

**Thursday  
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 24 April 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 24 April 2025*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CABINET OFFICE

*The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—*

#### Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

1. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress he has made on the infected blood compensation scheme. [903705]

12. **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress he has made on establishing an infected blood compensation scheme. [903717]

**The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds):** The infected blood scandal is the worst medical scandal in the history of our NHS, and the infected blood compensation scheme was set up to provide some small measure of justice to victims and their families. We have set aside £11.8 billion for victims, and since the scheme became law on 31 March, the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has the powers it needs to press ahead and make payments to those eligible for compensation. The compensation payments began last December, and 69 people have accepted their offers, totalling more than £71 million.

**Kate Osamor:** My constituent, who is 77 years old, is a victim of the infected blood scandal. He is worried that haemophilia patients infected with hepatitis are being sidelined by the compensation scheme. He tells me that he was told those on the special category mechanism with hepatitis C would be upgraded to the same level as those with cirrhosis, but that position has now been reversed. Will the Minister look into my constituent's concerns about disparities for haemophiliacs infected with hepatitis?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I will certainly write to my hon. Friend on the issue of the special category mechanism. I reassure her that the Government's objective is for all victims of the infected blood scandal to be able to achieve the compensation that they deserve.

**Alice Macdonald:** My constituent, Mr Alan Kirkham, has been badly affected by the infected blood scandal. He was infected with hepatitis C from a blood transfusion

in 1983. I met Alan recently, and he has been campaigning for justice for years. Will the Minister welcome and pay tribute to the work of campaigners like Alan? Can he provide assurances that we are working at pace to deliver compensation? Will he consider fast-tracking older and more vulnerable people?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I will certainly pay tribute to Alan and to the work of all campaigners over decades. I am restless for progress, and I will support the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to deliver compensation as quickly as possible. On fast-tracking for specific claimants, last week IBCA set out details of how it is prioritising claims from infected people nearing the end of their life.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What direct discussions has the Minister had with people in Scotland who have been impacted by the infected blood scandal about the slow pace of compensation payments?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** In the course of the work I have done, I have not only spoken to groups in Scotland, but engaged with the Scottish Government's Health Minister on this matter. On the pace of the payments, IBCA has taken a test-and-learn approach, which allows it to deal with a sample of the cases and then subsequently to scale up. IBCA is operationally independent, but I stand ready to provide all the support I can to speed up the payments.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): My constituent Hazel, from Street, was infected with hepatitis C in the 1970s after receiving blood products following the birth of her child. She suffered years of ill health and related problems, and is still waiting for the infected blood compensation scheme. Her case is truly heart-breaking, so what assurance can the Minister provide to people like Hazel that they will soon be supported?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** First, I express my sympathy and, I am sure, that of the whole House to Hazel in respect of what she has been through. The assurance I give is that this Government will act at pace. That is what we did in putting the first set of regulations in place by 24 August last year and by putting the second set of regulations in place by 31 March this year. I continue to stand ready to help and support IBCA, which is operationally independent, in any way that I can to speed up the payments.

### Public Service Reform

2. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reform public services. [903706]

10. **Jess Asato** (Lowestoft) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reform public services. [903715]

13. **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reform public services. [903718]

18. **Oliver Ryan** (Burnley) (Ind): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reform public services. [903726]

20. **Matthew Patrick** (Wirral West) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reform public services. [903728]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden):** This Government believe in the power of good public services to provide security and opportunity, but we are clear that the way in which the state works has to change. That is why we are reforming the planning system to get more houses built, why we have introduced free breakfast clubs to give children the best start to their day, why we have launched the AI action plan to drive the adoption of new tech in public services, and why a combination of investment and reform has helped us to cut NHS waiting lists for months in a row.

**Sarah Coombes:** Labour was elected to get the NHS back on its feet, and that is exactly what we have been doing. At Sandwell and West Birmingham hospitals NHS trust in my area, the waiting list has fallen by 10% since the election, which means that patients are finally getting the treatment they need. One of the key things we have been doing is to look at things such as ambient AI to automate doctors' notes and ensure that we have modern technology in the NHS. Will the Minister set out what we are doing to ensure that the NHS adopts all technology and reform to ensure that patients are being seen as quickly as possible?

**Pat McFadden:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is huge potential to increase NHS productivity through the adoption of new technology and AI. As I have said, the combination of investment and reform has helped us meet our election pledge to deliver 2 million extra NHS appointments in England in the first year seven months early, but we want to go further. We want to adopt the technology to which my hon. Friend has referred to get maximum productivity and better outcomes for patients.

**Jess Asato:** I thank the Minister for his response. I have been contacted by a constituent who is concerned for his poorly elderly father, who requires cryotherapy. That service used to be offered at his local GP, avoiding a difficult trip to our local hospital, which would have a deleterious impact on his father's already poor health. Given the Government's focus on moving more health services into the community and people's homes as part of our public service reform agenda, does my right hon. Friend agree that cryotherapy services should be considered as part of that welcome shift?

**Pat McFadden:** The Health Secretary has talked about three big shifts that are part of the 10-year NHS plan. One of those shifts is from hospital to the community, which will require more services to be available locally. We have agreed a new GP contract, which will see a large boost to general practitioner funding, alongside reforms to improve digital access. If we are going to make this shift, it is important that services are available in the local community.

**Luke Myer:** The Government's laudable mission-led approach has seen NHS waiting lists fall for five months in a row. Like many public services, our NHS has been plagued by over-specified guidance and unnecessary targets for many years, so will the Minister assure the House that the mission-led approach will mean a focus on core non-negotiables to deliver for the British people?

**Pat McFadden:** The missions set out the Government's long-term targets, and the plan for change sets out the key targets for the next few years. I do believe that targets can play a key role in driving behaviour, and that the focus on getting waiting lists and waiting times down set out in our plan for change can make a real difference over the coming few years.

**Oliver Ryan:** I thank the Minister for that answer. I know from my time as a councillor outside this place that under the last Government, policy was made in Westminster, with very little thought given to how it could hit frontline services more locally. However, examples such as test and trace during the pandemic show that local services can deliver national priorities effectively, so what can the Minister do to ensure that civil servants down here work better with frontline workers up there to make sure that this Government's priorities are being delivered?

**Pat McFadden:** The hon. Member makes a very good point. It is really important that we change the way in which policy is made—that we listen more to the frontline and work with the test-and-learn approach that was referred to by the Minister for the Cabinet Office in answer to the previous question. That can help drive better outcomes for the public.

**Matthew Patrick:** It is clear to me that under the last Government, our state failed the public. We had an agenda that was not rooted in the lives of everyday people, meaning that despite the number of civil servants being the highest in a generation, outcomes for my constituents in Wirral West and people across the country were worse. Will the Minister please set out how a smaller, more modern and more focused state can once again deliver world-class public services?

**Pat McFadden:** Over recent years, the public have seen the state get bigger and taxes go up, but they have not always felt that they are getting the right outcome from those changes. To deliver our plan for change, we need to reform the state to make it more efficient and more effective. We have started to deliver those reforms through stronger performance management, accelerating AI adoption, a focus on the frontline, and reforming rules around recruitment and secondments. Those plans will help empower our excellent civil services to work better, reduce bureaucracy and focus on what really matters, which is better outcomes for the public.

**Rishi Sunak** (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I commend the ministerial team, both on the innovation fund and—more importantly—the test-and-learn culture that has been referred to, which embraces a willingness to take risks and iterate. Does the Minister agree that in order for this work to be truly successful and transform

our public services, we must also reform our governance and approval processes in parallel, so that they do not inadvertently stifle this welcome method of innovation?

**Pat McFadden:** The right hon. Member obviously has hugely important experience in this regard. He will know from that experience that the traditional system can be risk-averse, and that it can seek to resolve too much and try to cover every base before launching a policy. The test-and-learn approach is different by intention. It intends to start small and to build from there. What is absolutely certain is that whether it is his party or my party in power, there is a duty on any Government today to pursue reform of the state to improve outcomes for the public, so in that regard I agree with him.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): A number of months ago, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster announced the plan for change and the pillars, missions and various other things that come with it. When will he update the House on how that is going and how the Government are meeting those targets?

**Pat McFadden:** Well, I have good news for the right hon. Gentleman. [*Laughter.*] This is parliamentary accountability in action. One of the key targets in the plan for change was to get waiting lists and waiting times down. I am pleased to report to him that they have fallen for five months in a row and that we have met our first step on 2 million extra appointments early, and I look forward to more progress in the future.

**Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): With 2,100 jobs set to go at the Cabinet Office by 2028, please can the Minister confirm what impact those cuts will have on his Department? What responsibilities might be transferred out of it?

**Pat McFadden:** The Cabinet Office has tripled in size in the past decade or so. I think it is right, after growth like that, that we look at productivity and how to get the best outcomes for the public. We have introduced a mutually agreed exit scheme. Some of the headcount reduction will be by transferring functions to other places, but I believe that the Cabinet Office can absorb a headcount reduction after, as I said, tripling in size over the past decade or so.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Can the Minister outline Government plans to reform the funding of fire authorities? That is especially important in Somerset, where changes to employer national insurance contributions, the ending of the rural support grant, the removal of the services grant and the reduction of the pension grant will cost Devon and Somerset Fire Authority nearly £2 million a year, at a time of rising costs.

**Pat McFadden:** I do not want to interrupt the collegiate mood we have had this morning by pointing out that we had to take those decisions after the inheritance we received. I cannot speak for every local authority settlement around the country, but the local authority settlements announced after the Budget were on the whole better than they have been for many years. They will not make up for the past 14 years, but they are better settlements than many local authorities have seen for some time.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers to those questions. The reform of public services is important, and I welcome the ideas he has put forward. I know he has a deep interest in Northern Ireland. Is it possible on his journeys to Northern Ireland—I understand that he goes regularly—for him to discuss the reform of public services with the Northern Ireland Assembly and the relevant Minister to ensure that we can have the same benefits that come from what he is putting forward today, thereby improving services and saving money at the same time?

**Pat McFadden:** It is important that we have good dialogue between all the devolved Governments and the UK Government. I believe that we do have that good dialogue in place at the moment. There are always different political parties represented around the table, and people will come at things from a particular angle, but when it comes to this kind of agenda, the questions are: how do we get the best value for money for people, how do we get waiting lists down, and how do we make sure that the taxes that people pay get the best possible public sector productivity? There is a common agenda there, and I see no reason why we cannot keep working productively together on that.

### Emergency Preparedness

3. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen emergency preparedness. [903707]

16. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen emergency preparedness. [903721]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare):** The Government are introducing a range of measures to strengthen our emergency preparedness. We hold regular cross-Government planning exercises for a range of scenarios. Later this year, we will undertake a pandemic response exercise, and we will also undertake a national test of our emergency alert system. Next week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will open the new UK Resilience Academy, which will train over 4,000 people a year.

**Ms Minns:** I thank the Minister for her response, and I particularly welcome the proposed test of the emergency alert system. The demise of landlines and the switch off of the public switched telephone network means that residents—particularly those in areas that suffer prolonged power outages, such as parts of my Carlisle constituency—now rely on their mobile phones more than ever in emergency events. Does the Minister share my desire to see Ofcom expedite its work on the radio access network resilience project so that we can move towards a position where the networks put in place emergency generators to switch the masts back on in the event of a prolonged power outage?

**Ms Oppong-Asare:** This is an issue that I recognise, and I reassure my hon. Friend that my colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology are working very closely with telecoms companies and Ofcom to ensure that consumers are protected throughout



the public switched telephone network migration. As she mentioned, that will include provisions to protect access to emergency services during power outages.

**Liz Twist:** Local resilience forums such as Northumbria LRF and Durham and Darlington LRF, which cover my constituency, play a very important role in identifying potential risks and supporting our local communities. Can the Minister tell the House how the Government are working with these local forums, and how they will ensure that their insights feed into the Government's planning and preparation for risks such as pandemics?

**Ms Oppong-Asare:** I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. The Government recognise the importance of local resilience forums and the role they play in boosting resilience in places and communities. I hope she feels reassured that I have met all local resilience forums across England to discuss their concerns, and I have also met businesses to talk about the importance of local resilience. We will continue to work closely with local resilience forums, including Northumbria LRF in her local area, to plan and prepare for a broad range of risks, including pandemics.

**Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con):** While I was a police and crime commissioner, I saw many of the things that have been referred to by hon. Members as critically important for emergency resilience planning across the public sector and working with the private sector. To ensure that that is all targeted in the right way, it is key to make sure that all the different agencies, public bodies and companies have a shared understanding of the risks that we face as a country, and receive the latest updates on those. Can the Minister tell the House when the Government will next update the national risk register, and explain what plans Ministers have for the frequency with which those updates will be published?

**Ms Oppong-Asare:** I thank the hon. Member for his work in this space, because I know he has done a lot of work on this issue. We are constantly looking at the risk register and updating it, and a lot of work has been done. Alongside that, we are carrying out a resilience review. As he rightly pointed out, we need to work across a wide range of sectors to make sure that wider society plays a greater role in this matter, and the work that I have been doing has involved meeting businesses, voluntary organisations and vulnerable groups to make sure that the issues are reflected. We will make sure that we share the lessons learned with the House in due course, and I have also engaged with parliamentarians on this issue.

**Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD):** In the last few weeks, Dorset has been ravaged by wildfires, especially Upton heath and Canford heath in my local area, where more than 130 acres are gone. I was blown away by the work of the fire crews from Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Will the Minister thank the fire services for their combined work, but also acknowledge that there needs to be a review of funding for emergency services to ensure that they are consistently able to protect us in the face of climate change? I ask her for that assurance.

**Ms Oppong-Asare:** I thank the hon. Member for raising such an important matter. I want to put on record my thanks to the emergency services, which have been doing a lot of work on the ground, particularly through local resilience forums and her work as a local MP. As part of the resilience review, we are looking at the issues she has raised. We are also working collaboratively across Departments to make sure that the climate change matters she has raised are looked at, because they should be looked at not only by the Cabinet Office alone, but across all Departments.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con):** I would like to turn to the sorry state of Labour-run Birmingham, where rats the size of dachshunds are terrifying local residents. Indeed, in *The Daily Telegraph* this morning, we read that

"Birmingham city council warns of a surge in rat-borne diseases...that the elderly, disabled people and babies are 'particularly susceptible' to".

The Government have had emergency powers throughout this crisis, not least the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. Will the Minister set out for the House why they have declined to use them?

**Ms Oppong-Asare:** I thank the hon. Member for his question, and I am sure he would like to join me in praising the Deputy Prime Minister and her team for their hard work on this. A lot of the rubbish has been cleared, and I want to take this opportunity to thank all the staff in Birmingham and across Departments who have played a key role in responding quickly to and dealing tirelessly with this matter.

**Alex Burghart:** I am afraid I am not going to congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister, in much the same way that the people of Birmingham are not thanking her either. I very much hope that the Deputy Prime Minister will take the Prime Minister and maybe the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to Birmingham to see that, in fact, much of the rubbish has not been cleared. I also hope that the Labour party will undertake not to take any donations from Unite the union while this crisis is ongoing.

The Government have commissioners in Birmingham at the moment, but we know from answers to parliamentary questions that the commissioners are not involved in the negotiations to end this ongoing problem with the local union. The Government have powers to do so. Why are they not using those powers, and when will they bring an end to these strikes and set the people of Birmingham free?

