have had on the retailers and the producers themselves, we need look no closer than right here. Last year a freedom of information request revealed that in the first 10 months of 2024, a year after the Conservatives hiked whisky tax, sales of whisky in Parliament's gift shops plummeted, with average monthly sales of 5 cl bottles down 36% and 70 cl bottles down 16% by the end of October. That means that, when Labour MPs approved the Chancellor's

plans to further increase taxes on whisky products, they did not even need to leave the building to pass a shop adversely affected by the tax.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): The SNP has failed to use the powers the Scottish Government have to grow Scotland's economy and has instead provided over low growth and low productivity, prioritising vanity projects over economic development. Scotland lags behind the rest of the UK in 10 out of 13 productivity indicators due to several factors, including insufficient investment in key industries and underperforming innovation strategies. The Scottish Government's slow response to support industries like Scotch whisky has exacerbated the issue. The lack of proactive long-term planning to foster business development and improve competitiveness has left Scotland's economy struggling to keep pace with the rest of the UK. Is the hon. Member aware that his own Government's inaction over 17 years has held this vital industry back?

Graham Leadbitter: That was a fairly lengthy intervention. The first point I would make is that the key concerns raised by the Scotch whisky industry are trade agreements and spirits taxation—and we are here to scrutinise the Government in Westminster, not Scotland.

The tax increase means that a minimum of £12 of the cost of a bottle of Scotch is now claimed by the Exchequer in tax for the first time, disproportionately penalising those who choose to consume Scotch whisky over other beverages. I urge the Government to reconsider excise duty on Scotch whisky to ensure that its global success story is not undermined.

On extended producer responsibility, we need a scheme that genuinely promotes a circular economy. The industry is supportive of EPR in principle, but it must not simply function as a packaging tax on producers. The costs imposed on producers through EPR are considerable and place significant additional cost pressures on the industry. Producers must be given clear figures to map their liability and meet their obligations. Better incentives need to be placed on local authorities to use the payments provided by producers to improve recycling and reprocessing services and in turn lower costs per tonne for producers.

Supporting the industry's sustainability goals is absolutely crucial and will, by extension, help meet the wider net zero goals that I believe most of us want to see achieved. The Scotch whisky industry has long taken its responsibility to address its own impact on the environment and to tackle our emissions seriously. The industry is committed to decarbonising its own operations by 2040 and becoming net zero by 2045.

The Scottish Government's Scottish industrial energy transformation fund and the UK Government's net zero innovation portfolio are welcome and have been strategically important in de-risking new technology, supporting delivery and testing at scale. It is important to note the example of Chivas Brothers, which has set an ambitious target of becoming carbon-neutral in distillation by 2026—I repeat: by 2026, or next year—and is on target to achieve that. That is ahead of the Scotch Whisky Association's industry target to decarbonise by 2040 and Scotland's vision of being net zero by 2045.

Chivas's heat recovery technology programme is open source, encouraging the adoption of technologies that unlock the successful reduction of energy intensity and carbon generation at scale. It is extremely heartening to

[*Graham Leadbitter*]

see an energy-intensive business such as distilling being willing not just to invest millions in developing innovative new technology, but to invite competitors, supply chain companies and others to share in that learning and use it in other locations. That is something many other businesses could learn from in terms of how we collectively tackle our energy usage.

It is vital to protect the unique sales environment offered by duty-free and global travel retail, a critical market for the whisky industry. Duty-free sales have long contributed to the development of the Scotch whisky industry and are estimated to generate £6.2 billion in annual exports and support 42,000 jobs across the UK. Overseas duty-free sales provide a shop window for Scotland. The vast majority of major airports have shelves lined with an incredible variety of Scotch. Serious consideration of arrivals duty-free here in the UK could provide a new opportunity for whisky brands to showcase their products, while creating a critical new source of revenue through increased employment in the UK-based supply chain.

The Scotch whisky industry is a vital part of both the Scottish and UK economies, and is a source of national pride. In my own Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey constituency, the sector operates 48 distilleries—soon to be 49—numerous labs, whisky storage sites and offices with engineers, technicians and architects, and is supported by a vibrant and extensive supply chain and a busy logistics sector. More than 5,000 of my constituents' jobs are tied to the Scotch whisky industry—one in every nine jobs. It is the most concentrated group of distilleries in the world.

By addressing the issues I have outlined today—trade, excise duty, extended producer responsibility, sustainability and duty-free sales—the UK Government can provide the support needed to ensure that the Scotch whisky industry continues to flourish for generations to come. We need all parties to champion our great exports, including Scotch whisky, and ensure that the sector has the support it need at home to deliver growth and investment, to flourish and to deliver on its sustainability objectives.

4.17 pm

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain.

I thank the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) for calling this debate on Government support for the whisky industry, a measure that I warmly support. I have the good fortune to represent some important whisky names located in my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North. Diageo has a major distribution centre, and at Hillington we have a fine example of a modern distillery established by the Glasgow Distillery in 1912, which is going from strength to strength. We have a well-respected and established independent bottler in Douglas Laing & Co, which has more than 70 years in the industry, Russell's bonded warehouse and, I suspect, more than a few customers of the Scotch whisky industry. So my constituency, like many others in Scotland, has a significant association with whisky, which is a good source of quality employment, a driver of innovation and a source of pleasure.

Whisky is a craft, an industry and an important export; it is symbolic of Scotland's landscape and beauty. I welcome the recognition that this debate brings, and I pledge to support this vital Scottish industry.

4.18 pm

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) on securing this debate, and thank him for his forbearance in letting me say a few words. Showing that this is a cross-party issue, it great to see Scottish Liberal Democrats, SNP MPs and Scottish Labour MPs here. It is a shame that we have missed out on the Scottish Conservatives.

Scotch whisky is more than a drink; it is one of Scotland's finest products, a symbol of our heritage and a driving force in our economy. In the Livingston constituency, we are proud to have world-class whisky producers such as the Glenmorangie and Ardbeg bottling plant and the North British Distillery. They generate good jobs, investment and prosperity in our communities, and that is why it is important that the Government have taken decisive action to support the industry.

We have worked tirelessly to remove trade barriers, ensuring that Scotch whisky receives the international recognition that it deserves. As others have said, Brazil's decision to grant Scotch whisky special status will give a £25 billion boost to the industry by opening up one of the world's fastest-growing markets. Brazil ranks among the top five global growth markets for alcohol over the next five years, and with exports to the country already topping £90 million in 2023, there is a huge opportunity for Scotch producers.

What is more, the Government's decision to give Scotch whisky protected status will, as has been said, ensure that our product remains authentic and competitive, free from imitation products that could undermine its quality and reputation. This really is brand Scotland in action, expanding our global reach, strengthening our economy and boosting jobs and investment in Scotland. The support does not stop there. The UK Government's decision to invest up to £5 million to cut costs for distillers in the spirit drinks verification scheme and to remove the mandatory duty stamps for spirits from May this year will be an important boost to the industry. Those steps will make it easier and cheaper to do business, ensuring the continued success of our whisky industry.

Scottish whisky is a global success story, but with the Government's support, and with the Scotland Office relentlessly promoting Scotland and Scottish products, we will ensure that it remains at the heart of Scotland in the future.

4.21 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) for securing the debate and providing such an excellent and thorough introduction. I commend my hon. Friends the Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor) and for Livingston (Gregor Poynton) on their contributions. I am sure that they will all be delighted to hear how much I enjoyed my visit in the summer to the Glendronach distillery in Aberdeenshire.

The Government recognise and celebrate the global success of the Scotch whisky industry, which is of historical and cultural significance and plays a huge role in the UK's economy and balance of trade. In 2023, exports of Scotch reached almost £6 billion in value. That success comes from the industry's well-earned reputation for quality and high standards, and we are committed to working with the industry to champion and protect that reputation.

Douglas McAllister: The Scotch whisky industry supports 41,000 jobs across Scotland, many thousands of which are in my West Dunbartonshire constituency, including at Chivas Brothers in Dumbarton and Auchentoshan in Clydebank. The October Budget backed Scottish whisky, introducing measures called for by the industry, and I welcome the Government's move to address long-running discrepancies in the treatment of the Scotch whisky industry by ending duty stamps, and to reduce and deliver parity in the fees for the spirit drinks verification scheme. Can the Minister share when details of that very positive announcement on reduced fees will be confirmed?

Daniel Zeichner: I will come to the Budget measures in a moment, but first I endorse my hon. Friend's point about the number of jobs the industry supports—41,000 in Scotland and a further 25,000 across the rest of the UK, many in rural areas.

Collectively, whisky distilleries are now Scotland's most visited tourist attraction, bringing in thousands of domestic and international tourists every year, largely to rural areas, and creating many opportunities for employment. Whisky is also a hugely important trade good. In 2023, the equivalent of 53 bottles of Scotch every second were sold overseas. That is important to delivering growth at home, which is why we are committed to supporting the Scotch whisky industry to export its fine products to overseas markets. We do that by leveraging free trade agreements and removing barriers to market access across the world. We are currently working on no fewer than 29 markets.

Wendy Chamberlain: It is important that we recognise, particularly when we look at the US, that exporting Scotch is not the only challenge. The Scotch whisky industry needs ex-bourbon casks to produce the whisky we all know and love. Does the Minister agree that the Government need to ensure that conversations with the US Administration take place? Otherwise, our supply will be impacted.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. We are well aware of the importance of those casks to the industry and their value.

As well as working with Governments overseas to increase market access, we work closely with the industry at home to catalyse its ability to reach export potential. We offer a wide range of support for businesses that want to start exporting or to expand into new markets, as well as a compelling programme of trade shows and events to support Scotch whisky exporters to access new markets, build buyer connections and increase marketing in target countries. We also have a network of international trade advisers offering one-to-one support across England, and teams with embedded sector expertise in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Overseas, we have a network of trade advisers and international

market teams supporting agriculture and food and drink businesses in more than 100 markets, supplemented by a network of 15 highly skilled agricultural attachés focusing on removing trade barriers in key markets. We are aware of the challenges faced by Scotch whisky in international markets and we work closely alongside their representatives.

Officials across Government are working on trade deals and breaking down export barriers to ensure that Scotch whisky is traded on a fair playing field and has opportunities to grow in new and expanding markets. An important part of that work is securing geographical indication status in major export markets, to add to Scotch whisky's domestic protection. The status is a special form of protection that defends the iconic product from imitation and counterfeiting. Last August, the Government were pleased to announce our role in securing this form of protection in Brazil, a country which is in the top five global growth markets for alcohol, and is worth almost £900 million in Scottish exports.

In the Budget a firm commitment was made to support spirits producers by, among other measures, investing up to £5 million in the spirit drinks verification scheme, which will reduce the fees paid by businesses for verification of their use of the Scotch whisky geographical indication, and go towards upgrading the overall verification scheme the Government provide. The specifics on how the funding will be used to improve the service will soon be announced by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): The share price of Diageo is down by two thirds, that of Pernod Ricard has halved—the whisky industry is in a difficult place. In the Budget, the duty added to a normal bottle was 32p, taking the total duty on a bottle of spirits up to £9.18. Does the Minister not think that we are plucking the golden goose once too often?

Daniel Zeichner: I hear those concerns. We are addressing a whole range of financial issues across the economy, and we think this is a fair and balanced approach.

To continue outlining some of the measures that we have taken to support the industry, we have announced measures to reduce business costs and encourage growth. We will be doing away with the alcohol duty stamp scheme from 1 May. About 3,500 spirits producers, bottlers and labellers will no longer need to comply with the duty stamp requirements, saving an estimated £6.5 million annually.

We will also simplify the administration of alcohol duty, reducing burdens and supporting growth. From March 2025, HMRC's arrangements for duty returns and payments will be reformed, supported by a new online service. Additionally, reform of the production approvals required by spirits producers means that many will no longer be required to operate separate excise warehousing facilities for the storage, bottling and labelling of their own products.

The industry has always been innovative in sustainability practices. That is reflected in the strategy developed by the Scottish Whisky Association, supported by the UK Government as we strive to develop a more circular economy. The strategy involves a number of packaging reforms, such as the deposit return scheme and extended

[Daniel Zeichner]

producer responsibility. We genuinely believe that this partnership working toward a common outcome will help us all to achieve wider sustainability goals.

We are aware that some distilleries in Scotland have struggled in recent years with delays and limitations to connection with the national grid, creating a barrier to growing their businesses. Reducing electricity network connection timescales and expanding network capacity to connect and to power businesses are both top priorities for the Government. We are working closely with Ofgem and the National Energy System Operator to accelerate network connections. The newly announced mission control for clean power 2030, alongside planning reforms to speed up infrastructure development, will play a vital role in unlocking grid connection delays for Scotch whisky distilleries, especially those in rural areas.

I thank the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey again for securing this debate. In the contributions today, we have heard Members' passion for this vital and important industry in Scotland and the wider United Kingdom. We have also demonstrated the strong support the UK Government are giving the Scottish whisky industry by listening to and acting on the industry's concerns, and by working collaboratively toward common goals.

Question put and agreed to.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

[*Relevant document: Second Report of the International Development Committee, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, HC 373.*]

4.31 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

It is an honour to serve under chairship today, Dame Siobhain. It is also an honour to bring this debate to Westminster Hall, and I am delighted to see so many parliamentary colleagues in attendance. With that being the case, I am not planning to take up my full allotted 10 minutes, as there is obvious enthusiasm among Members to participate in the coming hour. There are many colleagues here who have been passionate campaigners for justice for many years, and I would like to hear as many speeches as possible this afternoon.

On 19 July 2024, the International Court of Justice delivered its advisory opinion in respect of the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem. The ICJ was clear that Israel's occupation, annexation and continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is unlawful, and that Israel is under an obligation to end its unlawful presence in the OPT as rapidly as possible, with the evacuation of all settlers from existing settlements. The Court built on the determination that Israel has committed systemic violations of international humanitarian law by recognising that Israel has permanently acquired territory by force and suppressed the right of Palestinians to self-determination.

When the Minister rises to speak later in this debate, can he confirm that the Government agree that the occupation is illegal, and that they will call on Israel to comply with the ICJ and demand an end to the occupation? While the UK has called for an end to settlement expansion, do the Government agree that Israel must comply with the ICJ and not only stop settlement expansion but evacuate settlers from Palestinian land?

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important and timely debate. He is absolutely right to point out that this is perhaps the most substantial advisory opinion on Israel's illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories, which makes it clear that settlements are illegal, as is Israel's ongoing expansion of them, and settlement goods are illegal, as is the import of them. Does my hon. Friend agree that this places a particular and clear obligation on our Government to act immediately and abide by international law?

Brian Leishman: I am in complete agreement with my hon. Friend, and I pay testament to the work he has done to bring this issue to Parliament in the primary Chamber. I would also appreciate it if the Minister could explain why—to quote the UK ambassador to the UN—we supported

“the central findings of the ICJ's Advisory Opinion”,

but then abstained at the UN general assembly on 18 September 2024, where an overwhelming majority of nations supported the ICJ's advisory opinion? They demanded that Israel brings to an end, without delay, its unlawful occupation within no more than 12 months' time, by 18 September 2025.

Israel has developed and maintained its settlements through the forced removal and displacement of Palestinians. The Court's opinion is that Israel has the obligation to make

"reparation for the damage caused...to all natural or legal persons concerned"

in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case for action. Does he agree with Amnesty International that one of the practical measures the UK Government could take would be to ban goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements?

Brian Leishman: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that topic. That is something that I will mention at more length later on in my contribution, but yes, he can rest assured that I do. I am in firm agreement with my hon. Friend.

The ICJ advisory opinion is significant because it adds to the growing international consensus that Israel is committing the crime against humanity of apartheid against Palestinians. That language is extremely important, because the international community has witnessed, and continues to witness, annexation, occupation, segregation and apartheid. The world is the witness of crimes against humanity, and while the UK Government are in denial about what constitutes a genocide, millions of our own citizens, Amnesty International—as mentioned before—and many nations from the international community are not.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful point, which I strongly endorse. Of course, he can go further, because we are well aware that the new US Administration are now recommending the ethnic cleansing of Gaza. On top of the UK Government making clear their abhorrence of all of the actions that the hon. Gentleman has just described, they should make it very clear that they strongly oppose the proposals coming from the US as well.

Brian Leishman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution as well. I think it is fair to say that, when we look at President Trump's recent comments, it takes us into a new and rather diabolical position, with his efforts to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian people from their homeland. His comments about making Gaza a riviera of the middle east are frankly appalling, and an explicit denial of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.

The hard truth is that the UK needs introspection—to look at what we have done, and what we continue to do, to allow these dreadful acts of death and destruction to happen with impunity. I ask the Minister to please explain why the UK has sold, and continue to sell, arms to Israel—arms that have been used in committing atrocities against the Palestinian people.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for taking my intervention, and for securing today's debate, which is indeed on a very important subject.

I recently attended a talk by Professor Mamode, who demonstrated, with images and with his own testimony, the kinds of injuries that are being sustained by some people in Palestine. Notably, there was a seven-year-old boy whose injuries were so symmetrical that they could not have been done by human hand; they had clearly been done by a drone. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to also be thinking about the export of items that are not militaristic in and of themselves, but that can be weaponised, as drones have been in Palestine, and that we have to consider export bans on those items, too?

Brian Leishman: I thank my hon. Friend; I wholeheartedly agree. Again, that is something that I will turn to later in my contribution, when we look at a variety of actions that the UK Government could undertake.

I also ask the Minister to defend the words, and lack of action, from our Government, which have enabled the Israeli blockades to continue—blockades that stopped lifesaving aid, food, water and medicine from reaching besieged Palestinians who were starving and in the most dire need.

Historical context is vital because the persecution Palestinians suffer is not recent. That treatment did not start in October 2023. For Palestinians, the Nakba began many decades ago. From the mass dispossession of the Palestinian people in 1947 and 1948 to the present day, ethnic cleansing has been a constant.

The seizure of land and homes, the forced displacement, the destruction of civic, educational, cultural and religious infrastructure, which are all protected by international conventions and treaties, to which this country is a committed signatory, are all examples of settler colonialism and Israeli Government-authorised apartheid, that sees removal of the local population through ethnic cleansing. For decades, the international community has looked away and ignored the suffering of the Palestinian people.

I put it to the Government, through the Minister, that the time for the UK to show international and moral leadership is long overdue, especially regarding Palestine. Our nation's role as the former colonial power in Palestine, issuing and implementing the Balfour declaration of 1917, presiding over the dispossession and disfranchisement of the Palestinian people, has imposed an historical debt, which continues to grow the longer we refuse to stand up for the inalienable rights of Palestinians.

Will the Minister commit the UK Government to undertaking a thorough review of their diplomatic, political, trade, economic and military relations with Israel, to identify any aspects that assist and empower Israel's illegal occupation, and to stop those aspects? Will the UK Government suspend trade privileges, agreements and negotiations with Israel, pending the outcome of that thorough review?

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. He is making a passionate speech about the situation in Gaza. One of the biggest arguments made against the abolition of slavery was the financial cost to our country, so does

[Shockat Adam]

he agree that the Foreign Secretary's statement that we will not have economic sanctions against Israel because we have a £6.1 billion trade deal is abhorrent, and that we should reverse that statement as soon as possible?