**Ms Oppong-Asare:** I thank the hon. Member for the question, but I am slightly disappointed by the approach he has taken. It is important that we work collaboratively together. As he rightly pointed out, Birmingham is the focus here, and let us move the politics out of it. It is important that the dispute is resolved as swiftly as possible, and that is what the Deputy Prime Minister and her team are doing at the moment.

#### Data

4. **Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD):** What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the use of data by Government Departments. [903709]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould):** When we came into power, the Government commissioned a comprehensive state of digital government review, which demonstrated just how far we have to go. It set out a picture of fragmentation, silos and a failure to maximise the opportunity of data to personalise and target services. The average UK adult citizen spends a week and a half dealing with government bureaucracy every year. The Government have set out a plan to change this, and we are taking wide-ranging action: from creating the national data library to increasing the number of services that use gov.uk One Login.

**Steff Aquarone:** I am glad the Minister mentioned the Government's state of digital government review and its fairly excoriating conclusions. It is clear that the public sector is not using data well enough. It detailed the challenges, barriers and reluctance in getting the best out of the data available to Departments—some cannot even get their own arm's length bodies to share data with them—and if we use data better, we can deliver government better. Would the Minister meet me to discuss further how the Cabinet Office can lead in acting on the lessons of the review and ensuring that the citizen experience is put at the heart of the changes it makes?

**Georgia Gould:** I would be delighted to meet the hon. Member. I am very passionate about this. In local government, I saw how difficult it was for frontline staff who were not able to get data from different services. Most importantly, citizens are having to tell their story to and share data with multiple services, which causes confusion. We are working very closely with the new digital centre of government on this, and we have an action plan to address it. However, I always welcome new ideas, because this could be really transformative for citizens.

**Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab):** Too often, when I am trying to get to the bottom of problems for my constituents in Ribble Valley, I get responses to written questions saying that Ministers just do not have the data available. I applaud the Government for putting data at the heart of their plans, but I worry that we could get too carried away with looking at AI solutions before we get to solutions for actually collecting data in the first place. Could the Minister reassure me on how we are working with local government to make sure we are collecting data from all possible sources in one place to start with, before we get to how we can make that more efficient?

**Georgia Gould:** The two issues are completely linked. To use the opportunities of AI, which are enormous, to personalise services and target prevention, we need to have a clear data picture. We need to be able to bring data together across different levels of Government. There is a huge amount of data in Government, but some of it is stuck in legacy systems and not shared properly. This is the absolute bedrock of the opportunity around AI, so it is something we are very committed to, especially working with local government.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con):** I hope to continue the positive cross-party approach to this question. I particularly like the Minister's commitment

to a clear data picture. The Sullivan review into Government data was published in March this year, and Professor Sullivan made 59 recommendations to ensure that across Government accuracy and consistency are maintained. I do not expect the Minister to have a full formal response to that review today. However, can she reassure me that the Government will issue a full formal response to the review and its recommendations to provide that clear data across Government within, say, a year of the report's publication?

**Georgia Gould:** I appreciate this collegiate style of discussion. There is a huge amount to do here. When we came into power, we set out, as I said, a review of the picture that showed just how hard it is for citizens to negotiate. When moving home, one has to announce it to 10 different organisations using different public services, sometimes 40 different services, so we need to change. We have not waited for the review. We have already set out our own plans, but we will of course respond to external reviews that come forward.

### Civil Service Reform

5. **Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to reform the civil service. [903710]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden):** Let me thank the thousands of diligent and hard-working civil servants who are dedicated to making people's lives better. We want to get the best for civil servants and out of civil servants, so we are reforming the structure and the focus so that it is better placed to fulfil that purpose. That includes a number of important steps in recent weeks: robust performance management; better use of digital tools; faster recruitment; cuts to some wasteful spending; and a review of the arms-length body landscape, including the changes announced on NHS England, to return both power and responsibility to elected representatives.

**Peter Lamb:** I thank the Minister for his response and I am perfectly happy to accept the diligence of the civil service. Regardless, every two years a third of the civil service change their Department and countless more change to unrelated policy roles within each Department. Under the previous Government, policy expertise was completely hollowed out from the civil service. Will the Minister set out how we intend to resolve that to bring policy expertise back into the civil service and ensure we have Government teams capable of delivering for Britain?

**Pat McFadden:** It is probably true to say that a long-held frustration of some Ministers has been turnaround and the pattern of career progression, where people move on after a few years just as they are becoming an absolute expert in their area. Our ambition is not just to have policy expertise, but to change the way that policy is put together in the first place. That is why the test-and-learn approach, which we discussed earlier in this session, is so important. Frankly, the old way of having a group of experts writing a White Paper, throwing it over a wall and hoping it will work first time, just does not work in today's age. What we really have to avoid is a two-speed world, with massive innovation in the private sphere and a public sphere working in the same old ways. We have to avoid that in the interests of the public.

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman talks a good game about scrapping quangos and I support the review he announced to reduce the size of the bureaucratic state. Why then, despite the rhetoric, are the Government at the same time creating dozens of new quangos?

**Pat McFadden:** This is another debate, which has gone on for many years and relates to the question of headcount—Governments can magically reduce headcount by creating a quango somewhere, but the headcount may not have changed at all. What is informing the drive this time is the fiction that an arm's length body can somehow absolve Ministers of responsibility. It does not work like that in the real world. Sometimes there is a good case for having an arm's length body, but in the end, we know that accountability will be with Ministers, and that is what is informing how we look at these things at the moment.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): I have listened with a great deal of interest to what the right hon. Gentleman has had to say on the Government's plans to make Whitehall more efficient and to make significant reforms to service delivery, and we on these Benches very much welcome the intention behind that statement. However, announcements have been made in the media about the intention to cut 2,100 jobs in the Cabinet Office and reduce the Department's workforce by a third. Why have we not had a statement in this House about those job cuts specifically, and when will Members of Parliament get an opportunity to scrutinise exactly what that means for their constituents and their expectations about service delivery?

**Pat McFadden:** I work very closely with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Treasury on this matter. The truth is, civil service headcount grew by more than 100,000 in the years the Opposition was in power. We believe that some of that can be explained by the repatriation of powers after Brexit, but some of it can be looked at in terms of efficiencies, which is what we are doing. By reducing the Government's overhead, we can devote the resources to where they are really needed: in frontline public services. After such growth presided over by the Conservatives over the past decade, we believe that can be done.

### Co-operation with Devolved Governments

6. **Kenneth Stevenson** (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen co-operation with the devolved Governments. [903711]

9. **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen co-operation with the devolved Governments. [903714]

15. **John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen co-operation with the devolved Governments. [903720]

17. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen co-operation with the devolved Governments. [903723]

**The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander):** My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster spoke a few moments ago of a good dialogue. We are committed to working with the devolved Governments across the UK, and there is frequent, proactive engagement between Ministers and their devolved counterparts to achieve that. For example, we have worked with the Scottish Government on the joint investment plan for Grangemouth, with the Welsh Government through the Tata Steel/Port Talbot transition board and alongside the Northern Ireland Executive on the city deals.

**Kenneth Stevenson:** The Minister will be aware of last week's historic UK Supreme Court ruling on the definition of a woman being based on biological sex, which provided important legal clarity. It is critical now that the UK and Scottish Governments work in a co-ordinated manner to ensure that the practical impacts are understood. How does the Minister plan to ensure that this co-ordinated approach delivers for women in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, and does he agree that the ruling must be a lesson for the SNP Government to stop wasting Scottish taxpayers' money on flawed legislation and court cases?

**Mr Alexander:** The ruling upholds the protection of single-sex spaces based on biological sex and brings welcome clarity and confidence for women and, indeed, service providers. The Equality and Human Rights Commission, as Britain's equality regulator, has already committed to supporting service providers with updated guidance. On the specific point raised by my hon. Friend, we will meet Scottish counterparts to discuss the implications of this significant judgment.

**Katrina Murray:** I thank the Minister for his answer to the earlier question. Events such as Tartan Day provide a vital opportunity for companies such as RSE in Cumbernauld to promote their products to international markets. RSE has repeatedly told me that it wants to be a part of Brand Scotland. Will the Minister outline how he will work with the Scotland Office and the Scottish Government to ensure that Tartan Day is an even bigger success next year to secure investment in the Scottish economy and create Scottish jobs?

**Mr Alexander:** Let me first pay tribute to RSE and all its brilliant work on water tech. Earlier this month, I had the pleasure of representing Scotland in the United States along with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland at Tartan Week, where we met a range of businesses and investors to bang the drum for Scotland as a great place to invest and to work. It was, frankly, a powerful opportunity to show that Scotland has two Governments committed to its prosperity and wellbeing. As the UK Government committed to growth, we are more interested in new markets than old arguments, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State actively reached out to the First Minister seeking to co-operate by co-ordinating our presence.

**John Grady:** I welcome the steps that the Government are taking to strengthen co-operation with the Scottish Government, to cut waste and inefficiency and to ensure that Ministers take responsibility for public services. This is an important area for potential co-operation



and dialogue, because, in Scotland, we currently have more quangos than there are MSPs in Holyrood, which wastes millions of pounds a year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the SNP Scottish Government should stop hiding behind these quangos, end the culture of waste and take responsibility for plummeting standards in Scottish public services?

**Mr Alexander:** I echo the sentiments of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The powerful point he made about the ultimate ministerial responsibility resting rightly and reasonably with elected representatives applies north of the Tweed as surely as it does south of the Tweed. I only wish that the Scottish Government would use the powers that they have to do the same and actively cut waste and bureaucracy. Scotland deserves better than what we are witnessing just now.

**Elaine Stewart:** Does the Minister agree that this Labour Government's plan for change has helped to deliver 1,500 more GPs to help stop the 8 am rush and that the Scottish Government should work with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to look at how the SNP-run health service in Scotland could learn from such action?

**Mr Alexander:** As the UK Government, we have delivered more than 2 million extra NHS appointments seven months early, as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out just a few moments ago. Yet we all know that, despite the brilliance of NHS staff, the NHS in Scotland is still on its knees. Today, from this Dispatch Box, I urge our colleagues in the Scottish Government to work with us and actually learn some lessons from our team in the Department of Health and Social Care who are already driving change across England.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Of course, if the Government were serious about co-operating with the devolved Government, tomorrow's Second Reading debate on devolving immigration policy to Scotland, which has been secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins), would not be necessary. The Minister will recall that, in the run-up to the general election, Labour's Deputy Leader in Scotland, Jackie Baillie, said that they would be open to talks on this issue and, of course, it would be unthinkable that she would have said such a thing just to gain short-term electoral advantage. Therefore, having waited a year, can the Minister tell us when he expects those talks to open?

**Mr Alexander:** In the spirit of collegiality that has been the hallmark of this question session so far, let me respectfully suggest that there is a fundamental philosophical difference between our two parties. The SNP wants to end the United Kingdom and we believe in devolution, which is, ultimately, a two-Parliament, two-Government solution. There are two Governments who represent the best interests of the United Kingdom and, in that sense, I appreciate that there is a constant demand and a constant set of grievances from the SNP about why devolution is not working. It is about time that we had a Government in Scotland who were committed to making devolution work.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Kenneth Stevenson), given last week's UK Supreme Court ruling, which I welcome as a return to common sense and biological reality, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that Government messaging reflects this clarity and that it is implemented consistently both across the devolved regions and here in Westminster?

**Mr Alexander:** I can assure the hon. Lady that the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which has a remit across the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, has already committed to supporting service providers with updated guidance. I assure the hon. Lady that we are talking to colleagues in Scotland and that we will also be talking to colleagues in Wales and, indeed, in Northern Ireland.

### Local Authority Procurement: Economic Growth

**7. Ben Coleman** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to assist local authorities in using public procurement to help create economic growth. [903712]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould):** I welcome the House's continuing passion for procurement, and my hon. Friend has helped to lead the way in this area at Hammersmith and Fulham council. I have seen how much energy there is in local government to use procurement to deliver jobs and growth. The Government are working on plans to allow local authorities to reserve contracts for local employers. Public procurement can be a key tool in driving growth and supporting businesses across the economy. Our new national procurement policy statement looks to maximise spend with small businesses and asks contracting authorities to work collaboratively on local and regional growth plans.

**Ben Coleman:** I thank the Minister for her reply and for the excellent work she has done in putting together the procurement strategy. It has been a passion of mine for many years that we do not use procurement just to get extra social value but extra economic value, which will help local firms and local growth. That is what this statement does, and I hugely welcome it. May I ask the Minister whether she intends to issue guidance to local authorities so that they know how best they can achieve economic value? For example, they could proactively tell small firms what contracts are coming up or train them in how to tender, which is very difficult for them. The Government could also encourage local authorities to break procurement into lots, so that small firms have a better chance of bidding. Finally, local authorities could stop requiring an unreasonable number of years of accounts to be shown before small firms are permitted to bid.

**Georgia Gould:** Growth is the No. 1 mission for this Government. We have learned from local authorities such as Hammersmith and Fulham, which built economic value into procurement. The Procurement Act 2023 makes new tools available, but what is critical is how they are used to deliver innovation and growth. The Government will be consulting on new plans to set targets for small and medium-sized enterprise use for the wider public sector. We have delivered extensive

training and developed new communities of practice to help make the most of this huge opportunity. As my hon. Friend has said, much of this is about culture and the use of the tools. We will be working with local authorities around the country to deliver on this enormous opportunity.

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): My constituency is a food production powerhouse, and I welcome any steps by the Government to encourage local authorities to procure British-produced food. Local authorities are under extreme pressure to procure at very low cost. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that, first, the Groceries Code Adjudicator ensures that farmers are paid fairly for the food they produce and, secondly, the Department for Business and Trade is not about to undermine the food they produce by entering a damaging trade deal with the US that would undermine those standards?

**Georgia Gould:** The guidance we put into the national procurement policy statement makes it clear that we want to deliver best value for money, which means not just cost but ensuring that we support growth and local suppliers. That allows local authorities to make decisions on what will create jobs and best opportunities for communities in the procurement of food.

### Plan for Change

8. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on implementing the plan for change.  
[903713]

**The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves):** This Government were elected with an overwhelming mandate to deliver change. We inherited a country hit by an unprecedented cost of living crisis, with millions stuck on waiting lists and communities blighted by crime and antisocial behaviour. We are already delivering the change we promised. There will be a pay rise for 3 million workers, thanks to our increase in the national minimum wage. NHS waiting lists are down six months in a row, and there is funding for 13,000 neighbourhood police and community support officers. That was the change we promised, and that is the change we are delivering.

**Jim Dickson:** I thank the Minister for her answer. It is a really impressive catalogue of achievement in the early months of the Government. Can the Minister set out more specific detail for my constituents and the House on big infrastructure projects such as the lower Thames crossing? I am delighted that the Government have now given consent to it, and Dartford residents are delighted too. How can these big infrastructure projects not only kick-start economic growth but provide jobs, skills and opportunities for residents in Dartford and across the Thames estuary?

**Ellie Reeves:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for the people of Dartford. Fixing Britain's creaking infrastructure is vital for our growth mission and plan for change. We are reforming our planning rules to cut through blockages to delivering infrastructure and to help meet our target of 150 planning decisions by the end of this Parliament. The Government are committed

to working with the private sector to deliver the lower Thames crossing. As well as creating jobs, it will reduce congestion and drive economic growth by improving connectivity between Kent and Essex.