Brian Leishman: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution. My answer is quite simply yes, I agree. That was an appalling statement. I would like to think that our country is frankly better than putting a pound and pence figure on the cost of a humanitarian disaster and genocide.

I put this to the Minister. Will the UK Government ban the importation of goods from illegal Israeli settlements, which facilitate and give credibility to their existence? Banning the importation of goods from Israel's illegal settlements brings into line our commitment to international law and human rights. The ICJ is clear that all states have an obligation not to recognise, aid or assist in maintaining the illegal situation of occupation, and to stop providing assistance that sustains occupation and to ensure compliance with international law, through diplomatic and economic measures.

In conclusion, the UK Government have a very simple choice to make. Do we side with an apartheid state that has seized territory; displaced and contained people into an open-air prison; eradicated communities and centuries of culture; ethnically cleansed a people and committed genocide? Or do we join the call that many in the international community have already made for full compliance with international law, recognition of the state of Palestine and justice for its indomitable people?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. Please do not take that to be a promise. As everybody can see, a lot of people want to speak. We will endeavour to get through everybody, as is our hope. At the moment, we think the limit is around two minutes, but should it prove necessary to change that, I will let people know.

4.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for setting the scene. I have a different opinion from other hon. Members, but I respect their point of view and I hope that they will respect mine.

I am, and always have been, a steadfast friend of Israel. My commitment to the state of Israel is rooted in its right to exist as a secure and democratic homeland for the Jewish people. For me, that principle is non-negotiable. I hope that my remarks will reflect both my empathy and my unwavering belief in Israel's right to defend itself.

The ICJ measures, initiated by South Africa, reflect a deeply flawed and one-sided interpretation of international law. Israel has a sovereign right, indeed a duty, to protect its citizens from the barbaric terrorist organisation Hamas. The petitioners in this case conveniently ignore Hamas's atrocities: their deliberate targeting of civilians; the massacre of innocent men, women and children; and the use of Palestinian civilians as human shields.

I support the principle of a two-state solution, but let us be clear that peace cannot co-exist with Hamas's continued aggression. Every time Israel has made significant concessions, whether during the Oslo accords or the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, it has been met with an escalation in violence and not with peace. If Hamas retains power, Palestine will be a failed state from the outset—one that continues to launch rockets into Israel's towns and incite hatred against Jews worldwide. Peace will be possible only when the Palestinian leadership prioritises economic stability and co-existence over terrorism and destruction. A weakened Israel emboldens its adversaries, most notably Iran, Hezbollah and radical Islamist movements. Those entities do not simply wish for an end to Israel's military operations; they desire Israel's total annihilation.

The ICJ may issue opinions, but it is not infallible. We must challenge rulings that fail to acknowledge Israel's security needs, excuse Hamas's barbarism and seek to delegitimise a nation's right to exist. The UK must continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel, not just in words but in actions. That is my point of view, and I hope other Members will respect it, as I will respect theirs.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I clarify that I am imposing a hard two-minute limit, so I will ask hon. Members to sit down if they go over it.

4.47 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this debate, which comes at a critical time for the Palestinian people, the future of Gaza and the very foundations of international law. Those things are under direct threat from the recently elected so-called leader of the free world, who has proposed ethnic cleansing that violates the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to return to their homeland and live free from occupation. His threat to withdraw aid to Jordan and Egypt if they reject his so-called Gaza development plan has ignited a sharp backlash.

Those proposals are a blueprint for a crime of historic proportions, and our Government must condemn and resist them. That must, of course, mean accepting in full the historic advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice, made in July last year, which confirmed that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory is unlawful and which found Israel guilty of violating the international prohibition on racial segregation and apartheid.

Let us be clear: following the advisory opinion is not optional. As a UN member state and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK has clear obligations under international law. For a year and a half, I and other hon. Members have called for urgent action to hold Israel accountable for the indiscriminate targeting of civilians and the near total destruction in the Gaza strip. We must stand unequivocally and unashamedly for upholding international law and, in doing so, for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. Any further delay or refusal to do so risks the escalation of crimes of unimaginable proportions, as well as continuing to abnegate our responsibilities to meaningfully oppose the decades-long crimes of occupation.

4.49 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this important debate. I will not repeat what has already been set out, but I think that the British people want to hear politicians who sit in this Chamber speak the truth.

The repeated suggestion that the more than 40,000 innocent men, women and children who have been massacred were somehow being used as human shields is nonsense. Most British people know the truth because they see it on social media. The only evidence of human shields is the ones that the Israeli army have used. We have seen that documented and international organisations have confirmed it.

Any reputable organisation that makes adverse findings against the Israeli army and the Israeli leadership is immediately labelled as antisemitic, diluting the very essence of that word. Anyone with a moral compass wants to support peace and stability for Israelis and for Palestinians—that is paramount—but it is sickening to constantly hear the disparity in the argument whereby Palestinians are dehumanised.

Today on the BBC, we heard about one individual who was killed in Ukraine by a missile—one individual. I am not saying that that is not important—of course it is; any loss of innocent life is important—but thousands of children in Gaza can be killed and it barely makes the headlines. The atrocities in the west bank are continuing. We must do all that we can to support the Palestinians.

4.51 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this debate today.

Less than two months ago, on 16 December, we were here in a Westminster Hall debate—the Minister was present—when I was quite passionate about the intentions of Netanyahu. I stated unequivocally that Netanyahu's intention was to displace Palestinians into Egypt and Jordan. Lo and behold, what did we hear last week? That is exactly his intention, and now he is joined by President Trump. To me, that is no less than ethnic cleansing. We, including the Government, must call it out for what it is: ethnic cleansing. There is no other word for it.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Ethnic cleansing is a practice that we see taking place, as is the annexation of the west bank. Does my hon. Friend agree that the peace process is not an end result, and recognition must be a by-product of the peace process? That is inevitably coming to an end with the ongoing annexation that we see, but Palestinians must have a recognised state.

Tahir Ali: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention. It is another point that I have been quite vociferous on. We can achieve a two-state solution only if the UK Government recognise both states. By recognising one state, we can never achieve a two-state solution; it is almost as if we are saying that we agree with Netanyahu, who simply wants a one-state solution. That is not the

way forward for the peace process. What is being said should not be taken lightly; our denial is almost complicit in that agenda.

As of today, we have seen more than 50,000 Palestinians killed; thousands remain missing, their fate unknown; and countless families have been expelled from their homes. Humanitarian aid has been consistently denied, worsening an already catastrophic situation. The ceasefire three weeks ago brought a sigh of relief across the world. As fragile as it was—our Government have been repeating that—it almost, now, has become clear that Netanyahu, in preventing aid from getting to the Gazans as part of the deal, is the one who is reneging on it. More must be done to make sure that that ceasefire continues, and the harsh words that are being used against the Palestinians by Netanyahu and President Trump have to be called out.

4.55 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. We are at a pivotal moment in history. The international rule of law, established and affirmed after world war two, is on the brink of being disregarded by some of the very states that created it. The International Court of Justice, established in 1945, has a critical role in promoting peace and resolving disputes between states. Since its inception, it has seen approximately 90% of its rulings implemented. It is literally the world court, and the suggestion that its authority somehow is not recognised and respected because it does not apply to one single state cannot abide.

Last year, the ICJ ruling declared Israel's presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories unlawful. Although the ruling is legally binding in its principles, it is advisory in nature and its implementation will depend on the political will of states in the international community. The horrific attacks carried out by Hamas terrorists on 7 October 2023 were appalling, and they too must not go unpunished, but Israel's response to that atrocity has failed to distinguish in every case between terrorists and innocent civilians in Gaza. Will we continue to uphold a world order based on law, or will we allow power politics and strategic alliances to dictate when international law applies and when it does not?

Just last week, the US President sanctioned officials of the ICC for daring to investigate potential war crimes committed by Israeli forces. That was another dangerous precedent that undermines international justice. We cannot abide this: we must stand by international law and we must respect the ruling of the ICJ.

4.57 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this timely debate. It is not too onerous to have two minutes for a speech on this occasion, because there is really only one question to ask: when will the Government respond to the advisory opinion? Yes, it is a very significant piece of work and it will take some time, but we have had seven months, so I hope the Minister might indicate today how long it will be before that happens.

It will be difficult for the Government to respond, because it is not just about Gaza; it is about East Jerusalem and the west bank. It has fundamental implications for the

[*Andy Slaughter*]

continued existence of settlements, let alone their expansion, and for trade with those settlements. There are inconsistencies already in Government policy—from the last Government as well as this Government—in terms of allowing that trade to continue when we recognise the settlements as illegal. It is also about the segregation of the Palestinian population and the enforcement of that segregation, particularly on the west bank, and about the transfer of population, which we have heard a lot about in the last few weeks.

This will be a difficult decision for the Government. The Minister said that he agrees with the central findings, notwithstanding the fact that the UK abstained in the vote, but the implications of the Government agreeing with the judgment are very powerful for our relations with Israel, which is a friendly country.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On that point, and following on from the speech by the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), is not the key issue whether the UK will abide by international law, the rules-based order and the systems that were set up after the second world war?

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a conflict between some of the Government's political instincts. They say that Israel is an ally, but sometimes we have to speak as strongly to our friends as we do to our enemies. The reality is that the UK has particular responsibilities, such as historical responsibilities, going back to the Balfour declaration and the mandate, and moral responsibilities. The UK also has power and influence as a member of the UN Security Council. Unlike the last Government, this Government should take that seriously.

This issue goes to the heart of the problems in the middle east, and resolving issues between Israel and Palestine will unlock peace in the middle east. What is happening at the moment is exactly the reverse of that. We have a Government who say very clearly, through the Attorney General, that they believe in the rule of law. That is to be admired, but we must see it in the way that they respond to this opinion. I hope that we will see that soon.

5 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain.

I thank the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this very important debate. As he set out in his introductory remarks, the historic opinion from the International Court of Justice has significant implications for the UK Government. It adds to the growing international consensus that the actions of the Israeli Government constitute apartheid—a consensus articulated by states, by NGOs, by Israeli as well as Palestinian organisations, by Israeli politicians and by Israeli newspapers.

The ICJ opinion is very meaningful for the UK because, as it sets out, third states have obligations deriving from that opinion. Third states have an obligation not to recognise as legal the illegal occupation; not to render aid or assistance in maintaining that situation; to abstain from entering into economic or trade dealings

with Israel concerning the occupied Palestinian territory; and to take steps to prevent trade or investment relations that assist in the maintenance of that illegal situation.

I ask the Minister to please answer five specific questions. Given the opinion, it seems absolutely crystal clear that the UK must, first, end all arms sales to Israel, including dual-use items; secondly, end any military surveillance partnership that could contribute to rendering aid in maintenance of this illegal situation; and thirdly, regulate the private sector—there are credible reports of complicity on the part of private sector organisations, not least oil and gas companies, in providing fuel that maintains the unlawful occupation. Fourthly, the UK should ban the import of products from illegal settlements. Fifthly, it should suspend the UK's current trade agreement with Israel and negotiations over any new trade agreement, pending a proper and thorough review of the international human rights implications of this. In order to get peace, the occupation must be ended.

5.2 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain.

The conflict in Gaza has undoubtedly devastated communities, decimated areas and destroyed countless lives. Each and every day, the death toll rises as further lives are extinguished. Futures are lost forever. Our Government have worked extensively with the international community to support a desperately needed ceasefire in the region—and of course, we can always do more.

The ceasefire was hard fought and painstakingly negotiated, but finally it delivered not only peace but hope. Along with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, we welcomed a ceasefire that I know brought some small comfort to my constituents in Ilford South. After 15 months of death, destruction and violence, we have witnessed hostages returning to their families and prisoners being freed in exchange. Too often in such immense tragedies, when the scale of destruction is so severe, individuals are forgotten. When we talk of death tolls—raw numbers—the son, the husband, the brother and the father are lost. Seeing the hostages and prisoners being reunited with loved ones brings into stark reality the human cost of ongoing violence in the region.

As we stand here today, the ceasefire hangs in jeopardy less than two weeks after it was announced. The lives and liberty of so many hang in the balance. Gaza is not a political tool; Gaza is home to millions of Palestinians. As the Prime Minister said recently, Palestinians “must be allowed home”.

We cannot revert back to the violence. We cannot accept further death and destruction. We know that the only viable solution to unrest in the region is a free Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel. To support anything else would be to tolerate further suffering and violation of international law.

5.4 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this debate.

The situation in the middle east is one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time. Gaza is in ruins and tens of thousands are dead—including, tragically, many children. Meanwhile, Israeli families are still mourning the loved ones lost to Hamas's brutal attack on 7 October,

and many hostages remain in captivity. Across the region, civilians are paying the price for political failure and international inaction, and now with United States President Donald Trump's reckless Gaza plan, the current fragile truce is ever more endangered.

We cannot ignore the deepening humanitarian catastrophe. Hospitals should never be battlegrounds, nor should their doctors be detained—doctors and nurses must be allowed to do their jobs in safety. Aid must be allowed into Gaza at scale, and those responsible for blocking that aid should face real consequences. Let us not equivocate: the obstruction of humanitarian aid is a breach of the Geneva convention and constitutes a war crime. Then there is the issue of illegal settlements and settler violence in the west bank. Not only is the expansion of settlements illegal under international law, but it is a direct obstacle to peace. The UK must be willing to act, including by ending trade with illegal settlements, as specified in the International Court of Justice opinion, and by holding to account those inciting violence.

The immediate priorities must be a lasting ceasefire; the return of hostages, including the release of prisoners such as Dr Abu Safiya; and urgent humanitarian relief. Beyond that, there must be a real political effort—one that does not just manage the crisis but ends it. That means real pressure on all sides to make sure the current ceasefire lasts, to respect international law, and to finally deliver a solution in which both Palestinian and Israeli people can live in peace and safety.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I apologise for this, but a desire to get everybody in means that I am now reducing the time limit to one minute.

5.6 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): We need action, not words. The International Court of Justice ruling means that we need to see real action from our Government, and that means widespread sanctions. I recently co-ordinated a letter to the Foreign Secretary with my colleague and hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), supported by over 60 parliamentarians from seven political parties, calling on our Government to impose comprehensive sanctions.

Specifically, we should impose targeted sanctions on state actors, ban the import of products from illegal settlements, introduce a total and immediate arms ban—including on F-35s—and revoke the 2030 road map. That special UK partnership with Israel seeks to deepen economic, trade and security ties. How on earth would it be acceptable to do that with a state facing serious allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide? The UN General Assembly has endorsed the approach that sanctions are necessary. We now need the political will to put that moral and legal imperative into practice.

5.7 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing today's debate. I was at the International Court of Justice when the South African application was originally made, and I think we should congratulate South Africa on what it put forward and the work it has done to apply international law for Palestinians.

For the record, the ICJ's judgment included settlement activities in breach of article 49 of the fourth Geneva convention, Israel's attempt to annex parts of the Palestinian territories, and violations of international law prohibiting racial segregation and apartheid. These are very serious cases indeed. What we need to hear from the British Government is that they fully accept and fully support all the ICJ's decisions, and that they will implement them. My last word is this: if we continue supplying weapons to a country that is in violation of international law, we ourselves are in violation of international law.

5.8 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this debate. The Israeli occupation and annexation is unlawful; I would gently say to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that we cannot pick and choose where the law applies. There is no exemption for Israel.

I want to ask three questions about settlement goods. Can the Minister set out what legislative and regulatory steps the Government have considered to prohibit UK nationals, companies and financial institutions from conducting business in, or with, illegal Israeli settlements? Has the UK taken any measures aimed at banning trade in settlement goods, such as introducing effective tracking systems, and will the UK ban investments in Israeli companies or banks that are contributing to maintaining Israel's unlawful occupation?

5.9 pm

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): It is my pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this important debate.

While our closest allies rubbish the international courts, we must not go down that path and I welcome the Government's statements to that effect. As my time is brief, I will focus on one particular argument. Occupations are never planned to be extraordinarily long. Israeli occupation is now 57 years long, as reflected in Judge Yusuf's separate opinion. I fear that, if the occupation continues, it will become increasingly difficult to apply international law to the situation on the ground. I am therefore keen to hear from the Minister about what approach the Government are taking to ensure that the current fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hamas can become a long-lasting peace with a two-state solution. That is the only way that this extraordinarily long occupation will be brought to an end in the interests of Israeli and Palestinian people.

5.10 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) on securing this important debate.

Last week, barrister Sam Fowles warned parliamentarians of the real risk that the UK could be in breach of international law. Given the International Court of Justice's

[*Steve Witherden*]

advisory opinion that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory is unlawful and given the UK's membership of the UN, the Government must impose sanctions on Israel to undermine its illegal occupation.

Israel is on trial for genocide, so the current partial suspension of arms licences must go further. I say it again: the UK must impose an immediate and total ban on arms export licences. Furthermore, although the Government acknowledge the illegality of Israeli settlements, they continue to import goods from them. Illegal settlement products should not be regarded as Israeli goods and should be banned from entering the UK. With the US Administration openly calling—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I ask the hon. Member to sit down. I apologise—I know that he waited a long time to make his contribution. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, who has five minutes.

5.11 pm

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak with you as our Chair, Dame Siobhain. I thank the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this important debate, which he introduced with clarity and power. I also thank other right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken—it has been a passionate and compelling discussion.

Liberal Democrats have long argued that the UK should uphold the rule of law and the role of international institutions in our foreign policy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) argued in this debate. The post-1945 rules-based order was forged by Churchill and other leaders and has endured until now. It not only holds moral weight but is in the interests of democracies such as the UK. For that reason, we believe that, as a member of both, the UK should observe the opinions and judgments of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

We think it is irresponsible for Conservative Members to say, as they often do in the Chamber, that those are foreign courts. They may be located overseas but they have legitimate jurisdiction over the UK because previous Governments, both Conservative and Labour, have consented to that. Trying to portray them as a threat to UK sovereignty is not only false but damaging, as it reduces the likelihood of other states accepting their jurisdiction.

Imran Hussain: The hon. Gentleman is making a pertinent point about the international, rules-based order. We see that the International Court of Justice is investigating genocide but states are acting as though it is not; we have seen the International Criminal Court threatened directly by the most powerful country in the world; and we see international hypocrisy and double standards like we have never seen before. Surely the international, rules-based order is not only collapsing but dying before our eyes, if the UK Government and others do not act now.

Calum Miller: The hon. Member makes a powerful point to which I am sure the Minister will wish to respond.

Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) have been right to recognise the terrible level of violence that we have seen over the 16 months since the atrocities committed by Hamas on 7 October. We are moved to tears and anger when we hear of the deaths of infants in tents and hospitals in Gaza. At the same time, we are shocked and appalled to see the emaciated state of hostages such as Eli Sharabi as they are released from Hamas captivity in a gruesome pageant. There has been inhumane cruelty towards innocent civilians. That underscores why the rule of law matters. The ICC is right to consider cases against leaders on both sides. The UK should enforce these warrants.