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): As the Minister is undoubtedly aware, part of the plan for change is kick-starting economic growth. Prior to the recess, the Secretary of State for Transport advised me in relation to her statement about electric vehicle charging that the Cabinet Office is responsible for EU reset negotiations. What assessment has the Cabinet Office made of the cost of the UK not being in a customs union with the EU?

**Ellie Reeves:** The Minister for the Cabinet Office has been negotiating with the EU in the country's national interest. We have been clear that there will be no return to the customs union or single market, but the reset in our relations with the EU is an important one.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Key to much of that plan is the Government's target to make the UK the fastest growing economy in the G7. But with the International Monetary Fund joining the Office for Budget Responsibility and the OECD in massively slashing projections for UK growth and the IMF not expecting the UK to be the fastest growing economy in the G7 in any year between now and 2030, how confident is the Minister that the Government will meet that target?

**Ellie Reeves:** The prediction is that we are set to be the largest growing European economy in the G7. Since coming into government in July, we have prioritised growth: for example, Universal Studios building Europe's biggest theme park in Bedfordshire, and unblocking planning decisions on projects like the lower Thames crossing. We are getting on with delivering the growth that the country needs after 14 years of decline under the Conservatives.

### Topical Questions

T1. [903731] **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden):** Since the last oral questions, we have been working to create a more focused Cabinet Office that will drive the work of reform and help to deliver on our plan for change. We have taken decisive action, including by cutting wasteful spending so that resources can be targeted on the frontline. I am pleased to inform the House that I will shortly be opening the UK Resilience Academy, which will be an important resource in training public servants for a range of potential emergencies.

**Gurinder Singh Josan:** I am sure the Minister will agree that the diversity of those in positions of responsibility across all areas of UK Government and public institutions is key to maintaining confidence among the British public that the Government are working for all of us. Diversity is important across all the various equality

strands as well as the various geographical areas of the UK's nations and regions. Will he detail what work has been done to review the diversity of public appointments in the UK and to maintain and improve that diversity, particularly in view of the changes proposed to public bodies?

**Pat McFadden:** Merit will always be the primary consideration in any appointment, but diversity is important, and we are not giving up on it. We want to see a public service that looks like the country and speaks with all the accents that make this country a great place. The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould) recently spoke at the civil service social mobility conference to bring home that message, which will reflect what we do on public appointments.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the Paymaster General give us an update on his negotiations with the European Union? He has not updated the House since the beginning of February, and there has been much speculation in the press. Will he take this opportunity to rule out dropping the right to annual quota negotiations on fishing?

**The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds):** We will negotiate in the interests of our fishers and understand and implement our marine protection rights. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will understand, I will not give a running commentary on the negotiations, but we are clear that we will negotiate in the national interest and in line with the manifesto that the Government, with 411 Members of Parliament, were elected on.

**Alex Burghart:** The whole House will have heard the Minister fail to rule that out.

It was good to hear the Prime Minister recently praise the Brexit freedom to regulate as we wish on artificial intelligence; will the Minister assure the House that EU AI rules will not be applied to Northern Ireland?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** Again the hon. Gentleman comes with his questions on the reset. We have had an atmosphere of collegiality, and I want to join in by agreeing with the Leader of the Opposition that the previous Conservative Government left the EU without any plan for growth. That is absolutely true. The hon. Gentleman should follow the public debate on this issue. Major retailers including M&S, Sainsbury's, Morrisons and Lidl all support this Government's approach in the reset to get a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement. The hon. Gentleman should back that approach; otherwise, people will rightly conclude that he and his party have learned nothing.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I say to those on the Front Bench that we only got to Question 8 earlier because we were slow. Now we are in topicals, and I really want to get in all the Members who did not get in earlier.

T2. [903732] **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in congratulating the seven schools in my constituency that launched breakfast clubs this week? Does she agree that breakfast clubs are a fantastic example of this Government's plan for change and reform of public services in action?

**The Minister without Portfolio (Ellie Reeves):** I am pleased to hear about the seven new free breakfast clubs in Carlisle, and I am delighted that Brent Knoll school in my constituency also has a new free breakfast club. With our plan for change, we will give children the best start in life, breaking down barriers to opportunity and putting money back in parents' pockets by saving them up to £450 with the roll-out of free breakfast clubs.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): Warm words about a reset in UK-EU relations are no longer enough. The summit that will take place in London on 19 May is an opportunity for real action. Will the Minister take the opportunity that the summit presents to commit to bringing in a UK-EU youth mobility scheme that will boost economic growth and enhance chances for young people in our country and across the EU?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** A youth mobility scheme is not part of our plans. We have always said that we will listen to sensible EU proposals, but we will not go back to freedom of movement. Where I do agree with the hon. Lady is on concrete proposals and concrete progress on 19 May. We are looking to secure a new partnership with the EU that will make our country safer, more secure and more prosperous.

T3. [903734] **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Teesside has enormous potential for AI investment. What progress are the Government making on AI growth zones, AI adoption and investment for Teesside?

**Pat McFadden:** AI is a huge opportunity for the UK. The AI opportunities action plan was a statement of our ambition to make the UK a world leader in AI. We launched an expression of interest on AI growth zones and have received more than 200 responses. The first such zone has already been announced at Culham, home to the UK Atomic Energy Authority.

**Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): We have recently found out that portraits and paintings of Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh and William Shakespeare are among 69 pieces of artwork that have been removed from No. 10, No. 11 and across the Government estate. Does this not make a mockery of the Government's St George's day celebrations this week? They are more interested in chasing the latest woke trends than celebrating the history and heritage of this great country.

**Pat McFadden:** I have already said that we want a public service that reflects all the great accents that make this country such a great place. We celebrate our history, and I warmly wish the hon. Member—a day late, I admit—a very happy St George's day.



T4. [903735] **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): As we approach the eighth anniversary of Grenfell, there is still no justice for the bereaved and survivors, but we do now have a Government response to the national inquiry. Grenfell campaigners have been clear with me that they want to see the promised changes implemented, but they are sceptical, given previous failures of the state to learn the lessons from past disasters. Does the Minister agree that as part of, or alongside, the very welcome commitment to a Hillsborough law, there should be a national oversight mechanism to ensure that when inquiries are set up, they lead to meaningful change?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate on this issue. It is incredibly important that the Government are held to account for the implementation of inquiry recommendations. It is why the Government have already committed to establishing a publicly accessible record of recommendations made by public inquiries since 2024. We will ensure that becomes standard practice in the future. We are also considering wider reform of the inquiries landscape.

T6. [903737] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Press reports earlier this week indicated that negotiations with the EU around security and defence were to be linked to the review of the trade and co-operation agreement, in particular in relation to access to fisheries. May I invite the Paymaster General to confirm to the House that those reports are not true and that there will be no linkage between those two important negotiations?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** There is no such link, and the right hon. Gentleman knows that the current arrangements will come to an end in 2026. We will negotiate in the interests of our fishers and are looking at our responsibilities to the marine environment.

T7. [903738] **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): It is right that the Government have ensured that funding is in place to compensate victims of the infected blood scandal, but many of them, particularly those in my constituency, are still concerned that the process is taking too long. Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about what we are doing to speed up getting compensation to those victims?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for her constituents. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority is of course operationally independent, but I stand ready to take all the steps I can to ensure that compensation is made as soon as possible. Payments to the infected started at the end of last year; payments to the affected will start by the end of this year.

**Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): It is every British citizen's right to vote, and voter turnout is one demonstration of public engagement with politics. Will the Minister consider scrapping photo voter ID, so that the 777,000 people who said that was the reason they did not vote at the last general election will be able to exercise their right to vote at the next general election?

**Ellie Reeves:** As we set out in our manifesto, the Government are committed to encouraging participation in our democracy and believe that it is unacceptable when legitimate voters are prevented or discouraged from voting. Although we have no plans to remove the voter ID rules, at the elections in May the veteran card will be accepted for the first time, and we are conducting a thorough review of the voter ID rules, evaluating how they impacted citizens at the general election.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Too many Government Departments and public bodies have foreign-made tableware purchased with British taxpayers' money. May I invite the ministerial team to make a commitment to ensure that every Department replaces its foreign-made table set with a British-made one—preferably from Stoke-on-Trent?

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Georgia Gould):** We know of the brilliant craftsmanship of the Stoke-on-Trent industry. We are committed to supporting British businesses and ensuring that they have the best chance of winning public contracts. Our new national policy statement asks contracting authorities to maximise spend with small and medium-sized enterprises and to support our industrial strategy.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): During the last Parliament, I made a submission, on behalf of the National Association of Retired Police Officers, for a medal to be issued in recognition of the service given by those injured on duty and invalidated out of the service. That had the backing of the then Policing Minister, and I understand it also has the backing of the current Policing Minister, but it has now disappeared into a black hole in the Cabinet Office. Will the Minister please dig it out, dust it off and give it a fair wind?

**Pat McFadden:** I will find out exactly where we are with this matter and then write to the right hon. Member.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): Under the Windsor framework, the Government, through the Cabinet Office, regularly supply data to the European Union about the number and type of checks conducted at the Irish sea border, but they refuse to provide that data to Members of this House. When I was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the oversight of those checks lay with the local Department, I was able to acquire that, but now that it is under the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Members who ask those questions get a refusal of an answer. Why is that?

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I am perfectly happy to look into the matter that the hon. and learned Gentleman raises. On the UK-EU reset, I very much hope that if the Government are able to secure a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement that they will reduce the number of checks on the Irish sea.

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): The 36th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster came and went over the recess, when we also saw in the media rumours that the Government are considering watering down their proposed Hillsborough law. Can the Minister explain the Government's thinking?



**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I pay tribute to the Hillsborough families and those who have campaigned over so many years. The Government are committed to bringing in a

Hillsborough law, but it is also important that we work closely with the families to ensure that we get it right, and that is precisely what we will do.

## Ukraine War: London Talks

10.35 am

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary if he will make a statement on the talks held yesterday in London on the war in Ukraine.

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty)**: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question and for the Opposition's continued support for the united position that we take in our iron-clad support for Ukraine. We remain fully committed to working with Ukraine and our international partners to secure a just and lasting peace.

Our support for Ukraine is iron-clad. Representatives of the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States convened in London yesterday, with Ukraine, for another round of intensive talks, following up on the meeting in Paris last week. All parties reiterated their strong support for President Trump's commitment to stopping the killing and achieving a just and lasting peace. The talks were productive and successful, and significant progress was made on reaching a common position on next steps. All agreed to continue their close co-ordination and look forward to further talks soon. There was an E3 statement on this just last night. The Foreign Secretary had bilateral discussions with Foreign Minister Sybiha, and he remains in close contact with his ministerial counterparts. To give further details of the discussions would only benefit Putin, as I hope the right hon. Lady understands.

We condemn Russia's brutal missile and drone attacks on civilians, including overnight. Our thoughts are with the victims and their loved ones at this tragic time. They were absolutely horrific scenes, and they came on the back of shocking scenes not only in Kyiv but in Kryvyi Rih, Sumy, Marhanets and many other locations across Ukraine in recent days. I remind the House that, while Ukraine has been in peace talks, Russia has continued these severe attacks, including last night. That is a stark reminder of the continued bloodshed and aggression perpetrated by Putin. I witnessed myself the terrible situation in Kyiv when I visited just weeks ago; there were attacks on Bucha of all places just hours before I arrived. Indeed, this is about not just the killings but the continued shocking abductions of children and attempts to wipe out Ukrainian culture. Putin's demands remain undiminished. We are very clear about that.

President Zelensky has shown his commitment to peace. President Putin must now agree to a full and immediate ceasefire without conditions, as Ukraine has done. We will not stop in our efforts to work with all parties to that end.

**Priti Patel**: For all the talks taking place, it is concerning that a clear and unified front in support of Ukraine, to support a peace on its terms, has yet to emerge. The Minister mentioned the E3 statement on yesterday's talks, but it consisted of three sentences stating that the talks were productive and successful, and that significant progress was made in reaching a common position on the next steps. Will he tell us exactly what was productive and successful about the talks, what those next steps are, and whether Ukraine is in agreement? Were security guarantees for Ukraine discussed, and was progress made

on agreeing what they will be? Was the UK's long-standing position of supporting Ukraine's accession to NATO discussed?

Following the abhorrent missile strike in Kyiv last night, which killed more innocent civilians, does the Minister believe that Putin is committed to a just and fair end to this conflict? Can the Minister confirm whether the status of Crimea and other Ukrainian territories invaded and occupied unlawfully by Russia was discussed and what the UK Government's position is? The UK was the strongest advocate for Ukraine regaining all the territory taken by force by Putin and for Putin to lose this war. Is that still the case?

There is much debate about the initiatives to end the war by negotiations, but we cannot forget that this war was started by Putin—a murderous, vile autocrat who is being propped up by an axis of authoritarian states trying to extinguish democracy on our continent, and by those who are opposed to our values, including China, North Korea and Iran. We need the Government to leverage British influence in every way possible for Ukraine. Our Ukrainian friends are on the frontline, battling an attempt to reshape the whole international order by force.

I condemn the sanctioning of 15 Members yesterday by Russia. To those colleagues, I say this: it shows that you are on the right side of history and that we must always stand up to tyranny. UK sanctions on Russia must stay in place. What is the Government's position on applying secondary sanctions, and when will the billions of pounds of proceeds from the sale of Chelsea FC be made available for Ukraine?

Can the Minister explain why the Government's £2.26 billion loan to Ukraine, backed by the profits of sanctioned assets, is being paid over three years rather than in full now? Finally, what more can the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office do to mobilise British technology, which could be cheaply and quickly applied to adapt Ukraine's military efforts?

**Stephen Doughty**: I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions and for her continued support and unity on these issues. It is crucial that we send a signal not only to our friends in Ukraine but to Putin—that this House will not be divided on these issues. We are united in our support for Ukraine, and I can reassure her of our absolute commitment to Ukraine. Indeed, there has been extensive ministerial contact over recent weeks. I met Minister Sybiha in Turkey a week or so ago, and the Foreign Secretary was with him yesterday. Contact remains at every level.

The right hon. Lady asked a number of specific questions. I am afraid that I cannot go into the detail of yesterday's discussions, for reasons that she will understand. I know she has a job to do in holding us to account on that, but it is really important that we allow those technical talks to go on at that level between the principals, and she will understand why that is necessary.

I agree completely with the right hon. Lady's point about the sanctions against Members of this House, which I utterly condemn. This is par for the course when it comes to Putin and his regime. She asked what we are doing on sanctions. Our commitment to sanctions remains undiminished. We will maintain the pressure at every level. In fact, we are ramping up the pressure, and

today we have announced new sanctions, including on the shocking repurposing of games console controllers to kill Ukrainians by Russia. We are taking robust action at every step we can, not only directly, to choke off the Russian war machine, but in relation to second and third-country circumvention of those sanctions. She can be assured that I have spent a lot of time on this issue in recent weeks.

The right hon. Lady asks about the situation with Chelsea FC, and I refer her to my previous comments on that. We are working at pace to meet the agreements that were made on that. She points out the importance of the extraordinary revenue accelerator loan. The first tranche of that has been disbursed. In fact, I discussed this with the deputy Finance Minister of Ukraine just a few weeks ago, to ensure that they had access to those resources. They do have access, and I am happy to write to her separately about the details of the further tranches that will be paid.