It has been impossible for us to consider the ICJ opinion today without reference to the proposals for Gaza put forward by President Trump last week, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) highlighted. Since 5 November, Liberal Democrats have pointed out that President Trump would be unpredictable, and that the UK needed to put itself in a position of strength so as not to get swept into the chaos that the new resident of the White House would unleash.

Since the ICJ's opinion was delivered in July 2024, the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has worsened appreciably. Northern Gaza has been flattened and its citizens placed under displacement orders. Gaza is today riddled with unexploded ordnance, even as Palestinians return home under the fragile ceasefire. In the west bank, settlement expansion has continued, and the Israel Defence Forces have continued arbitrarily to detain Palestinians and protect illegal settlements. The Israeli Knesset has outlawed the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. Extremist members of the Israeli Cabinet have continued to call for the annexation of the west bank, and welcomed President Trump's suggestion that Palestinians be forced from Gaza, yet the ICJ's opinion is clear. It creates obligations on other states, including the UK, which include supporting the Palestinians' right to self-determination, taking steps to prevent trade or investment that assists in maintaining the illegal situation, and not rendering aid or assistance that maintains the situation.

In response to that call, Liberal Democrats have repeatedly called on the Government to take the following steps: legislate to cease trade with illegal settlements in the occupied territories; sanction those who advocate illegal settler expansion or violence by settlers towards Palestinians, in particular Minister Smotrich and former Minister Ben-Gvir; restrict all arms sale to Israel, including component parts for F-35 aircraft, since those have been used against Palestinians in the occupied territories; and immediately recognise the state of Palestine. Ministers have repeatedly refused to take those steps—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. I do not have the power to tell you to stop, but if you would not mind coming to an end, that would be good.

Calum Miller: I shall, of course. I am sorry, Dame Siobhain; I was taking account of the intervention. I shall be very brief.

I am most frustrated by the consistent refusal by Ministers to recognise Palestine. If the Government are serious about working with all partners to restore a pathway to a two-state solution, that cannot happen

when only one party enjoys state recognition. Failing to act empowers the extremists on both sides. The time has come to recognise the state of Palestine.

5.16 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I commend the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing the debate.

We continue to follow developments stemming from this case at the ICJ carefully, and note that the ICJ itself has been far from unanimous about the advisory opinion. We understand that the Labour Government's position is that they agree with the central findings of the ICJ's advisory opinion, but will the Minister tell us whether he thinks that such court cases are an effective way to try to bring about peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and will he be clear that under no circumstances should we draw any kind of moral equivalence between Hamas and the democratically elected Government of Israel?

Let me address the immediate situation in Israel and Gaza, which remains extremely fragile. The announcement by Hamas that they are postponing hostage releases will be a cause of concern and anxiety for the families of the hostages, and all who care about their appalling captivity. Will the Minister explain what direct engagement our Government have had with the Israeli Government, the US Administration and our partners in the region in response? The hostages held in horrific and inhumane conditions in Gaza must be returned to their loved ones, both in accordance with the terms of phase 1 of the ceasefire and in the subsequent stage. We have been relieved to see the release of the hostages freed so far under the agreement, including British Israeli national Emily Damari. I sincerely hope that all those who have been freed from captivity can now begin to rebuild their lives after the most unimaginable trauma—and nobody should doubt that trauma.

We have all seen the shocking scenes of hostages being paraded by Hamas prior to their handover, and the shocking images of the release of Or Levy, Eli Sharabi and Ohad Ben Ami on Saturday. We must also acknowledge the tragic death of 86-year-old Shlomo Mansour, who we now understand was killed during the appalling Hamas attacks on 7 October. His body has been held hostage in Gaza. We think today of his family and friends at what must be an unimaginably distressing time. The hostages who remain in the hands of Hamas are at the forefront of our minds, as are the poor families who have suffered so much and continue to wait anxiously for news about their loved ones. The news that eight hostages will not be returned to their loved ones alive is tragic. The days and weeks ahead may be very difficult for Israel and the Jewish community, and we must support them.

We must again ask the UK Government to continue to work overtime alongside our partners to exert pressure and help to remove the obstacles stopping humanitarian access to those who continue to be held hostage by Hamas. That is an important point, and it does not always receive the attention it deserves.

The Government must not jeopardise the UK's relationship or undermine trust and confidence with the Government of Israel if they want to continue having a serious and in-depth dialogue about the present situation

and the future of Gaza. I would appreciate it if the Minister could update us on the delivery of British aid to Gaza since last week's urgent question.

As to what the future could look like, we are not even close to phase 3 of the current agreement and we should not get ahead of ourselves, but, to restate our long-standing position on regional peace, we support a two-state solution that guarantees security and stability for both the Israeli and the Palestinian people. Our long-standing position has been that we will recognise a Palestinian state at a time that is most conducive to the peace process. We are not at that point now, and we are clear that recognition cannot be the start of the process.

Israeli hostages remain in captivity and every single one must be released. Ensuring that Hamas are no longer in charge of Gaza and removing their capacity to launch attacks against Israel are also essential and unavoidable steps on the road to lasting peace. Our immediate focus must be getting the hostages out and getting the aid in, and then making progress towards a sustainable end to the current conflict.

If the Palestinian Authority are to have an expanded role, they need to implement the most significant reforms in their history, including to their welfare and education policies, and they must demonstrate democratic progress. That will clearly be important for their operations in the west bank, too. There are also steps we would like Israel to take, as we have said before, in relation to frozen funds and settlements. More generally, we want the UK to be actively involved in efforts to expand the Abraham accords.

I will comment briefly on the other major ICJ case, brought by South Africa, which I have serious concerns about. I do not believe it to be helpful in the goal of achieving a sustainable end to the current conflict.

To conclude, although formal determination of genocide should be based on the final judgment of a competent court, the Conservative Government when in power were very clear that Israel's actions in Gaza cannot be described as genocide—

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. Again, I do not have the power to ask you to sit down, but I would be very grateful if you did.

Wendy Morton: Almost there, Dame Siobhain. We will continue to carefully scrutinise the Labour Government, and I would welcome any updates from the Minister.

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for securing this debate. I will try to make some progress. I imagine that many colleagues will want to intervene, but I am keen to give my hon. Friend a chance to respond, so I will limit the number of interventions that I take.

Many Members have spoken movingly of the horrific scenes that we have seen right across the conflict, and many have drawn attention to the fact that it is right for all our minds to be on the ceasefire at this time. It is vital that the ceasefire continues through this weekend and beyond, through all three of its phases, on time and

[Mr Hamish Falconer]

in full. That is the most important intervention that the international community can make for the people of Gaza and the people of Israel at this time.

I reiterate, as the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have done repeatedly, that the UK is fully committed to international law. When the Prime Minister addressed the UN General Assembly last year, he urged UN members to turn back

“towards the rule of law towards cooperation, responsibility and progress. Towards peace.”

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Falconer: I will in a minute.

We demonstrated our commitment to international law in September, when the Foreign Secretary announced to Parliament the decision to suspend relevant export licences to Israel. I reassure hon. Members that that is not a partial suspension; it is a full suspension. I will not rehearse the F-35 arguments, but those suspensions do cover drones and the kinds of attacks that Professor Mamode has been briefing about so movingly.

That decision was made following the Foreign Secretary's review of Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law, which concluded that there is a clear risk that UK exports could be used in violation of international humanitarian law. We are continuing those assessments and we keep all aspects of our exports policy under close review.

John McDonnell: I am grateful for the Minister's statement about the British Government complying with international law, because a number of us are concerned about complicity. Mark Smith, the diplomat who resigned because of his concern about arms sales to Israel, wrote three days ago:

“I saw illegality and complicity with war crimes.”

Has there been an investigation into Mark Smith's allegations?

Mr Falconer: My right hon. Friend will understand that I do not want to comment too much on an individual case, but the diplomat in question was not engaged in this issue specifically since our Government have been in power, so I am not sure that there is a question for us to answer there.

The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) asked about the advisory opinion of the ICJ. The UK has traditionally been a strong supporter of the ICJ. It is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations and this Government respect its independence.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Falconer: I will make a little bit more progress, if I may.

As the Foreign Secretary and others have made clear, we continue to consider the opinion carefully. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) rightly identified the complexity and the novel elements of that advisory opinion, and we are taking our time in considering it. I hope to be able to return to the House in due course. The opinion contains

novel findings that require further reflection. I understand his desire to know quickly our position, but hon. Members will appreciate that such an important decision necessarily takes time and careful consideration. The advisory opinion in itself took months in its development, and will take some months in its—

Debbie Abrahams: Will the decision about the advisory opinion be made before or after the Swiss conference in March?

Mr Falconer: I am not going to be drawn on precise timings.

Douglas McAllister: In its judgment, the Court stated that Israel is

“under an obligation to provide full reparation”

to Palestinian victims—full reparations for its damage and destruction. That is a key part of securing peace. How will our Government ensure not only that UK and international aid flows in, but that reparations are paid to the people of Palestine?

Mr Falconer: I am not going to comment further on how we are going to respond to the advisory opinion. It is in process and I hope to be able to update the House soon. Recognising that time is running away from me, I am not going to take any more interventions, but I will very quickly run through some of the other issues that were raised most regularly.

In relation to trade, I want to be clear that the UK Government consider Israeli settlements illegal under international law, and goods produced in those settlements are not entitled to benefit from trade and trade preferences under the UK's current trade agreements with the Palestinian Authority and Israel. We support accurate labelling of settlement goods so as not to mislead the consumer. We routinely update our guidance to British businesses on the overseas business risk website and advise British businesses to bear in mind the UK Government's view on the illegality of settlements under international law when considering their investments and activities in the region.

There have been many questions about statements from the US President. The UK has always been clear, and we remain clear, that we must see two states, with Palestinians able to live and prosper in their homelands in Gaza and the west bank. There must be no forced displacement of Palestinians, nor any reduction in the territory of the Gaza strip. Palestinians should be able to return and rebuild their homes and their lives. That is a right guaranteed under international law. We need to move through the phases of this ceasefire deal, towards reconstruction. We will play our part in supporting that reconstruction, working alongside the Palestinian Authority and Gulf and Arab partners.

Let me end by reiterating this Government's commitment to international law. We continue to consider the advisory opinion carefully, with the seriousness and rigour that it deserves. Our long-standing position is that Israel should bring an end to its presence in the OPTs as rapidly as possible. That should be done in a way that creates a path for negotiations towards a two-state solution where two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side in peace. That is what we will continue to press for with our international partners at every opportunity.

I close by saying that my thoughts are with those in Gaza and in Israel suffering with terrible uncertainty at the moment. We must all hope for the preservation of the ceasefire. I and the rest of the Ministers at the Foreign Office will do everything in our power to preserve it.

5.29 pm

Brian Leishman: I thank the Minister for his response. I also thank the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), and all other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions.

It is my opinion that the Minister did not answer all the questions that I set out, so I will submit them in writing. While there is currently a ceasefire, the humanitarian emergency facing Palestinians is very much ongoing and peace in the middle east looks a very fragile thing indeed. I will include in my letter to the Minister a suggestion that he looks into Mark Smith's comments in greater detail, as Mr Smith details that senior officials and Government Ministers protected arms deals—

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 12 February 2025

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): In August 2024, I established the infected blood compensation scheme in regulations. This enabled the Infected Blood Compensation Authority (IBCA) to begin making compensation payments to people who are infected and the work to progress payments quickly continues as an absolute priority.

Today I laid before Parliament the draft Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2025. These regulations need to be debated and approved by both Houses before they can come into force. Once in force, the regulations will provide IBCA with the powers it needs to begin making payments to eligible affected people (such as partners, parents, children, siblings and, in some instances, carers) this year, and to make payments to eligible people through the supplementary routes. This is in addition to maintaining the core route for eligible infected people as established last year. As we set out in August, the infected blood compensation scheme is tariff-based, with the core route setting out tariffs which are intended to work in a way which would be appropriate for the majority of people applying to the scheme.

The Government have published an accompanying explanatory memorandum and equalities impact assessment alongside the regulations on legislation.gov.uk. On gov.uk, we have published an updated compensation scheme explainer and an addendum report from the expert group.

I would also like to welcome the progress being made in delivering compensation. In addition to the over £1 billion of interim compensation payments we have paid, IBCA has now invited 113 people to claim compensation. So far, 23 offers have been made, totalling over £34 million and 14 offers have been accepted and paid, totalling over £13 million. IBCA remains on track to invite 250 people to apply by the end of March and will continue to publish the monthly statistics on its website. However, this is only the beginning, and there is much more work to do.

By laying these regulations, we are one step closer to having the entire infected blood compensation scheme fully established in law. This will be a significant moment for all those who have waited for this for too long. My aim remains for these regulations to be in place by 31 March and I hope parliamentarians from across both Houses support these regulations so that we can finally focus solely on delivering compensation to those who have waited for justice for so long.

[HCWS443]

Security and Intelligence Agencies: Contingencies Fund Advance 2024-25

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): The security and intelligence agencies will be seeking a supplementary estimate for 2024-25. As it will be some time before the associated legislation receives Royal Assent, the agencies are seeking an advance from the Contingencies Fund in order to meet contractual commitments. Parliamentary approval for additional resource of £56,879,000, capital of £51,762,000 and cash movements of £168,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the security and intelligence agencies. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £276,641,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund. As the security and intelligence agencies are non-ministerial departments, I am making this statement on behalf of their accounting officer to ensure that Parliament is informed of this advance from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS448]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Statutory Gambling Levy: Prevention

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Minister for Gambling and DCMS Lords Minister, Baroness Twycross:

Today I am updating the House on the Government's plans to introduce the statutory gambling levy, further to the Government's response to the levy consultation published on 27 November 2024.

In that response, the Government were clear that delivering prevention activity at the local, regional, and national levels with effective commissioning and oversight arrangements is highly complex and needed further consideration. The levy will for the first time provide increased, independent, dedicated investment for prevention initiatives and we wanted to take the time to get the policy right, while ensuring necessary legislation is passed. It is a priority for the Government to have the levy in place by April 2025 with funding flowing as soon as possible thereafter.

To ensure that there is sufficient trust, expertise and authority in the use of the levy funding for prevention, I can confirm that we have appointed the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) in the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to take on the role as lead commissioning body in this area for England, alongside appropriate bodies in Scotland and Wales.

Prevention remains a crucial part of the Government's efforts to tackle gambling-related harm. An effective prevention plan seeks to identify the right mix of interventions to be applied at both the population and individual level. In its broadest sense, prevention will include a wide spectrum of measures, including but not limited to regulatory restrictions on products, place, and provider, as well as tailored measures for at-risk

groups and individuals, including education and early intervention activities, with the ultimate goal of delivering on the Government's objective to reduce gambling-related harm in Great Britain.

That is why the Government are increasing investment through the levy to facilitate a comprehensive approach to harm reduction in all three nations of Great Britain. We will allocate 30% of levy funding to the prevention stream, up to £30 million each year, alongside the significant funding allocated for research and treatment.

Ringfenced investment in this area will help to encourage innovation and support a strengthened, integrated and co-ordinated approach to prevention in Britain. As the Government's lead on improving England's health, we are confident OHID is well-placed to capitalise on its expertise and relationships in this area. It will maximise the impact of the dedicated funding the UK Government are putting behind this effort.

OHID, working closely with appropriate bodies in Scotland and Wales will seek to develop a comprehensive approach to prevention and early intervention, supporting improvement across respective nations. OHID and appropriate bodies in Scotland and Wales will undertake necessary design work to determine the final scope of prevention activity, working closely with the research and treatment leads to ensure a joined-up approach. We will develop and provide clear and measurable outcomes for the prevention strand of the statutory levy system, as we have already done for research and treatment. However, future activity may focus on:

Awareness-raising: building the public's understanding of the risks associated with gambling-related harm, is crucial to preventing harm before it occurs. Population level campaigns could be used to raise awareness of gambling-related harm and reduce the stigma often associated with seeking help.

Local and regional initiatives: delivery of more upstream interventions to address harms earlier and more effectively at local and regional levels, with interventions tailored to the needs of those communities, and the development of a national approach would be a significant step forward.

Building capacity: providing investment for organisations, particularly those in frontline settings, to further understand and deliver harm reduction activities that will reduce harm for at-risk people.

The statutory levy will for the first time provide ringfenced investment towards the prevention of gambling-related harms. Together with OHID and the wider levy system, we are confident that the levy will play a crucial role in the Government's manifesto commitment to reducing gambling-related harm.

[HCWS444]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Contingency Fund Advance: UKAEA Pension Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy): I hereby give notice of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero's intention to seek an advance from the Contingencies Fund of £55,000,000 for the UK Atomic Energy Authority pension schemes. This is a cash request to enable pension payments to be made as they fall due.

Parliamentary approval for additional cash of £55,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for UK Atomic Energy Authority pension schemes. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £55,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The cash advance will be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent on the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS441]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Manston Inquiry

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): In fulfilment of the commitments made by the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Suella Braverman), I am today announcing the establishment of an article 3 ECHR non-statutory independent inquiry to investigate the conditions encountered by those detained at Manston short-term holding facility between June and November 2022.

The inquiry will investigate the decisions, actions and circumstances which led to those conditions, and will reach conclusions on the treatment of those detained. The inquiry may make recommendations regarding the conditions and should investigate whether there are lessons to be learned regarding the Home Office's handling of the incident.

The formal start date of the inquiry will be 17 March 2025 and I will place a copy of the terms of reference for the inquiry in the Libraries of both Houses.

The inquiry will be chaired by Sophie Cartwright KC, who has experience in inquests and inquiries. Arrangements for the inquiry will be a matter for her, but as the sponsoring Department, the Home Office will provide support and ensure the inquiry has the resources needed to fulfil its terms of reference.

The Government will make no comment on issues which are now in the purview of the inquiry until it has concluded, but we will encourage all current and former public officials with evidence to provide to the inquiry to co-operate with its requests for assistance.

[HCWS439]

Security Service: Correction of Evidence

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): The purpose of this statement is to notify the House that MI5 has corrected previously incorrect evidence that it provided to the High Court and the Investigatory Powers Tribunal, in relation to the case of agent X and alleged acts of domestic abuse. The High Court has today varied the injunction covering this case which allows further information to be reported. The Investigatory Powers Tribunal case is continuing and is expected to conclude later this year.

It is clearly a very serious matter to provide incorrect information to the court and MI5 has apologised directly for this.

I have commissioned an independent external review to report to me and to the director general of MI5 to understand what led to incorrect information being provided by MI5 to the High Court. Sir Jonathan Jones KC, former HM Procurator General, Treasury Solicitor and head of the Government Legal Service, will lead the review and ensure that an independent authoritative view can be taken on what went wrong, and any actions MI5 needs to take to prevent a similar occurrence in the future. Sir Jonathan will report his findings directly to me and Sir Ken McCallum, and I will ensure these are shared with the Investigatory Powers Commissioner and the Intelligence and Security Committee.

MI5 does an incredibly difficult and important job every single day to keep our country safe from a wide range of threats, working to the highest of standards, and it is of course essential that those high standards must always be maintained.