There is absolutely no softening of our commitment to the coalition of the willing. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary met French, US, German and Ukrainian counterparts last week, underlining our shared commitments, and we are leading a coalition of willing nations to defend Ukraine's security. We will not get into the operational details, for obvious reasons, as the Defence Secretary made clear earlier this week.

The right hon. Lady asks about Crimea. The UK's position regarding Ukrainian sovereignty is well known and has not changed: we do not recognise Russian sovereignty over any territory illegally seized from Ukraine, including Crimea. When, how and on what terms this war comes to an end can be decided only by negotiations with Ukraine at the heart of them.

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): As one of the individuals who was sanctioned yesterday by the Kremlin, I ask the Minister whether he agrees that if Putin is serious about securing any sort of lasting peace in Ukraine, he should stop the performative sanctioning of democratically elected Members of this House and focus on stopping the murderous, barbaric killing of civilians in Ukraine and the invasion of that nation, which we stand with in full support.

**Stephen Doughty:** Again, I utterly condemn the sanctioning of Members of this House, including my hon. Friend. I am on that list too, as are many other Members, and it is completely unacceptable; we are clear on that. My hon. Friend rightly points out examples of Russia's actions in recent days—the horrific attacks, the deaths, the killing, the continued aggression—and of course Russia is the aggressor in this conflict.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Liberal Democrat spokesperson James MacCleary.

**James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): Overnight, Russia launched 11 ballistic missiles and nearly 200 cruise missiles and drones at civilian targets in Kyiv. Yesterday's talks in London should have been an opportunity to strengthen the western coalition's support for Ukraine in the face of Putin's barbarism. Instead, they were derailed by President Trump, who, in a petulant response to President Zelensky's refusal to countenance the recognition of Crimea as Russian, withdrew his Secretary

of State and special adviser from the meeting. President Trump demonstrated that he is not interested in securing a just peace that can deter future Russian aggression and protect Ukraine's right to self-determination. Instead, he is intent on securing a carve-up of Ukraine with Putin, as long as it is agreed before the 100th day of his presidency. Will the Minister make clear to his US counterpart that the apparent ultimatum shared with President Zelensky last week, which would deliver to Putin most of the goals of his illegal invasion, is utterly wrong and would only embolden future Russian aggression? I too yesterday found myself on a list of MPs from across the House who are being sanctioned by the Kremlin. Will the Government outline how they plan to support Members who are being targeted for speaking out?

**Stephen Doughty:** While I welcome the hon. Gentleman's party's continued support for a united front on Ukraine, I do not recognise his characterisation of the talks yesterday, which were productive and constructive, and involved the United States. The Foreign Secretary also spoke to Secretary of State Rubio just the night before, and we are in regular contact with our US counterparts. Secretary of State Rubio welcomed the fact that we were hosting special envoy Kellogg alongside others. Of course, the Prime Minister has been in contact with President Trump in recent days, and the Foreign Secretary has been in contact with his counterpart.

We share the President's desire to bring this barbaric war to an end. Of course Russia could do that tomorrow by withdrawing its forces and ending its illegal invasion. We are working with all our allies, including the United States, on a plan to stop the fighting. We obviously need agreement among all of us on that—European allies, the United States and others—and we are working closely with President Trump on that, but we are also clear that Ukraine's voice must be at the heart of any talks. We warmly welcome the agreements and discussions between the United States and Ukraine, but ultimately the ball is in President Putin's court. He continues instead to fire missiles and cause the destruction and killing that the hon. Gentleman rightly highlighted. It is utterly horrific. The responsibility lies with one person, and that is Vladimir Putin.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): I associate myself with the Minister's comments about the appalling attacks on Ukraine last night, and I thank him for his statement today. Will he update the House on the support the Government are offering to Ukrainian communities across the UK at this very difficult time, such as the large Ukrainian community in Reading?

**Stephen Doughty:** I thank my hon. Friend for his support, and he rightly references Ukrainian communities across the United Kingdom. I have met the Ukrainian community in my constituency, and just this week I met Ukrainian community members to discuss a range of issues, including the horrific abduction of children, which Russia has continued to perpetrate, one of the most shocking and heinous aspects of this conflict. I am really proud of what British communities have done across the country to support Ukrainians, and the strong ties that have been built. It is fantastic that we have signed a 100-year partnership, so that for 100 years into the future, we have that relationship and give

[Stephen Doughty]

that iron-clad support on every level—economically, diplomatically, militarily, and of course through crucial people-to-people links.

**Sir James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): Our international relationships the world over are dependent on partner countries' confidence that we will stick by our word, and that our allies will do likewise. Will the Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), convey that message to the United States of America? The world—friends and foes alike—is looking at our willingness to stick by the commitments that we have made to Ukraine. If we renege on those commitments, every single relationship around the world will be undermined.

**Stephen Doughty:** Well, I am not my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—I represent Cardiff South and Penarth—but I thank the former Foreign Secretary for his comments, his continued support, and his engagement with me on these important issues when I was in opposition. The Government and I have been absolutely clear: our support is iron-clad, not only now, but for 100 years into the future. I was able to convey our support and our unity on this issue to a bipartisan delegation from the US House Foreign Affairs Committee yesterday. It was an excellent and productive discussion. There is strong unity on these issues. We need to continue to work together, across Europe and in our transatlantic and global alliances, to deter and defend against the threat from Russia, as well as other threats that we face together.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I was also one of the Members on the list of people sanctioned by the Kremlin yesterday. I want to make it clear in this House that if Vladimir Putin thinks that sanctioning me will silence me, he is very, very wrong. It is no coincidence that the sanction came on the day when I launched a report that I co-authored with UK Friends of Ukraine on the issue of the stolen children. The report outlines in detail the systemic capture, re-education and conscription of Ukrainian children by Russia. Will my hon. Friend outline whether the issue of the stolen children was discussed yesterday? Does he support the campaign to return the stolen children? Will he join me in calling for a UK national day of action to recognise the issue of the stolen children of Ukraine on 17 July, the Day of International Criminal Justice?

**Stephen Doughty:** I thank my hon. Friend for her powerful points, and I condemn the sanction against her. She is right to raise the issue of the stolen children. I discussed the matter a short while ago with the Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister and representatives of the different campaigns on the issue. This is a personal priority for the Foreign Secretary and me. It is one of the most heinous and horrific aspects of the conflict, not only for those children and their families, but because it speaks to a wider attempt by Putin to subjugate the people, identity, culture, language and future of Ukraine. That should be clear for all to see. One of the most powerful reminders of that is a picture that I have in my office painted by one of the children, who was thankfully

returned, but sadly there are still far too many children who have been taken by Russia. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on this important issue, and I am very happy to discuss the event that she suggested.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): If the Government could persuade the Nobel peace prize committee to give the award to Donald Trump on condition that he stops siding with the aggressor against the victim, does the Minister think that American policy might revert to one of NATO deterrence, which prevented world war three for half a century after the end of world war two?

**Stephen Doughty:** The right hon. Gentleman, who I know well, will know that that is a matter for the Nobel committee, and not for me. I do not recognise his characterisation. We are working closely with the United States, Ukraine and all of our European partners to secure a just and lasting peace for Ukraine. We are very clear about who is on the side of peace—us—and who is on the side of war: Vladimir Putin.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): Members across this House who have been sanctioned by Putin and his flunkies should wear that as a badge of honour. It indicates just how Putin and his flunkies feel about the prospect of Russian assets being seized. Will the Minister update the House on the progress made in moving from freezing to seizing Russian assets to strengthen the hand of our brave Ukrainian allies?

**Stephen Doughty:** I condemn the sanction against the hon. Lady, and against other colleagues in the House. We have been very clear that Russia must pay for the damage it is causing in Ukraine and the destruction that it has wrought on the Ukrainian people and industries. I saw some terrible examples of that when I visited just a few weeks ago. I have spoken about the importance of the extraordinary revenue acceleration scheme and the moneys that are now available to Ukraine. The Government continue to work closely with allies on the issue that the hon. Lady references. I had extensive discussions with my G7 counterparts and others about considering all possible lawful avenues for making Russia pay for the damage it is causing, and we will update the House in due course.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement. I also thank the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) for her statement, because it is important that this House speaks with one voice on this really important issue. On Tuesday, I asked a question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the changing nature of warfare. The Minister raised the terrible image of controllers for computer game systems being used as weapons. Has he had conversations with NATO partners and allies about the changing nature of warfare, and will that be fed into the strategic defence review?

**Stephen Doughty:** We certainly have had those conversations, and we have them regularly. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. The Minister for the Armed Forces is here with me; we regularly discuss these issues. I am sure all that will be considered as part of the strategic defence review. My hon. Friend rightly points out the efforts we are making to deny Russia any



of the nefarious means it uses to prosecute its horrendous war in Ukraine. We have taken very specific action on some of those matters today, and we will continue to consider further measures.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I welcome the words of the Minister, and the UK Government's steadfast support for Ukraine, and for further promoting European security. Will he say a little more about how he is working across Government Departments to support the efforts of civil society and businesses in the UK to ensure that, at every level, we offer the greatest support possible to Ukrainians?

**Stephen Doughty:** I point my hon. Friend to the important 100-year partnership that we signed. Engagement at every level between civil society and people in every community is crucial. I know that there are very important twinning arrangements between cities and communities across the UK, and we look forward to strengthening those, and working with those communities. I met Ukrainian civil society organisations in Kyiv just a few weeks ago, and I regularly meet organisations here in the UK. If all of us across this House can create more links, that will give true strength for the future to the foundation on which that partnership is built.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The Minister's confirmation that the coalition of the willing will not permit the concession of any Ukrainian sovereign territory to Russia is most welcome, but I am not sure that I understand how that squares with Mr Trump's current negotiating position, which seems to be based entirely on that. Some 20,000 Ukrainian children have been stolen by the neo-Soviet Union and sovietised. That is a war crime. Did the meeting yesterday make it absolutely plain that no recognition of any concession based on war crimes will be admitted at any time?

**Stephen Doughty:** The right hon. Gentleman asks important questions. He has heard what I had to say about the abducted children, and I completely share his passion, and his horror at what has happened. I will not go into the details of what was discussed yesterday, but as I said, I spoke about this issue very recently with our Ukrainian counterparts, and I know that the Foreign Secretary takes a very keen interest in it. The right hon. Gentleman also asked about territory. I will repeat what I said: we do not recognise Russian sovereignty over any territory illegally seized from Ukraine, including Crimea.

**Dr Jeevun Sandher** (Loughborough) (Lab): I was also one of the Members sanctioned by Putin yesterday for calling for this House to do everything we can to stop him. The lesson of a century ago is that dictators like Putin cannot and will not stop unless we stop them, and the only way to stop him is through strength—through strong armed forces, a strong NATO and a strong nation. How will we invest in our strength to stop Putin and keep ourselves safe?

**Stephen Doughty:** Again, I condemn the sanction against my hon. Friend. He asks what we are doing to keep our citizens and all our allies safe, and to keep our shared security in place. Again, I am pleased to be joined by the Minister for the Armed Forces. This Government have stepped up resources for defence and security and

UK support to Ukraine. We are increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027, and have an ambition to reach 3%, and the UK is committed to providing Ukraine with £3 billion in military assistance this year and every year for as long as it takes. I mentioned the ERA loan, and we also have export finance support, £1.6 billion of which is going on supplying Ukraine with more than 5,000 air defence missiles. That is utterly crucial and makes a tangible difference, not least in the face of the barbaric attacks that we saw overnight.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): I welcome fresh members to the list of those of us who have been sanctioned. Why is President Trump treating Ukraine as the aggressor? Will the Minister remind US negotiators that—together with the United Kingdom—the USA signed the Budapest memorandum, assuring Ukraine of its territorial integrity and independence, when that country sacrificed unilaterally its position as the world's third largest nuclear-armed power?

**Stephen Doughty:** I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's support on Ukraine, but again, I do not share his characterisation of the United States' position. We share President Trump's desire to bring this barbaric war to an end, and we are working closely with the US and other international partners to secure a just and lasting peace. As I have said, it is very clear to us that President Zelensky and Ukraine are demonstrating and have demonstrated a clear commitment to peace, including through their participation yesterday alongside the US and our European partners. We know who the real obstacle to peace is: Vladimir Putin.

**Mr Connor Rand** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that, as other hon. Members have alluded to, last night's brutal attack on Kyiv is a timely reminder to Governments and leaders around the world that Russia is and always has been the aggressor in this conflict? Does he agree that that perspective must be central to any talks, as we stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes?

**Stephen Doughty:** As I have said, we are absolutely unequivocal that Russia and Vladimir Putin are responsible for this war, and we are absolutely clear that they are responsible for the ongoing killing and aggression. That is why we stand four-square and iron-clad behind Ukraine, and we are working with the United States and our European allies to achieve a peace that is just and—most importantly—lasting. We know that Putin's demands and intentions remain undiminished, and we need to ensure that Ukraine has the ability not only to defend itself, but to deter future aggression by Putin.

**Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): This weekend, I will join with the Ukrainian community in Torbay to mourn the sad loss of a Ukrainian national who has died far from home. Almost 20,000 children have been stolen by the barbaric Putin regime; can the Minister advise the Chamber on what practical steps the Government are taking to get those children home?

**Stephen Doughty:** I was able to discuss some of the practical steps that we are taking on this important issue just a few weeks ago with the Deputy Foreign Minister of Ukraine and, indeed, with many of the

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organisations that are working on it. We are exploring further ways in which we can assist; we have already done a huge amount, and I look forward to seeing steps forward taken in due course. I am very happy to update the hon. Gentleman in writing with further details.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I am ashamed to admit that I have not yet been sanctioned by Russia—I am feeling a little bit lonely. Clearly, I have to do more to call out Putin's barbaric war crimes. This House is always at its most united and its most passionate when we are talking about the need for a just peace in Ukraine, so can I ask the Minister very delicately whether he is convinced that all our international allies understand that for a peace to be lasting, it has to be just?

**Stephen Doughty:** I think that is well understood, and it is a point that we continue to underline in all of our conversations, whether across the Atlantic, across Europe or with other parties internationally. It is why we have supported the important work on the special tribunal on the crime of aggression; it is why we are supporting action on justice for crimes that have potentially been committed in Ukraine; and it is why we are continuing to support key institutions within Ukraine on these issues and have worked within the Council of Europe on these issues, too. We have been very clear that justice must come alongside sustainability and Ukraine's ability to deter future aggression and of course to defend itself and its people right now.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The assistance that we have provided to our friends in Ukraine has included firefighting equipment, along with training on the use of that equipment. The devastation that took place overnight demonstrates that that assistance is still inadequate, so will the Minister undertake to review with the fire service Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), what extra provision we can provide? If we cannot provide anything, will he reach out to our international partners to encourage them to supply equipment, so that the fires can be brought under control and people's lives saved?

**Stephen Doughty:** The hon. Member raises an important issue, and I know the huge support that has gone in. Indeed, I worked with colleagues on some of that in the previous Parliament. One of my friends in Ukraine was called up as a military firefighter in responding to some of those attacks on the cities. The need is huge, and we have been giving a huge amount of support on reconstruction, energy infrastructure and other issues. I am happy to look at the issues he raises and to see whether there is more we can do in that regard.

**Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): Pope Francis described pride as the most devious of sins, but I wonder if we can be granted a little bit of indulgence and the Minister can take some pride in colleagues from across the House joining the fine group of those who have been sanctioned by Russia. However, those who are doing the hard yards are in Ukraine. Can the Minister assure us that he believes that the United States still believes in Ukraine's territorial integrity, for which those brave Ukrainians are fighting?

**Stephen Doughty:** I have been clear that we are working closely with President Trump and the United States, our European partners and others. I refer the hon. Member to the comments I made just a short while ago in response to the shadow Foreign Secretary. We are clear that Ukraine must be at the heart of these negotiations. That is why we are working closely with the United States, with our European partners and, crucially, with Ukraine. That was exactly what was happening in the technical talks yesterday here in London.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): On Tuesday, I asked the Defence Secretary what our red lines would be at yesterday's peace talks regarding any peace proposal from the US that required Ukraine to cede any of its sovereign territory to Russia. I did not receive an answer. Yesterday, US Vice-President J.D. Vance told reporters:

"Now, of course, that means the Ukrainians and the Russians are both going to have to give up some of the territory they currently own."

Can the Minister now state that the Government will not support any US proposal that sees Russia make territorial gains at the expense of Ukraine upon any permanent cessation of hostilities?

**Stephen Doughty:** The hon. Member will understand that, like the Defence Secretary, I will not be drawn on the detail of the discussions yesterday. The only person that that would benefit is Vladimir Putin. We have been clear that we share the United States' desire to bring this barbaric war to an end. Ultimately, though, it is for Ukraine to decide its future. Our position on that has not changed, and that is why we are working closely with Ukraine, our international partners and others to end the bloodshed and suffering caused by Russia. We are clear on who the aggressor is in this situation. We will continue to stand iron-clad with Ukraine.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I have nothing new to say about this, but since I was one of those included yesterday in the list of those who were no longer welcome in the Kremlin—not that I had thought I ever would be—I feel compelled to place on record that my determination to oppose and expose the brutality and illegality of Vladimir Putin and his Government is greater today than it was yesterday. Can the Minister do what he can to make sure that our resolve in this House is heard in the Kremlin and also, if necessary, in the White House?

**Stephen Doughty:** I am absolutely sure that the voices in this House are heard across the world. I have no doubt that the Kremlin is watching what is being said. Again, I condemn the sanction against the right hon. Member and other Members across the House. This terrible aggression by Russia and by Putin has often had the exact opposite effect of what he intended; it has strengthened NATO unity, and we have new members of NATO, increased defence spending, increased resolve, increased unity, and increased willingness to stand with Ukraine not just now but 100 years into the future. That is the message that we continue to send from this House and that we continue to send from our allies. It is the message that we must continue to send.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): At the London talks, did the Government have the opportunity to discuss with allies the deployment of 155 members of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in support of Russia against Ukraine?

**Stephen Doughty:** I am not going to get into the detail of the talks yesterday, but I will make it clear to the hon. Member that we are acting robustly against third-country support for Russia's illegal war, including through our sanctions. We did so in relation to a series of matters, including the support of military industrial companies and others. The Foreign Secretary raised concerns with his Chinese counterpart on China's supply of equipment to Russia and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's relationship with Russia. We engage very closely on third-country support, in whatever form that takes, and we are not afraid to take action where that is necessary.

**Llinos Medi** (Ynys Môn) (PC): I welcome the UK Government's recent commitment to strengthening their energy partnership with Ukraine, which is crucial for Europe's energy independence. I recently visited Urenco's Capenhurst site, where an advanced nuclear fuels facility is being developed—a market that is currently dominated by Russia. Could the Minister outline how the UK Government are advancing this technology and what it means for the UK's energy partnership with Ukraine?

**Stephen Doughty:** Diolch yn fawr; I appreciate the hon. Lady's interest in these issues and her support. We have been doing a huge amount with Ukraine to support its energy sector against the terrible attacks that have been taking place, but we have also been working on how we might co-operate together on energy in the future. That is a crucial question for all of us across Europe. I continually raise with European and other counterparts the issue of removing the dependency on supplies from Russia and elsewhere. We need to look at new partnerships and ways forward in which we can support all our energy needs—whether that is through renewables, through nuclear or in other ways. This is an important issue, and I thank the hon. Lady for raising it.

**Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Can the Minister update the House on whether yesterday's meeting involved discussion of any potential future co-operation between the US and Russia on energy? If it did, did he impart to his US counterparts that such an arrangement would be a folly?

**Stephen Doughty:** As I said before, I will not get into the detail of talks and discussions. We are very clear on our position, which is that we need to support and stand with Ukraine. We are having productive and constructive talks. Those continued yesterday with the United States, European allies and others, and I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) a moment ago.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): How can the Minister describe yesterday's talks as productive if the United States continues to make unreasonable demands of Ukraine that the United Kingdom does not support?

**Stephen Doughty:** I can describe those talks as productive and constructive because they were.

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is being reported today that the White House is considering lifting its sanctions on the Russian Nord Stream natural gas pipeline—more evidence, in case it was needed, that this US Administration are increasingly siding with Russia. This is hugely concerning, as I am sure the whole Chamber agrees. May I please urge the Minister and the Department to use whatever leverage they have with the US Administration to prevent that from happening? If it does go ahead, what will the Government's next steps be?

**Stephen Doughty:** The hon. Lady asks an important question about sanctions. The Prime Minister has been very clear that sanctions against Russia are a vital part of our armoury, and the UK is committed to maintaining our Russia sanctions—we are not considering lifting them. As the PM said in Paris, in order to get Russia to the table, we need to keep up the economic pressure to hinder its ability to wage war, and we need to deal with all the ways in which the war is being fuelled and supplied. The purposes of our sanctions are very clear: to stop Russia threatening and undermining Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence; to help ensure that Russia pays for the damage it has caused; and to make sure that Ukraine is placed in the best possible position to secure a just and lasting peace. We will continue to work with the United States and all our allies on those important issues.

**Charlie Dewhurst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Further to the last question, there is rightly concern that Russia continues to bypass sanctions through its shadow fleet. What measures are the Government taking alongside our allies to prevent that?

**Stephen Doughty:** Since this Government came into office, we have ramped up our efforts, particularly on the issue of the shadow fleet, on which we first sought sanctions at the European Political Community summit, just days after coming into office. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the impact of those sanctions has been substantial in constraining and taking down Russia's ability to wage this war. Collectively, the sanctions by the previous Government and this Government have prevented \$450 billion-worth of support to fuel Russia's war. That could have paid for another three or four years of military aggression against Ukraine. We will not hesitate to consider further actions in this area; indeed, we have announced some of the biggest packages in recent weeks.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers. I was one of those to be sanctioned, but what does that sanction mean? It means that my superyacht—I do not have one—cannot be taken to Vladivostok for the summer or for the winter, so I will have to take it to Ballywalter, the village where I was born and brought up, and put it alongside the rented rowing boat that I use now and again. The sanction will not stop me speaking up to tell it straight on Russia's crimes, and let us remember what those are. There are the stolen children, whom the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) talked about. There are the thousands of men, women and children who have been murdered, and the church pastors who have disappeared. There was the massacre in Bucha. All those crimes anger us. This is about



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accountability: it is about making sure that the Russians who carried out those crimes will be held to account some day. By the way, I hope they are watching, because a sanction does not stop me, and it will not stop anyone else in this Chamber speaking up either.

I apologise for that introduction, but as I said earlier this week, peace is the goal, but not at any price. What discussions has the Minister had with the Ukrainians to ensure they understand that our support is there until the right deal is in place? What discussions have taken place with our American allies to ensure that we are still on the same page when it comes to making sure that Russian aggression is not rewarded and that Ukraine's sacrifice is always remembered?

**Stephen Doughty:** I think the hon. Gentleman's comments, like those of my hon. Friends, accurately capture the sentiments of this House. I condemn the sanction against him, but the reaction of him and other Members of this House should show everybody in the world—including Vladimir Putin, but also our allies and, most importantly, Ukraine—that our support remains ironclad and undiminished: it will strengthen rather than diminish.

I visited Bucha just a few weeks ago, and as with colleagues who have visited it, those scenes will never leave my mind. Let alone the horrific scenes we have seen over the last few weeks, the fact that that place has suffered so much—it is where priests were murdered and children were abducted, and just hours before I was there, further missiles came in and killed civilians—should leave nobody in any doubt whatsoever about who is the aggressor. It is Vladimir Putin and his regime. It is his war of aggression. Ukraine is the party that is serious about peace. We will work with Ukraine, the United States and our European allies in the endeavour to find that peace, but the ball is now very much in Vladimir Putin's court.

## London Sudan Conference

11.17 am

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the London Sudan conference.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer):** Co-hosted with the African Union, the EU, France and Germany, the London Sudan conference convened Foreign Ministers, major donors and humanitarian leaders to galvanise co-ordinated international action on the conflict. Discussions focused on ensuring humanitarian access, protecting civilians and supporting a Sudanese-led peace process that preserves Sudan's territorial integrity. A co-chairs' statement set out the shared principles of an immediate ceasefire, rejection of external interference, opposition to parallel Governments, a return to a civilian-led transition and a principled approach to full, unimpeded humanitarian access.

Although this was not a pledging conference, international partners did announce over £800 million of support to address the humanitarian situation. This includes a further £120 million in UK aid for this year, which will reach over 650,000 people with food, nutrition support and emergency assistance, including for survivors of sexual violence. It follows our sustained push to ensure aid reaches those in need, including through access corridors such as the Adré crossing from Chad.

The UK will continue to lead international efforts to end the conflict in Sudan. Our immediate goals are clear: to bring an end to this destructive war, to protect civilians and to get aid to where it is needed most. Our vision for Sudan is to work with the Sudanese people and international partners to deliver the democratic and peaceful future that they deserve.

**David Mundell:** I thank Mr Speaker for granting this urgent question. It is so important that we shine a light on this conflict, which is the worst humanitarian crisis in the world at this time. Sudan is experiencing the most extreme hunger crisis. Conflict-related famine, mass displacement, and extreme and sexual violence and killings continue to devastate millions of people. About half the population—24.5 million people—are experiencing acute food insecurity, with 650,000 facing catastrophic hunger. The conflict has led to an unprecedented displacement, with 8.6 million people internally displaced since the start of the conflict and nearly 4 million people forced to flee across borders.

Unfortunately, the crisis continues to get worse. In recent days, we have seen the Rapid Support Forces attack the Zamzam camp, which housed about 500,000 displaced people, and the Sudanese Government allegedly attack a market in western Darfur, which is speculated to be one of the worst single incidents of the conflict. I share the Minister's aspirations, as I am sure does the whole House, but we cannot underestimate the scale of the challenge. I was pleased that the Government took part in the conference, but it was very disappointing that it was not possible to get the other participants, particularly the Arab nations, to sign up to an agreement



at the end of it. It was also disappointing to find the RSF declaring an alternative Government within a few days of the conference.

What are the Government doing to encourage a greater role for the African Union, particularly in discussions at the United Nations? Generally, there is a view that if the African Union was more involved, it would be more difficult for Russia to veto UN resolutions. Secondly, what are we doing in relation to the United Arab Emirates and its role in the conflict, which has been significant?

**Mr Falconer:** This is a truly tragic sequence of events for the people of Sudan. The right hon. Gentleman has long had an interest and he is right to call me to the House to answer questions. We had hoped that at the conference last week, we would be able to issue a communiqué agreed by all parties. As he identifies, there is a whole range of countries with an interest in Sudan. We are at real risk at the moment not only of a further degradation of the situation for those in Zamzam, northern Darfur and across Sudan, but, as he says, of a declaration of parallel Governments, none of which will lead to the peaceful democratic future that the Sudanese have long hoped for.

The Foreign Secretary took the decision to try for this conference in an attempt to ensure wide agreement among the parties, because he recognises that there must be no hierarchy of conflict. The situation in Sudan is catastrophic and we are making every effort. The conference was the beginning, not the end, of our efforts to try to reduce the suffering in Sudan.

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

**Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** Let me begin by supporting the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and congratulating him on securing what is a very important urgent question.

Many millions of innocent Sudanese civilians have been caught up in what is a barbaric conflict. They deserve peace and dignity. They are facing the most appalling, dire humanitarian crisis. It is a fact that red lines have been crossed in the conflict, and that cannot be allowed to stand. We all want to help chart a course to a meaningful peace for the people of Sudan, and we are aware of the various pillars articulated in the London Sudan conference statement. We all agree on the need for an immediate end to the fighting, on preventing the partition of Sudan, and on the need for urgent humanitarian access.

Crucially, the Foreign Secretary's conference did not see any new practical measures agreed with the African Union and other partners to help the warring parties into a ceasefire and an end to the conflict, and, importantly, to deter the ways in which the conflict is being escalated, because there has been no de-escalation whatsoever. Supporting a transition to a civilian-led Government is clearly crucial, and it must be led by the Sudanese people. What practical diplomacy are the Foreign Office and the Foreign Secretary doing to help international processes such as Cairo to stay on track and to build confidence among the Sudanese civilian and political forces?

Finally, the Minister mentioned the additional £120 million in humanitarian aid announced by the Government for 2025-26. Will he inform us which organisations the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is partnering with for the delivery of this new aid, whether delivery has started and whether it is actually making any impact whatsoever? Will he also confirm that in parallel to announcing this new aid, he is working to keep border crossings open and pressing for the proper safety nets to ensure that this aid ends up with those who genuinely need it, and not in the wrong hands?

**Mr Falconer:** Like the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), the shadow Foreign Secretary raises important questions about the African Union. We thought it was particularly important that we co-hosted this event with the African Union; clearly, this is an important conflict with wide implications for those in the neighbourhood and in east Africa. We are taking practical steps, and we conducted the conference in closed session in order to enable the kind of frank discussion that is required to advance towards a more peaceful solution in Sudan.

I would not wish to give the House the impression that we have made dramatic progress towards an end to the violence in Sudan. We are all familiar with the terrible reports that continue to come in—even this morning—of events in Darfur and across Sudan.

Through the conference, we were able to bring greater unity among the international community on what the necessary next steps must be and on the importance of maintaining open border crossings, which, as the shadow Foreign Secretary sets out, are vital, in addition to trying to ensure that humanitarian access can be exercised right across Sudan. We have been in discussions with Tom Fletcher, the emergency relief co-ordinator, who has today spoken to some of the key participants. In terms of practical steps, I can confirm that we remain in direct contact, through our special envoy for Sudan, with both the RSF and the Sudanese armed forces. We are absolutely clear that we need a civilian process towards civilian Government.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** The Government were right to co-ordinate this conference as a first step on the path to peace. It is obviously disappointing that it was not possible to establish a contact group at the end of the conference, but I know the Minister will be working hard to progress bilateral talks, not least with the external actors in this conflict such as the UAE and Egypt.

I want to put the spotlight on women and girls in this conflict, who are experiencing high levels of sexual violence. What discussions were there on the protection of women and girls, and on the further steps that could be taken both to ensure the safety of those experiencing trauma today because of their experiences and to protect women and girls in the future?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to put the focus on violence against women and girls in Sudan. It is absolutely appalling—the latest reports are lurid and graphic in their details of what is befalling women and children right across Sudan. The Minister for Africa has been leading international efforts to maintain a spotlight on these questions. He chaired a

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UN Security Council briefing on conflict-related sexual violence in Sudan just last month, and was also at the UN Security Council in November further highlighting this issue. This conflict is disproportionately affecting women and children, and the UK will remain completely focused on doing everything we can to bring that to a close.