Protecting national security is the first duty of the state, and the work of our intelligence agencies is critical to keeping the UK and its citizens safe. Covert human intelligence sources—or agents—play a crucial role in that work, and maintaining the secrecy of their identities is essential to protect them, their families, the vital intelligence they provide, and the recruitment of future sources.

The Government maintain and support the principle of neither confirming nor denying allegations about whether individuals may or may not be operating on behalf of the UK intelligence agencies.

The Investigatory Powers Tribunal case to which this incorrect evidence was provided is still ongoing, and therefore I cannot provide further information or comment to the House on this case at this time.

The Government are also clear that all organisations must have robust safeguarding policies under continuous review and must take any allegation of domestic abuse extremely seriously. The public and Parliament must have the highest confidence in the processes in place to protect the most vulnerable and protect those most at risk in society.

[HCWS445]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Social and Affordable Housebuilding and Supported Housing: Next Steps

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):

Further support for social and affordable housebuilding and next steps on supported housing

England is in the grip of an acute and entrenched housing crisis. The detrimental consequences of this disastrous state of affairs are now all-pervasive. We have a generation locked out of homeownership; 1.3 million people languishing on social housing waiting lists; millions of low-income households forced into insecure, unaffordable

and far too often sub-standard private rented housing; and 160,000 homeless children living in temporary accommodation.

Among the most important causes of the housing crisis is a failure over many decades to build enough homes of all tenures to meet housing demand and housing need. That is why the Government's plan for change includes an ambitious milestone of delivering 1.5 million safe and decent homes in this Parliament.

We are also determined to deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable housebuilding in a generation. Today, I am announcing further support for the affordable homes programme and the local authority housing fund, and outlining the steps the Government intend to take to raise standards and better regulate supported housing.

Affordable homes programme

We will set out details of new investment to succeed the 2021-26 affordable homes programme at the spending review later this year. This new investment will deliver a mix of homes for sub-market rent and homeownership, with a particular focus on delivering homes for social rent.

In October 2024, we announced £500 million in new in-year funding for the affordable homes programme. As a result of significant demand from housing providers across the country, that additional funding is already oversubscribed.

I am therefore pleased to announce that the Government are allocating a further £300 million to the affordable homes programme. This will support the near-term delivery of more social and affordable housing, delivering up to 2,800 new homes with more than half being social rent homes.

Local authority housing fund

In addition to further funding for the 2021-26 affordable homes programme, I am announcing a £50 million increase to the third round of the local authority housing fund (LAHF 3). This takes the total funding for this round of the programme to £500 million, alongside about £30 million of existing funding being reallocated.

LAHF provides funding to local authorities to help them deliver better-quality temporary accommodation and to support UK commitments to those on Afghan resettlement schemes who are fleeing persecution. The fund's third round, which we confirmed in July 2024, has had high levels of interest from local authorities, with over 150 taking part. In total, LAHF 3 will deliver more than 2,700 homes by 2026.

The majority of the additional £50 million allocated will be used to procure better-quality temporary accommodation so that local authorities can appropriately support local families in need of housing.

We recently invited councils to express an interest in delivering additional housing through LAHF, and we will be contacting those councils shortly to confirm the allocation of both the additional and reallocated funding.

Supported housing

While there are many excellent supported housing providers undertaking crucial work to help vulnerable people get back on their feet and improve their lives, there are still significant numbers of unscrupulous

providers who fail to provide high-quality accommodation to their tenants and a minority of rogue exempt accommodation operators who exploit gaps in the existing regulatory regime to profiteer.

The impact of poor-quality, non-commissioned exempt accommodation on vulnerable individuals can be devastating, whether it is the physical and mental consequences of living in squalid conditions, the risks that arise from the absence of effective supervision and safeguarding arrangements, the money gouged from hard-up residents through service charge costs that are ineligible for housing benefit purposes, or simply the inability to sustain an exempt accommodation tenancy, or to move on from one, because of a lack of care or support.

This Government are determined to improve the quality of accommodation in the supported housing sector and assisting local authorities to drive up standards in their areas. That is why we are committed to implementing the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023.

We are today announcing that on 20 February 2025, we will publish a consultation on a number of the regulatory reforms contained within it. These include proposals for national supported housing standards and a locally-led licensing regime to give local authorities the powers they need to effectively manage the supported housing markets in their areas.

We are committed to taking a sensible and proportionate approach to the introduction of these planned reforms and we look forward to receiving feedback through the consultation from good providers, local authorities and residents to ensure we get things right.

[HCWS447]

Electoral Commission Reports on the 2024 Elections: Government Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): Our democratic systems and institutions are strong and are rightly admired around the world. This Government will build on this, further strengthening our democracy and encouraging full participation from eligible voters.

It was a challenge to deliver separate local and general elections in 2024, following complex reforms to electoral law and parliamentary boundary changes. The entire electoral community rose to this challenge. I am grateful to returning officers, electoral registration officers and their teams for their hard work and dedication to the successful delivery of these polls—and to every volunteer who gave their time to support the democratic process.

The Electoral Commission, in line with its duties, reported in September 2024 on voter identification at the 2024 general election; and in November 2024 on how that election was delivered, as well as the delivery of the May local elections, police and crime commissioner elections and mayoral elections in England and Wales. I am pleased to publish today the Government's response to the Electoral Commission's reports.

I welcome the Commission's views and recommendations and thank them for their work. I note the many positives from their findings: most importantly that the elections were well run, and electors were highly satisfied with the

processes of registration and voting, despite delivering two sets of polls in short succession. I welcome the marked increase in voter confidence since 2019: 83% of the public reported a high confidence in the polls and 87% believed the polls were free from fraud and abuse. Those numbers are a testament to the efforts from across the electoral community in the intervening period—but also an encouragement to improve further.

I also note the challenges that the commission's reports highlight. We treat their recommendations seriously; this response sets out what this Government are doing about them. Disability must not be a barrier to participation: there is clearly more to be done to help disabled voters access the support that is their legal right where they need it. We must also tackle the unacceptable intimidatory and abusive behaviour some candidates face when standing for public office; review and improve voter identification rules, to make it easier for legitimate voters; reduce the risk to delivery through improved electoral processes; and widen participation in our democracy.

This Government will work with our partners to increase participation in elections, to ensure a wider range of voices is heard and that people's views are fairly represented. We will deliver on our manifesto commitments to improve registration, extend the right to vote to those 16 and over for all UK elections, review and improve the voter ID rules, and strengthen the political finance framework.

These reforms are not the sum total of our ambition. We continue to work with our partners to scrutinise and improve our election processes, even as we reflect further on the commission's reports and develop practical responses.

In parallel to this response to the Electoral Commission's reports, I am also pleased to publish the findings of an independent, nationally representative public opinion survey related to voting in the UK, undertaken by Ipsos. This is the third wave of a set of surveys conducted on behalf of the Government to understand elector attitudes to and experiences of several measures in the Elections Act 2022, including voter ID, accessibility and absent voting. Further work will follow, with this research contributing to the Government's evaluation of the impact of the Elections Act 2022 on the 2024 general election. That evaluation will be published in spring 2025. This Government are determined that all eligible voters will be able to cast their vote, with support where necessary.

The Government will work closely with the Electoral Commission and key stakeholders from across the sector to further understand and assess the impact of recent and future reforms. I am pleased to announce that we will be bringing all this work together into an overall Government strategy for elections, setting out the Government's approach to elections and electoral reform for this Parliament. This will be published later this year.

We are the custodians of an internationally renowned democracy that has endured and evolved over hundreds of years: we will protect our democracy, fix its foundations, and ensure it continues to grow to become stronger, more inclusive and more vibrant than ever before.

The associated documents will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS442]

Grenfell Tower

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): I want to provide the House with an update on the Government's work with the Grenfell community and on my decision about the future of Grenfell Tower.

Supporting the community

Learning the lessons from the Grenfell tragedy and ensuring lasting change are key priorities for the Government. In his statement to this House in September, the Prime Minister (Keir Starmer) committed to supporting the community now and always, and to building a legacy of change in their name.

I am committed to supporting bereaved families, survivors and immediate community, and working to ensure that we never see a repeat of the tragedy. Since my appointment, I have valued hearing directly from the community about the issues that matter to them.

Grenfell Tower

I am responsible for Grenfell Tower and for making a decision about its future. I understand that this is a deeply personal matter for those affected, and I am keeping their voice firmly at the heart of this decision making.

I would like to update the House that over the last week I have met bereaved families and survivors, and residents in the immediate community to explain my decision that Grenfell Tower will be carefully taken down.

Listening to the community

I have reached this decision after listening carefully to the community, and I am grateful to everyone who has shared their personal stories and views, especially bereaved and survivors.

In November last year, I explained to families that I would listen to their views and make sure their voices were heard, as well as consider expert information before making a decision on the future of the tower in February.

From November I offered bereaved and survivors the opportunity to meet in-person in North Kensington and Whitehall, or online, at different times and individually when families felt more comfortable with this. I have also spent time with representative groups, residents' associations, schools and faith leaders. I am grateful to everyone who shared their view—whether directly with me, with the Minister or officials—and especially to the bereaved and survivors.

The tower was the home of the 72 innocent people who lost their lives, and of survivors whose lives were forever changed. It is clear from conversations it remains a sacred site. It is also clear that there is not a consensus about what should happen to it.

For some, Grenfell Tower is a symbol of all that they lost. The presence of the tower helps to ensure the tragedy is never forgotten and can act as a reminder of the need for justice and accountability. Being able to see the tower every day helps some people continue to feel close to those they lost. For others it is a painful reminder of what happened and is having a daily impact on some members of the community. Some have suggested that some floors of the tower should be retained for the memorial, others have said that this would be too painful.