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

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): The Sudan conference in London presented an opportunity to generate international consensus for a path to peace in Sudan's civil war, the world's largest conflict. It was deeply disappointing that the conference failed to establish a contact group for the conflict, as such a group could build international political will to move towards an end to the fighting. Will the Minister therefore outline what new diplomatic initiatives he will pursue to establish a contact group?

I welcome the announcement of £120 million more for humanitarian aid, but with aid access being wielded as a weapon of war on both sides, can the Minister assure us that it will reach civilians?

Gender-based violence is a terrible feature of the war, so what steps can be taken to protect women and children? I am also deeply concerned by reports that other nations are supplying arms to the warring factions, particularly the reports that the United Arab Emirates have provided weapons to the Rapid Support Forces, which are alleged to have committed mass civilian killings and are accused by the US of genocide in Darfur. Will the Minister outline what steps he has taken to stop the flow of arms to ensure that British exports are not used in Sudan?

**Mr Falconer:** The shadow Foreign Secretary also raised those questions. I am happy to write to the House with further details about aid delivery, both in relation to the £120 million in further funding and the concerning reports over recent days about restrictions in aid access, particularly in Darfur. Once the situation becomes clearer, I am happy to provide a full update to all parties on the practical questions about aid delivery.

The hon. Lady asks about the practical successes of the conference and what is next on the diplomatic front. The statement from the co-chairs, which include not just the UK, but the African Union, the EU and others, attempted to capture what was an important and frank set of discussions over the course of the day, and set out five principles. It went further than any other recent statement, calling for a ceasefire, rejecting external interference, opposing parallel governance and supporting a transition to civilian-led Governments. My Foreign Office officials have been talking to all parties with an interest in Sudan, including the two belligerents, to make it clear that the statement is the strong view of the international community and that we expect to see it put in place.

It is true, as the two most recent questions have set out, that we were not able to secure a contact group at the conference. I would not want the House to think that, as frank and behind closed doors as it was, the conference was therefore a failure. The fact that this is

difficult is all the more reason why it was important for the UK to show leadership and to bring the African Union and others to the table to discuss these issues.

**Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What is happening in Sudan should shock us all. UNICEF has warned that children as young as one are being raped. More than 220 cases of child rape have been reported since 2024, so we need outrage and, more importantly, action. Can the Minister confirm how much of our aid, if any, is being spent on supporting survivors of sexual abuse and violence, and also how we are using our role as penholder on Sudan at the UN to push for action specifically on sexual violence?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend has worked extensively on these issues, and I know her commitment to them. I will write to her with a full breakdown on which part of our aid programmes are working with survivors. As I set out in answer to an earlier question, the Minister for Africa has led efforts at the Security Council on ensuring that the whole international community is focused on the atrocities that she has just described. We are also leading efforts at the Human Rights Council to establish and renew the mandate for the UN fact-finding mission, which will be crucial to supporting future accountability efforts in Sudan.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I appreciate the pressures on the Minister's officials, but does the Minister agree that this disaster playing out in Sudan is under-reported, and, therefore, may I encourage him in the future to take every opportunity to come to the House voluntarily with statements, rather than rely on urgent questions, to give him the opportunity, which he has quite rightly taken today, to spell out where we are in this awful situation?

**Mr Falconer:** I am always happy to come to the House, but let me just clarify that I am not the Minister with policy responsibility for Sudan; that belongs to the Minister for Africa in the Lords. Since taking office, the Foreign Secretary has shown strong personal commitment to this conflict. He is intensely aware of the many conflicts in the world, but appreciates that this is the one that is causing the greatest humanitarian disaster. There is a danger of appearing to create a hierarchy of conflict, and the Foreign Secretary is personally committed to ensuring that that is not the case, and that is why he took the leadership that he did last week.

**Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): Sudan is the world's biggest humanitarian crisis, and we know that there has been a particular toll on women and girls, as other Members have mentioned. Some 80% of hospitals in conflict-affected areas are not functioning, and maternal deaths have spiked, so can the Minister say little bit more about how aid will support hospitals in the region?

**Mr Falconer:** I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. As I have said in previous answers, we are very focused on the fate of women and girls in Sudan. We have been working through the United Nations and with the emergency relief co-ordinator to ensure that the necessary aid is in place, whether that is for the function of hospitals, to support survivors or to protect

the mechanisms to prevent civilian suffering. I will update the House once the position is clearer, given the events of the last few days.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing this urgent question and laying out the unimaginable horror of what is currently happening in Sudan. There is a very real danger that the catastrophe in Sudan will spread to neighbouring countries. Since 2023, an estimated 800,000 Sudanese refugees have fled to Chad, which is already one of the poorest countries in the world and ranked No. 1 in the list of countries at risk of genocide. What assessment has been made of the impact of overseas aid cuts to the likelihood of genocide occurring in Chad, and what are the Government doing proactively to prevent a genocide in Chad?

**Mr Falconer:** The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. Since the conflict began, 3.6 million refugees have fled to neighbouring countries. That of course includes Chad, but also Egypt, South Sudan, Uganda and the Central African Republic. Many of these countries I know well, and I served in South Sudan for the Department for International Development for two years. These are countries with delicate political balances and that have seen recent incidences of severe conflict. What happens in Sudan makes a difference to neighbouring countries. I do not think that what is centrally at issue here is UK aid to Chad. What is centrally at issue is violent displacement from Sudan, and we will remain focused on those questions.

**Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): I commend the Foreign Secretary for co-hosting the conference and for giving this situation the political and diplomatic attention that it warrants. The crisis in Sudan is awful. The UN has warned that

“never in modern history have so many people faced starvation and famine as in Sudan today”.

The UN puts that down to the deliberate starvation tactics by the RSF and the SAF. Can the Minister outline what further measures the Government are taking to end the deliberate obstruction of food aid by the warring parties?

**Mr Falconer:** The UK condemns the growing body of evidence of serious atrocities being committed against civilians in Sudan. The escalation of violence, killing of civilians, sexual assault of women and restriction of humanitarian access must end. That is why in January the Foreign Secretary visited the Sudan-Chad border and raised awareness of the conflict. It is why we hosted the conference last week and are in regular touch with both the parties themselves and all those with influence, including regional players, the United Nations and major donors. We are trying to do everything we can to ensure that humanitarian access is properly restored.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Might it be expedient if we use our intelligence resources to expose and shame those who are fuelling the conflict through arming the antagonists?

**Mr Falconer:** We are clear that there should be no external interference in Sudan and that a continuation of this conflict serves no one. It is why we took the

efforts last week that we did, and we held the conference in closed-door sessions in order to allow the frankest possible exchange of views on the way ahead.

**Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The scenes from Sudan are beyond harrowing. There is brutal murder, millions at risk of starvation, and millions more have been displaced, with women and children watching their sons, fathers and husbands be brutally killed and many of those women and children being victims of the most horrendous sexual violence. In Newcastle-under-Lyme, I represent a number of people from the Sudanese community—either born in Sudan or whose parents were born in Sudan. They are watching the TV in horror, fear and sorrow. What we are doing to engage with and support the British Sudanese community here in the United Kingdom?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend speaks about the horrors for British Sudanese residents who are looking back at home and seeing such atrocious scenes. I am sure that the Minister for Africa will be happy to meet with my hon. Friend and his constituents to discuss the issue further. I have Sudanese constituents in Lincoln, and I know the horror that they feel each and every day looking at this imagery.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that religious freedom must remain a key pillar of the UK's foreign aid policy? That said, with Sudan now ranked as one of the worst countries in the world for Christian persecution according to Open Doors, will he confirm whether the protection of religious minorities will be a condition—indeed, a priority—of the distribution of foreign aid to Sudan?

**Mr Falconer:** Freedom of religious belief remains a real priority for the Government. On my way to the House, I was with our new envoy for freedom of religious belief, meeting with the Baha'i community, who have suffered in Yemen and Iran. This remains an important question for the Government, and we will remain focused on it through the envoy.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The Minister rightly condemns the violence against women and girls in Sudan. Will he update the House specifically on what assistance is being provided to the victims of female genital mutilation? Those women are literally castrated. Will he ensure that we are providing assistance to those poor women?

**Mr Falconer:** I have heard the House's interest in the fine detail of which elements of our aid programme are working with survivors, and I commit to providing that further information in due course.

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): I am deeply concerned by the ongoing conflict in Sudan and in particular the sexual violence that was brought to light so shockingly by the hon. Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald). When the Minister next engages with his counterparts in South Sudan, will he raise the case of Dr Ding Col Dau Ding? He travelled from Norfolk to South Sudan to practise medicine shortly after independence and saved many lives across east Africa in his time there. Just a year later, he was shockingly



[Steff Aquarone]

murdered, and his family—my constituents—have been fighting for justice for almost a decade. Will he meet me and the family of Dr Ding to discuss how they can finally secure justice for their beloved brother and son?

**Mr Falconer:** I am not familiar with the case. I will discuss it with the Minister for Africa and ensure that the hon. Member gets a proper response.

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing the urgent question. Despite the barbarity of Sudan, it seems to be the forgotten conflict. What steps are being taken to investigate and prevent the transfer of arms to Sudan via third countries who may have been present at the conference over the weekend and are allies of the UK?

**Mr Falconer:** We were clear in the co-chairs' statement, as we have been in many other places, that we do not want external interference in this conflict. We are taking every step we can to try to ensure that we get back to a diplomatic solution and back to a civilian transfer towards civilian rule, which is what the Sudanese so desperately need.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister clearly understands the issues and responds to our questions, so we thank him for that. Having, like others, raised the Sudanese war on numerous occasions and the acts of depravity and war crimes that have taken place over the last number of years, I and many others were disheartened to see the end to any semblance of peace talks. However, we must not lose heart and give up. The people of Sudan deserve a better chance of hope and a future without living in fear. How will the Minister facilitate further peace talks? What discussions have taken place with allies to produce a co-ordinated global effort to stop the torture, the maiming and the killing and to bring peace to all?

**Mr Falconer:** I say with regret that the two protagonists of the conflict do not appear prepared to enter into serious talks at the moment. That was why they were not invited to the conference. The conference was not an attempt to mediate a peace deal as that is not possible if neither participant is prepared to do so. We made the judgment that the conference was so important to try to cohere international support towards the next steps to try to reduce the violence. We are working with all our partners to try to do that.

## Business of the House

11.44 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell):** The business for the week commencing 28 April includes:

**MONDAY 28 APRIL**—Second Reading of the Football Governance Bill [*Lords*].

**TUESDAY 29 APRIL**—Remaining stages of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 30 APRIL**—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill, followed by motion to approve the draft Licensing Act 2003 (Victory in Europe Day Licensing Hours) Order 2025, followed by motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Crime and Policing Bill.

**THURSDAY 1 MAY**—General debate on Parkinson's Awareness Month, followed by general debate on prisoners of conscience. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the early May bank holiday at the conclusion of business on Thursday 1 May and return on Tuesday 6 May. The provisional business for the week commencing 5 May will include:

**TUESDAY 6 MAY**—General debate on the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe and victory over Japan.

**WEDNESDAY 7 MAY**—Remaining stages of the Data (Use and Access) Bill [*Lords*].

**THURSDAY 8 MAY**—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 9 MAY**—The House will not be sitting.

**Jesse Norman:** Could there be a local election coming up? I very much hope that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and everyone here had a perfectly spectacular Easter. I am sure I speak for the whole House in recording my sadness at the death of His Holiness the Pope, who was, in his work and in his life, the embodiment of faith, hope and charity.

If I may, I would like to start with something small but important. My hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) recently asked the Secretary of State for Education, in a written parliamentary question, whether she had visited any private schools since July last year. The junior Education Minister, the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), replied that

"the Secretary of State for Education and the wider ministerial team visit a wide variety of education settings, including private schools. The Secretary of State for Education prioritises visits to our state schools, which serve 93% of pupils in England."

All that is no doubt true but it is not an answer to the question that was put. All ministerial visits are logged by the Department, so it would have been and remains easy to compile the numbers. The Leader of the House has made clear on many occasions her commitment and belief that Members of this House should receive proper answers to their questions. Will she take up the matter with the Secretary of State for Education and see that a proper answer is given?



A few weeks ago I talked about how the Prime Minister was steadily being mugged by reality, and we have seen this again in the last few days with the Government's U-turn on the ban on sourcing photovoltaic cells built with slave labour in China. The same can be said for the Government's energy policy as a whole. It is important to put before the House the fact that Labour's 2024 manifesto promised to cut bills, boost energy security and create cheaper, zero-carbon electricity by 2030, accelerating to net zero by 2050. It tried to allay public concerns by promising

"a phased and responsible transition in the North Sea that recognises...the ongoing role of oil and gas in our energy mix."

Nine months on, we can see how that is going. The Government have already had to U-turn on their infeasible commitment to zero carbon electricity by 2030. Most recently, the situation with British Steel in Scunthorpe has underlined the deeper incoherence of their overall approach. By banning new oil and gas licences and preventing new exploration, the Government are committing the UK to greater dependency on imported oil and gas at higher cost, with higher emissions and under less democratic control. In so doing, they are not advancing environmental justice or economic resilience; they are accelerating a decline in energy sovereignty that will leave this country more polluting, less secure and, ultimately, poorer.

If we do not produce our own oil and gas, we will have to buy it. The difference is that it will come from overseas, and imported energy is not only more expensive but has a far higher carbon footprint. I remind the House that, for example, importing liquefied natural gas involves cooling gas to 160° below zero, shipping it thousands of miles from Qatar and regasifying it at a port in this country. The net emissions are up to four times higher than those from North sea gas. Crucially, UK territorial emissions go down, but overall emissions, including imports, are higher than they would be. This is not an honest policy.

Labour's manifesto talked about the importance of energy security, but refusing to allow new exploration does not reduce our vulnerability; it increases it. Energy, after all, is national security. It is industrial strategy. It is heating our houses and fuelling our cars. The idea that a major economy should voluntarily give up control of its energy supply before alternatives are well advanced is not progressive—it is reckless.

The problem goes somewhat wider. The Government talk about a green industrial revolution, but the more expensive imported energy we have, the harder that will be to achieve. Not just steel but chemicals, ceramics and fertilisers all require large amounts of gas and will do for years to come. If energy is unreliable or unaffordable, those industries will continue to struggle whatever the fond imaginings of the Secretary of State. Worse still, the Government's policy will squander capital and skills that might have gone into safely managing the UK's remaining hydrocarbon assets. The extra revenues that would have helped fund the transition will now be lost to the many other countries that welcome such investment, while the Government turn their back on a sector that still employs 200,000 people and contributes billions in tax revenue.

I ask the Leader of the House whether she shares my view that we badly need some common sense here. We all want an effective and just energy transition, but that starts with one principle: control what we can and use

our own resources responsibly and transparently while building the clean energy system of the future. Instead, the Government have chosen a path that will increase emissions, raise costs, weaken the economy and tie Britain's future to foreign powers and volatile markets. That is not leadership; that is an abdication.