Expert advice

I also considered independent expert advice. Engineering advice says that the tower is significantly damaged. It remains stable because of the measures put in place to protect it but even with installation of additional props, the condition of the building will continue to worsen over time. Engineers also advise it is not practicable to retain many of the floors of the building in place as part of a memorial that must last in perpetuity.

Taking the engineering advice into account I have concluded that it would not be fair to keep some floors of the building that are significant to some families, while not being able to do so for others and knowing that, for some, this would be upsetting.

How the tower will be taken down

The Government are committed to taking the next steps respectfully and carefully. There will be continued support for, and engagement with, the community throughout the process.

In the coming months, the Government will confirm the specialist contractor that will develop a detailed plan for taking the tower down. The work will be led by technical experts with specific health and safety responsibilities and will include a methodology that includes environmental, health and safety measures and a detailed programme of work. The views the community have shared already will inform the plans. The Department will continue to work with them, for example on arrangements to pay their respects.

There will be no changes to the tower before the eighth anniversary. It will likely take around two years to sensitively take down the tower through a process of careful, progressive deconstruction that happens behind the wrapping.

We continue to support the independent Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission as the community choose a design team to work with them on designing a memorial.

I will ensure that parts of the tower or materials from the site can be carefully removed and returned for inclusion as part of the memorial, if the community wishes.

The Department has regularly consulted the Metropolitan Police, HM Coroner and the Grenfell Tower inquiry to ensure decisions about the site do not interfere with their important work in pursuit of justice and accountability. The Police and HM Coroner have again recently confirmed they have everything they need.

Continued commitment for the community

My commitment to the community continues. I will ensure bereaved families, survivors and residents continue to have opportunities to speak with me and the Building Safety Minister on issues that matter to them most.

[HCWS440]

JUSTICE

Probation Service: Prioritisation

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The Probation Service is an essential part of our criminal justice system. Keeping our streets safe and cutting crime depends upon the vital work of

probation officers and staff. Today, it supervises just over a quarter of a million offenders, from those on community sentences to those released from custody. That is not all. The Probation Service provides sentencing advice to judges and magistrates every day in our courts, oversees more than 4 million hours of community payback each year, monitors 9,000 offenders on tags at any given moment, provides a vital link to thousands of victims, through the victims contact and the victims notification schemes and works in close partnership with policing and the voluntary sector to keep our communities safe.

The pressure facing our Probation Service is considerable and I am grateful for everyone who works tirelessly across the system. It is only right to acknowledge the incredibly hard, and often hidden, work that probation officers do across England and Wales. These dedicated staff have been the single constant throughout the last decade of change. We need to ensure that the Probation Service can deliver the vital work that needs to be done to keep the public safe and reduce reoffending. However, the Probation Service this Government inherited was burdened with a workload that was, quite simply, impossible. We need to be honest and open about the state that the Probation Service was left in by the previous Government. The transforming rehabilitation strategy failed. The rhetoric was of a revolution in how we manage offenders, but the reality was far different. Workloads increased, as new offenders were brought under supervision for the first time, and scarce resources were stretched further than ever. We know that morale plummeted, and worrying numbers of staff voted with their feet, leaving the service altogether, leading the then inspector to declare a “national shortage” of probation professionals.

The new structures failed. The privately owned community rehabilitation companies set up to manage medium and low-risk offenders underperformed, and between 2017 and 2018, just five of 37 CRC audits carried out by HMPPS demonstrated that expected standards were being met. In 2019, eight out of the 10 CRCs inspected that year received the lowest possible rating—“inadequate”—for supervising offenders. The chief inspector of probation called them “irredeemably flawed”. The previous Administration reunified the Probation Service but wasted a decade and millions of pounds.

When we took office, we discovered that orders handed out by courts were not taking place. In the three years to March 2024, around 13,000 accredited programmes, a type of rehabilitative course, did not happen. This was not because an offender had failed to do what was expected of them, but instead because the Probation Service had been unable to deliver these courses in the required timeframe.

For that reason, I have asked the Probation Service to put in place a process of prioritisation. Accredited programmes handed down by the courts to those who are considered to have the higher risk of reoffending

will be prioritised. This is not a decision I take lightly. But it is a decision to confront the reality of the challenges facing the Probation Service. Those who will not complete an accredited course will remain under the supervision of a probation officer. And all the requirements placed upon them will remain in place. Any breach of a community sentence could see them hauled back into court, and any breach of a licence condition could see them back behind bars.

In July, I committed to bringing on 1,000 trainee probation officers by March of this year—a commitment that we are making progress towards. Next financial year, we will onboard at least another 1,300. New probation officers are the lifeblood of the service, and they will guarantee its future. And I want to ensure that we are taking advantage of the latest technology, like AI. We must give probation staff access to modern digital services, drawing in data from across the justice system. Work is already ongoing that is improving the flow of information that is so critical to an accurate assessment of an offender’s risk, and new tools are beginning to strip away the administrative burden that gets between a probation officer and an offender.

However, given the challenges faced by the Probation Service, new staff and better processes are not sufficient on their own. Faced by a caseload of just over a quarter of a million we need to think about how we use the Probation Service most effectively. If the service is to fulfil its historic purpose—protecting the public by reducing reoffending—we need to look hard at what works, and where officers time is best spent. When it comes to the value of a probation officer’s time the evidence is clear that we must shift more of probation officers’ time towards the higher-risk offenders, spending more time on protecting the public, working with partners, and working with the offender to rehabilitate them and motivate them to change.

This Government will focus the Probation Service on the interventions that have the greatest impact. For lower-risk offenders, we will task probation officers with a swifter intervention. They will spend more time with an offender immediately after their sentencing or release from prison to assess the root causes of an offender’s crime. Then they will refer them to the services that will address that behaviour, which could be education, training, drug treatment or accommodation. Once they are following that direction, as long as the offender stays on the straight and narrow, we must then focus probation officer’s time more effectively. This means more time spent with the offenders who pose the higher risk of harm or reoffending and more time with offenders whose prolific offending causes so much social and economic damage to local communities.

[HCWS446]

Written Corrections

Wednesday 12 February 2025

Ministerial Corrections

WORK AND PENSIONS

Welfare Cap

The following extract is from the debate on the welfare cap on 29 January 2025.

Alison McGovern:... What was the result of a decade of Conservative welfare caps? Repeated breaches of the cap, with ever higher limits. The latest cap is now on course to be breached by an £8.6 billion overspend. This is not tolerable, given the state of our economy and the public finances.

[Official Report, 29 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 364.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Employment, the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Alison McGovern):

Alison McGovern:... What was the result of a decade of Conservative welfare caps? Repeated breaches of the cap, with ever higher limits. The latest cap, **with a margin included**, is now on course to be breached by an £8.6 billion overspend. This is not tolerable, given the state of our economy and the public finances.

EDUCATION

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

The following extract is from the eighth sitting of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Public Bill Committee on 30 January 2025.

Stephen Morgan: With regard to the consent for home education, if someone has ever been subject to a safeguarding concern, we believe that this is a proportionate response that focuses on the most vulnerable.

[Official Report, Children's Wellbeing and Schools Public Bill Committee, 30 January 2025; c. 297.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan):

Stephen Morgan: With regard to the consent for home education, **if someone is subject to certain safeguarding concerns**, we believe that this is a proportionate response that focuses on the most vulnerable.

BUSINESS AND TRADE

US Steel Import Tariffs

The following extract is from the urgent question on US steel import tariffs on 11 February 2025.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Donald Trump's tariffs will cause much uncertainty across the world, not least for those working in our great British steel industry. Tariffs are not just bad news for UK steel producers; they would have a tangible effect on people's lives, from lower economic growth to higher inflation. It is not likely to end with steel, so we may well be caught up in

America's economic vandalism. Will the Minister set out how US tariffs may affect the UK economy and what preparations are being made as a result, and does he agree that British jobs are on the line and that businesses and workers want to see the Government stand up for them?

Mr Alexander: To give a sense of quantum to the House, about £400 million-worth of UK steel exports go to the United States. That represents, if I recollect accurately, about 10% of UK production, so the hon. Gentleman is entirely right to recognise that this is a significant moment...

[Official Report, 11 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 184.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security, the right hon. Member for Lothian East (Mr Alexander):

Mr Alexander: To give a sense of quantum to the House, about £400 million-worth of UK steel exports go to the United States. That represents, if I recollect accurately, about **8% of UK steel exports in 2023**, so the hon. Gentleman is entirely right to recognise that this is a significant moment...

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

AstraZeneca

The following extract is from the debate on AstraZeneca on 3 February 2025.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The chief scientific officer has previously stated the importance of this investment in the UK's pandemic preparedness. In the light of the announcement, what assessment has the Minister made of the impact on the UK's ability to respond to future pandemics?

Chris Bryant: It is not entirely dependent on our AstraZeneca programme, and indeed, as I have already pointed out, the piece of work in which it was intending to invest—I hope I will get the science right—was changing the way in which it would create the nasal flu vaccine for children from an egg-based to a cell-based system. It has now decided not to do that, but to stick to the egg-based system. I think that if the chief scientific adviser or the chief medical officer has anything on which to update the House, he and/or she will do so.

[Official Report, 3 February 2025; Vol. 761, c. 559.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant: It is not entirely dependent on our AstraZeneca programme, and indeed, as I have already pointed out, the piece of work in which it was intending to invest—I hope I will get the science right—was changing the way in which it would create the nasal flu vaccine for children from an egg-based to a cell-based system. It has now decided not to do that **in Speke**, but to stick to the egg-based system **there**. I think that if the chief scientific adviser or the chief medical officer has anything on which to update the House, he and/or she will do so.

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