**Lucy Powell:** I am sure the thoughts of the whole House will be with Catholics in this country and around the world as they grieve Pope Francis. As the shadow Leader of the House said, Pope Francis embodied the very best of us with his deep faith and commitment to the poorest, the weakest and those dealing with conflict and destitution. I once again put on the record my thanks to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to Mr Speaker and to all the House staff for the professional and speedy way they recalled Parliament for us over the Easter recess. They have dedication and professionalism at their core.

I take this opportunity, which I do not think has been done yet in the House, to pay tribute to Rory McIlroy on finally getting one of the greatest sporting achievements—the golf grand slam—and being the first European to do so. The resilience and mental strength he showed was unbelievable, and he was a role model of great sportsmanship. I also wish good luck to all those taking part in the London marathon this weekend.

The shadow Leader of the House raises a number of points about the Government's energy and climate change strategy, but he misunderstands the economics of the situation. The way we will get energy security and lower bills in the future and over the long term is by having our own energy security and our own clean energy supplies. We have to get ourselves off fossil fuels because to get that energy security, we have to become a price maker, not a price taker. Home-grown energy is the only way we will get control over our prices and get off the fossil fuel roller coaster. As a country, we have great assets: we are an island nation with an ability to generate offshore and onshore wind, tidal and nuclear energy.

This Government have wasted no time. We have lifted the ban on onshore wind. We have established Great British Energy. We have approved nearly 3GW of solar, delivered a record-breaking renewables auction, kick-started carbon capture and got the nuclear planning reforms under way. That is how this country will bring down energy bills and get the energy security we need. We have to get ourselves off the fossil fuel rollercoaster. The shadow Leader of the House needs to look at the economics of the situation.

I notice that the Chamber is very busy today—unlike many Members—as we look forward to the local elections. The shadow Leader of the House did not want to use this opportunity to make his party's pitch for the forthcoming local elections, perhaps because the Conservatives are not quite sure what their pitch is. People have not forgotten the chaos and decline that his party left this country in after 14 years of failure and sleaze.

The Labour party is putting money in people's pockets with our boost to the living wage, with wages rising faster than prices; we are fixing the NHS, with waiting lists down for six months in a row and cut by 220,000 since July; our new free breakfast clubs will give kids the start to life that they need; we are taking back control of our trains and buses; and, as I saw at the weekend, we are taking swift action to tackle crime and antisocial

[Lucy Powell]

behaviour by seizing and crushing off-road bikes, which I did myself. That is the difference that Labour makes in power.

I am still not quite sure what the Conservative party's strategy is at the elections. Perhaps the shadow Leader of the House would like to enlighten us. Is it what has been proposed by the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), in the form of an alliance with Reform? If that is not their strategy, why has he not been sacked? The Leader of the Opposition used her flagship election interview on the "Today" programme this week to tell us of her one big achievement: Tory party unity. I nearly spat out my tea! Tory Members can barely muster a cheer for her at Prime Minister's questions, and the shadow Justice Secretary is in open leadership campaign mode.

In fact, this week I have seen a letter that the shadow Justice Secretary sent to all Conservative local election candidates with his clear leadership pitch and the offer of "lunch with Robert". By the way, it was all on House of Commons-headed paper, Madam Deputy Speaker, which is highly questionable. It is blatant manoeuvring, and a strong leader would have sacked him by now. Is it not the truth that, at the elections next week, a vote for the Conservatives is a vote for Reform, and a vote for Reform is a vote for the Conservatives?

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): We have been dealing this week with the sad passing of Pope Francis. I was also deeply saddened by the shocking, cowardly and deadly terrorist attack on innocent tourists in Jammu and Kashmir. The victims and their families are very much in my prayers. I sincerely hope that the perpetrators are swiftly brought to justice. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House take this opportunity to convey this Parliament's heartfelt condolences to the Indian people and to condemn that callous attack?

**Lucy Powell:** That horrific terrorist attack in Kashmir was utterly devastating and, as my hon. Friend says, a cowardly act. My thoughts and those of the whole Government are with the affected, especially those who have lost loved ones.

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) was denied entry to Hong Kong while making a private trip to see her son and meet her three-month-old grandson for the very first time. She was given no reason by the local authorities as to why she was refused, so it seems reasonable to assume that her only crime was being a British parliamentarian. She tells me that going all that way only to be bundled on to the next flight home with no explanation was a big shock, and that she was close to tears. Her son was waiting for her and her husband just a short distance away in the arrivals lounge, but she never saw him.

This is extremely worrying and has far-reaching and concerning implications. To be clear, my hon. Friend had not been made aware that she would not be welcome in Hong Kong, and it was a purely private visit. The Liberal Democrats are concerned that this could have a chilling effect on all parliamentarians who speak up for freedom and democracy. We cannot and must not

accept our democracy being undermined by allowing the intimidation of UK parliamentarians. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on how the Government intend to engage in a clear-eyed manner with authoritarian countries that appear to be creating hidden blacklists of British parliamentarians?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the hon. Member for raising this matter on the Floor of the House, because I know that it is of deep concern to all Members. I know the hon. Member for Bath well—I have known her for a number of years, and I enjoyed our exchanges when she was the hon. Lady's predecessor—and I was shocked and deeply saddened to hear of this incident. She must be so upset not to have had the opportunity to meet her grandson, having been denied entry to Hong Kong in this way.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) is right to say that it is unacceptable for a Member of Parliament to be denied entry to another country simply for being a Member of Parliament, albeit on a private visit in this case. The Government have relayed our deep concerns over this incident to the Hong Kong and Chinese authorities, and we will continue to press these issues with them over the coming months. She is right to say that our democracy and our ability as Members of Parliament to speak freely in this place, and to not have that jeopardised when we travel abroad, is fundamental to what the House of Commons is all about.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I recently visited a great regional organisation, North East Youth, in my constituency and met members of the Peer Action Collective, an inspiring group of young people working to prevent violence within the education system. Lucy, Penny and Dan delivered a compelling presentation on the need for clearer communication and better listening to young people in schools. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can implement more effective ways of understanding the causes of youth violence and disruptive behaviour and supporting young people before an escalation to violence?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Lucy, Penny and Dan, and all those involved in the Peer Action Collective, which sounds like a very good initiative. The Government take youth violence incredibly seriously. We have established the Young Futures programme, and we want to bring all those partners together to take these issues forward. It would make a very good topic for a debate.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I join the shadow Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), and the Leader of the House in expressing condolences to Catholics all over the world on the death of the Pope. His leadership of the Church will be sadly missed.

In terms of the business, I commend the Clerks who support our Committee on the work they have been doing to try to get colleagues to agree to having a debate next Thursday.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): Good luck!

**Bob Blackman:** We managed to achieve it, thank goodness. May I ask colleagues who have made applications and are on our waiting list to respond speedily once they have been offered a date?

The business on Thursday 8 May will include a debate on St George's day, which should have been held today, but for the fact that Government business takes precedence. On Thursday 15 May there will be a debate in the Chamber on solar farms. Next Tuesday there will be a debate in Westminster Hall on compensation for criminal injuries. We are not proposing to have debates in Westminster Hall next Thursday because it is the day of local elections. On Tuesday 6 May there will be a debate on parking regulation, and I remind the House that it will take place at 11.30 am, because we will be on Monday hours. There will be further debates in Westminster Hall.

On Tuesday we saw the systematic murder of Hindu pilgrims in Pahalgam in India. The sad reality is that the terrorist group thought to be responsible for this, Lashkar-e-Taiba, is a Pakistani organisation that deliberately targets innocent people in Jammu and Kashmir. Already the Indian Government have revoked visas, closed the border and expelled officials from Pakistan as a result. Probably most importantly, they have suspended the Indus waters treaty. We need the Foreign Secretary to make a statement to the House on what could end up being a quickly escalating situation between India and Pakistan.

Tonight there will be a vigil outside the Indian high commission. I will be representing the Opposition, and I understand that there will be representatives of the Government as well. We must give our reassurance and support to the Government of India in ensuring that they apprehend these terrorists and that those responsible for supporting them are also brought to justice. My understanding is that the Pakistani Government and the Pakistani military have condoned these attacks. I am sure the Leader of the House will join me in condemning these terrorist atrocities and will agree on the need to ensure that people who visit Jammu and Kashmir are held safely and do not have to suffer such incidents yet again.

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for letting us know about future debates. Like him, I anticipate that next Thursday will not be as popular as today seems to be, for obvious reasons. I absolutely join him in condemning the terrorist attack in Kashmir. This country always stands shoulder to shoulder with other countries—in this case India—that suffer these horrific terrorist attacks, which are cowardly acts that we resolutely condemn. Conversations are ongoing, as he will know, to provide the support that we can, and we will also provide that support to any British nationals affected. I thank him for raising this important matter.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Members will see that there is a lot of interest in business questions today—about 80 wish to speak. I therefore ask any Members who have a long question to rewrite it. It should be no longer than two or three sentences.

**David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The good people of Kidsgrove were promised significant improvements to their town as part of the Kidsgrove

town deal. However, Simon Tagg, the Conservative leader of Newcastle-under-Lyme borough council, alongside the former Conservative Member of Parliament, over-promised and under-delivered. They knew they did not have the funds available. They should now say sorry to the people of Kidsgrove. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on openness and transparency in public funding?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for once again raising this important matter with me. He is a strong advocate for Kidsgrove and his constituents. I am really sorry to hear about the frustrations with the town deal. He is absolutely right that things were over-promised and under-delivered, and that is why the people of his constituency rejected the Conservative party at the last election.

**Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Last month's fire at Cirencester is at least the third at a battery energy storage system already this year and residents are understandably worried when they are constructed near to their homes, yet Labour's planning reforms will make building them in villages such as Lower Penn, Swindon and Wombourne in my constituency even easier. May we have a debate in Government time on the safety of battery energy storage systems, on planning regulations and on how we can ensure that local communities have proper oversight and a real say?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear about the fire in Cirencester. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to get the balance right by ensuring that such facilities are safe and are safely operated while at the same time ensuring that we have the infrastructure that we need, and not just today but in future, for battery storage and other clean energy supplies. We are taking steps to ensure that local communities are consulted on these matters and that they benefit from these facilities when they come to their local area, but we make no apology for saying that we have to sprint towards that clean energy superpower that we need to be.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): Next week marks the beginning of Coeliac Awareness Month, a time dedicated to raising awareness about coeliac disease, a serious autoimmune disease for which the only treatment is a strict gluten-free diet for life—it is not a fad. While coeliac disease affects one in 100 people in the UK, just 36% are medically diagnosed, leaving an estimated half a million people potentially facing debilitating symptoms yet being in the dark as to their cause. So will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to mark this important month and to help raise important awareness of this terrible disease?

**Lucy Powell:** Coeliac Awareness Month is an important time and I commend my hon. Friend for raising this issue in the House. She is right that we need to do more to raise awareness of that debilitating disease, especially in relation to treatment and access to affordable gluten-free food, and that would make a good topic for a debate.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The Leader of the House will probably know that last night, elsewhere in this House, the campaign to return



[Sir Roger Gale]

Ukraine's stolen children was launched, with cross-party support and a very large number of people present. Some 20,000 Ukrainian children have been abducted and taken to the neo-Soviet Union. That is a war crime, as was the bombing of Kyiv and Kharkiv last night, and Putin is a war criminal. Will the Leader of the House consult the Leader of the House of Lords and try to ensure that no person who supports President Putin, however grand, is given a platform that would enable them to address these Houses of Parliament?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of the stolen children of Ukraine and the event to launch that campaign in the House yesterday. There has just been an urgent question about this matter. The Minister of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), was very clear about our unwavering support for Ukraine and our condemnation of the continued actions of Russia and Putin, especially overnight but also over a long period of time. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine. We are establishing the coalition of the willing to support what Ukraine wants going forward. The only country that is stopping peace is Russia, under Vladimir Putin, who could stop this war tomorrow if he chose to do so. I am sure that we will continue to discuss these issues.

**Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I am proud to be the MP for Crystal Palace. On Saturday, many of my constituents will travel to Wembley to see Crystal Palace take on Aston Villa in the FA cup semi-final. A win will see Crystal Palace continue their quest for their first major trophy since the 1991 Zenith Data Systems cup. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing Crystal Palace football club good luck for the weekend?

**Lucy Powell:** I am often invited to support other football clubs, but my husband is an Aston Villa fan and, obviously, I am a Manchester City fan, so we have a lot of other stakes in the FA cup semi-finals this weekend. However, I am happy to join my hon. Friend in wishing Crystal Palace the very best of luck on Saturday.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): There are proposals by Scottish Borders council to close a number of local nurseries, including those at Channelkirk, Yetholm, Glendinning, Westruther, Ednam, Cockburnspath and Fountainhall. There is strong local opposition to those plans. Local nurseries are vital to rural communities such as mine, and keeping them open ensures that we can attract and retain young families in the Scottish Borders. Does the Leader of the House agree that nurseries throughout the United Kingdom should be protected, and will she allow time for a debate to discuss the importance of nursery provision in rural communities?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear about that and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Scottish Government should be prioritising nursery provision and ensuring that people in rural constituencies such as his have access to that vital provision. He will know that, as the consequence of the Budget, the Scottish

Government received a boon of over 20% more per person than the rest of the UK, so they have no excuses for the actions they are taking.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am sure that everyone in the House is concerned about the use of public money. In my constituency, a council is employing leaf blowers to blow leaves around a redundant car park, and a county council has spent £11 million on levelling a field for a school playing field and £16 million on a bridge to nowhere, so may we have a debate on how we can better scrutinise the use of public money in local government?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend raises a really important matter. Local people want to know that their council tax is going towards the services that they want to see in their communities. Nothing frustrates our constituents more than seeing things in their area and their community that they perceive to be, frankly, a waste of money. This Government are committed to bringing more accountability and audit into local government, and we will bring forward legislation on that soon.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Just over three weeks ago, the Minister for children and families had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to the Dispatch Box to be forced into extending the adoption and special guardianship support fund, which had expired the previous day, leaving thousands of vulnerable children and their adoptive parents and kinship carers in limbo. Not once during that 45 minute urgent question did she say, when she triumphantly announced £50 million extra to continue the fund, that the individual support grants were about to be cut by 40%. That information was snuck out in a private letter last week, during recess, to local authorities and charities. Will the Leader of the House demand that the Education Secretary comes to the House, makes a statement, and takes questions from hon. Members who feel that they were, I am sure inadvertently, misled by the children's Minister that day, so that we can understand the impact on some of the most vulnerable children in our society?

**Lucy Powell:** I know that this is a matter of deep concern to many Members across the House, and I commend the hon. Lady for continuing to raise the issue, which also affects a number of my constituents. The Government have ensured that we have the £50 million arrangement for this year, but she will recognise that the increased demand on the adoption system, which is a good thing, means that we have had to make money from the fund go a bit further for many families. However, I hear what she says about the Government's accountability. There was a written ministerial statement on the subject on Tuesday, but I will ensure that she and other hon. Members are able to question and speak to the Ministers, as appropriate.

**Paula Barker** (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): Dozens of families across Merseyside, including my constituents Gemma and Paul Lucas, have been left financially and emotionally devastated by the actions of a home improvement company, Celsius Home Improvements Ltd, and its director Frank Deary. Customers had to pay 60% of costs up front to Mr Deary, but have been left with homes that are uninhabitable and, in some



cases, dangerous. The *Liverpool Echo* has reported that it has seen documents showing that Mr Deary's companies were providing quotes post 2022 with Celsius branding, but were trading as Clearmetric Ltd. A winding-up order was made against Clearmetric Ltd in the Manchester district registry on 7 January this year, more than three years after Celsius Home Improvements was dissolved in February 2022. What can the Government do to prevent individuals like Mr Deary and his associate Liam McGrath from liquidating one company, which owes more than £1 million to customers, and going on to scam others by setting up other companies, one of which I am led to believe is called Merseyside Construction Ltd? Most importantly, what can be done to get justice and a full refund for my constituents Gemma and Paul?

**Lucy Powell:** I am really sorry to hear about this troubling case. My hon. Friend has used her voice and her platform as a Member of Parliament to raise some very serious issues, and I commend her for that. Phoenixing, whereby directors dissolve a company to avoid debts, only to set up a new one, is wrong. We are committed to stamping the practice out, and Companies House now has greater powers to do that. My hon. Friend is right that people like her constituents need greater recourse when services and products go wrong or are not delivered and they cannot get the accountability that they need.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. I want to get as many people in as possible, so please keep questions short.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Unitary council elections, county council elections and mayoral races are taking up a lot of the headlines at the moment, but in local government, there is an often regrettably forgotten subset of incredibly hard-working people who offer to serve on parish and town councils—people like Nic Brown, who, after 25 years, is standing down from Chearsley parish council in my village. The amount of work that people put in for no remuneration, just for love of a place, is extraordinary. In a lot of parish and town councils in my constituency, not only are the elections uncontested, but there will still be vacancies after next Thursday. Can we have a debate in Government time to thank everyone who puts themselves forward to serve on a town or parish council, and to discuss how we can encourage more people to come forward to serve their community through those councils?

**Lucy Powell:** I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to all those who serve on our town and parish councils—often, as he says, for little reward, in one sense. Our communities need them, and they are vital. As he will know, we are bringing forward changes to local government, because we want to ensure that people can represent their area and deliver the kind of change and services that people want. That is why we have the devolution Bill coming forward.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Tomorrow, we would have been debating the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill. However, we have not seen the impact assessment, which I understand has been prepared but not published. Many of us have serious concerns

about the safety of the legislation. Significant advance notice of what is in the impact assessment is really important for us, so that we can scrutinise it. Will the Leader of the House say when the impact assessment will be published? Now that it has been prepared, will she ensure that we can see it immediately, and that it is not withheld?

**Lucy Powell:** I reassure my hon. Friend that the impact assessment is absolutely not being withheld. I have been asked about this a number of times, and I made it clear on previous occasions that given the number of amendments to the Bill, the impact assessment would take some time. I am glad that in order to allow that time, the promoter of the Bill moved the date for its next stage to 16 May. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that the impact assessment is published imminently, long before 16 May, so that people can consider the issues in it.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Businesses across my constituency, the wider west of England and south Wales were given a rather glum Easter present in the news that heavy goods vehicles will be banned from the M48 Severn bridge from the end of May. That will lead to expensive and environmentally damaging diversions, and one local haulier called it a “hammerblow”. National Highways estimates that the bridge will cost between £300 million and £600 million to fix. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Department for Transport brings forward a clear plan of action as soon as possible?

**Lucy Powell:** I will absolutely ensure that the hon. Lady gets a full ministerial reply about why that has happened, and when those repairs will be done, so that HGVs can get back on to the bridge as soon as possible for her constituents.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House to join me in supporting the Football Governance Bill, which will have its Second Reading on Monday? I appreciate that she does not support Reading football club, but will she also offer her support to its fans at this very difficult time, as we wait to hear the outcome of the ongoing negotiations?

**Lucy Powell:** Absolutely. I am delighted that the Football Governance Bill will receive its Second Reading in this House next week; it is an incredibly popular piece of legislation among the many Members from across the House who, like my hon. Friend, have a club in their constituency. The Bill seeks to ensure that fans and communities are put at the heart of our football governance, and that protections are in place against rogue owners and those who do not have the financial means to support their clubs properly.

**Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): May I associate myself with the comments about the passing of Pope Francis? As a Catholic, I very much appreciate them, and I wish the best to the conclave in selecting our new Pope. As was mentioned earlier, if the current trend continues, more than 1.5% of my constituency will be covered in solar farms. One of my main concerns is about the use of battery energy storage systems, which my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) mentioned. Green

[Sarah Bool]

Hill solar farm in my constituency will have a very large one. They pose a huge risk of fire. Those fires release toxic fumes, and putting them out pollutes the waters and takes days—if the solar panels can ever be put out. I know that there may be a debate on the issue, but I also ask the Leader of the House to speak to the Secretary of State about the severe risks posed by BESS, because applications are being pushed through that create serious risks for our communities.

**Lucy Powell:** As I said in answer to a previous question on this issue, we need to get the balance right: we need to ensure that these facilities are safe for local communities, and that the risk of fires is mitigated as far as possible, while also getting much-needed infrastructure for battery energy storage, which is absolutely critical to the future of our energy security and our economy. I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets a ministerial update on those matters.

**Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): The new traffic calming scheme in Bierton has been causing chaos, noise pollution and danger in my constituency. Almost 2,000 people have signed Matthew Grolimund's petition calling for an urgent review of the chosen layout. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging Buckinghamshire council to plan its road building and roadworks better, and will she reaffirm this Government's commitment to improving our road infrastructure?

**Lucy Powell:** Poorly planned and delivered roadworks are of great frustration to my hon. Friend's constituents, and to the constituents of Members from across the House. I join her in urging her local council to ensure that the roadworks do not cause the level of disruption that she describes, and this Government are committed to ensuring that.

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): Families in Holt have been promised for years a new primary school to replace the current building, which is too old and too small to cater for this growing market town. However, the Conservative-led county council has broken promises and dithered and delayed, pointing to minor fluctuations in the birth rate as a pathetic cop-out. Will the Leader of the House consider scheduling a debate on investment in our primary schools? Also, how this decision reached? Will she facilitate a meeting with the relevant Minister to ensure that parents, pupils and staff in Holt get the new school that they need?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear of the dither and delay in getting the school in Holt that the hon. Gentleman's constituents have long been promised. As he knows, the provision of places is a matter for local authorities. They have been given the funding to provide places where they are needed, so the local authority really has no excuse but to get on and provide the school.

**Naushabah Khan** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): I recently visited the hygiene bank in Medway in my constituency. Its volunteers provide essential hygiene products to people who need them, restoring their dignity and confidence. Given that 4.2 million adults in the UK live in hygiene poverty, will the Leader of the

House consider a debate on how we tackle this issue, and specifically on removing the 20% VAT on soap by reclassifying it as an essential hygiene item?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight hygiene poverty, which is a real issue for many in this country. Tackling poverty in all its forms is a priority for this Government. I am sure that she would not expect me to make decisions on or talk about future levels of VAT, but this is a really excellent campaign that I think will get wide support from across the House, if she wants to take it further.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Yesterday, like many Members across the House, I attended the event staged by the MS Society in Portcullis House. I was given a handout that said that an estimated 3,770 people in my constituency suffer from multiple sclerosis. I have met a number of them and their support groups over the years, but that number is surprising. It is estimated that each year, another 179 will be added to that number. Next week is MS Awareness Week, so it would be an appropriate time for a ministerial statement on that subject, and I hope that the Leader of the House will oblige me with that.

**Lucy Powell:** I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for all the work he has done in supporting steel and British Steel in his constituency, and for his attendance at the recall. He makes a really good point about MS Awareness Week and the real challenges faced by people living with chronic diseases. Given that it will be MS Awareness Week, I will certainly bear in mind his request for a statement.

**Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): To get to school, William Cartwright, who is in year 6 at Thorn primary school in Bacup, has to cross the very busy Burnley Road at a point where there is no lollipop service, 20 mph zone or zebra crossing. That is his daily experience. He said:

"Cars travel very fast. We often run across the road, and I've nearly been hit several times."

William has launched a petition calling for Lancashire county council to install a safe crossing. He says:

"We should not have to wait for an accident to happen before something is done."

I could tell a similar story about the safety of roads around almost every other primary school in Rossendale and Darwen. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating William on his initiative? Given how oversubscribed Westminster Hall and Adjournment debates on this subject have been, will she agree to a debate in Government time?

**Lucy Powell:** I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating William on highlighting the issues of road safety in Bacup and across Rossendale and Darwen. He is absolutely right: road safety matters attract a great deal of interest in this House. We will soon deliver an updated strategic framework for road safety. I will ensure that that is brought to this House, and I will consider his request for a debate.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Some 77% of LGBTQ+ millennials are considering starting a family, but only three out of 42 integrated care boards

in England give female same-sex couples access to fertility funding. Others ask for six to 12 rounds of self-funded treatment before funding is considered. As we celebrate Lesbian Visibility Week, could we have a debate in Government time about the discrimination that same-sex couples face when accessing fertility treatment?

**Lucy Powell:** I join the hon. Lady in supporting Lesbian Visibility Week, and she raises a really important matter. We should be supporting all couples of whatever kind who want to start a family, with all the joy that that brings and all the support that those families can bring to the babies and so on. I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets a full ministerial reply, but I am sorry to hear about the postcode lottery she has described.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Last week, I co-hosted a youth engagement workshop at the brilliant Tokko youth hub in my constituency to help inform our Government's national youth strategy. Young people from a range of organisations, including Luton's children in care council, CHUMS, the Centre for Youth and Community Development, Luton Roma Trust and Luton Youth Council—to name but a few—all gave excellent feedback. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is vital to recognise a wide range of young people's voices in developing strategies that affect their futures, in order to break down barriers to opportunity for all?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for facilitating that workshop. She is absolutely right; we want to co-produce the national youth strategy, and conversations and workshops like the one she has described—which are part of what I think is the biggest conversation ever with young people—are critical to ensuring that we design the services and support that young people want.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): I know that like me, the Leader of the House will be a massive fan of acrobatic gymnastics, so she will be aware that over the Easter break, Team GB went over to Luxembourg to compete with 22 other nations. What she might not be aware of is the outstanding contribution made by Spelthorne Gymnastics in bringing home five gold medals and three silver medals from the European championships. Will she join me and Members from across the House in congratulating Team GB and Spelthorne Gymnastics on this outstanding effort?

**Lucy Powell:** I thought the hon. Gentleman was going to ask me to perform a somersault—we will save that for later, maybe. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I was thinking more of the political variety—if you don't mind! I absolutely join the hon. Member in congratulating Spelthorne Gymnastics on their fantastic achievement of five golds and three silvers in GB acrobatic gymnastics.

**Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): On a recent visit with the courts Minister, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), to Shropshire's justice centre, I was reminded about the dedication of our magistrates. Can we have a debate in Government time about the importance of magistrates in the justice system? Since the 12th century, magistrates have played a critical role in delivering local justice, and now do so as volunteers, many with decades of service.

Currently, there is not a long service medal award; does the Leader of the House agree that there really ought to be?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in thanking all the magistrates—as he says, they are volunteers, and they are the backbone of our justice system in this country. I think the issue he has highlighted is one that would gather a great deal of momentum and support, and I implore him to continue campaigning for it.

**Shokat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): If the Leader of the House will indulge me, I would like to quote somebody who I suspect has read more books than I have: Albert Einstein. He said,

"The only thing that you absolutely have to know, is the location of the library."

Libraries are more than just a place of knowledge—they are the lifeblood of local communities, bringing people of all backgrounds together. However, in Leicester, the Labour mayor is looking to slash library services in some of the most economically deprived areas of my great city, and I know the same will be happening in other constituencies up and down the country. Cutting our library services disproportionately affects the most vulnerable in our society, so will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in which we can praise our public libraries and the work of our wonderful librarians across the country, and urge the Government to give more support to local authorities to protect those crucial services?

**Lucy Powell:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Libraries are long-standing services in many of our communities, and they provide a great service to local people. They do not only provide access to books; these days, they provide access to services, the internet and all sorts of other things, to ensure that people have the knowledge and access they need. I am sorry to hear of the plans in Leicester, which I will look into for the hon. Gentleman, but we have given local areas a record settlement in the local government budget, which I hope means that they can keep their libraries open.

**Jo White** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Last week, I visited Papa's fish and chip restaurant in Worksop, where I met the owner, Nick. He told me about his reconnect campaign, which encourages people to come off their screens and spend time in good company over a first-class plate of fish and chips. He also showed me the safe space he has created for SEND families. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Nick for running such a thoughtful and caring campaign?

**Lucy Powell:** Papa's fish and chip shop in my hon. Friend's constituency sounds like a great place to go and reconnect by putting away our phones and having a great plate of fish and chips. Perhaps I will join her there some time soon.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Recently, the Bank of Scotland announced the closure of all five of its branches in my constituency. As part of the follow-through, the organisation Link makes an assessment of access to cash, and in particular whether a free-to-use cash machine should be provided. However, it is bound by very strict criteria,



[David Mundell]

meaning that it has to take into account other cash machines—cash machines that might not be available 24/7, might not have disabled access, and might not be stocked up with cash on a regular basis. Will the Leader of the House ask Treasury colleagues to review those criteria to make absolutely sure that people have access to cash machines?

**Lucy Powell:** Access to cash in communities like the right hon. Gentleman's is an issue that gets raised with me pretty much every week in this House. I will certainly make sure that a Minister comes back to him on those criteria and whether they are appropriate now that we are seeing more and more banks withdrawing from our high streets, and whether access to cash is really viable.

**Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): My local authority, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar/Western Isles council is fast approaching its 50th anniversary. Formed in 1975, it brought together the many islands that make up Na h-Eileanan an Iar and gave the Outer Hebrides a unified identity. My father served as a councillor, and my brother currently serves; they are among many councillors and officials who have given service to the islands over the years. Our local authorities are not much loved, but by wishing Comhairle nan Eilean Siar a happy 50th anniversary, will the Leader of the House show that they are much appreciated?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Western Isles council and wishing it a happy 50th anniversary. It sounds like he comes from a great dynasty of local politicians, and here he is as a Member of Parliament, representing his home area.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House in advance for the very large number of follow-up letters she will be writing after this marathon session. I know that it is probably quite a chore, but we really appreciate that she does it so conscientiously.

In a brief exchange about NHS dentistry on 13 March, as part of the formidable campaign being waged by the National Federation of Women's Institutes on that subject, I was quite impressed when the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said that the problem requires, "not simply tinkering with the system as it is, but fundamentally rethinking it"—[*Official Report*, 13 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 1298.] I am sure he is absolutely right about that, so will the Leader of the House urge him to make a statement to the House on what progress he anticipates making on this very important issue?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for thanking me for all the letters that my brilliant civil service team support me with, getting the answers to the questions that people ask me during business questions. Making sure that Members get answers to the questions they raise is something that I take incredibly seriously.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that dentistry has been broken in this country, that access to NHS dentists is not what we would want it to be, and that more fundamental change is needed to ensure that we get more dentist appointments and look at the dental

contract—I am lobbied about this issue by my own dentist every time I go. I will ensure that the House is kept updated on progress.

**Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): Aldershot Town football club are going to Wembley. The FA trophy final on 11 May will be the first time in the club's history that the red and blue army have played under the arch, with over 17,000 fans there to spectate. That club is also the first football club in the country to achieve the armed forces covenant gold status award for the work it does in our community. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating everybody at the club on reaching this prestigious final, and for giving all of us in Aldershot something to cheer about?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Aldershot Town on reaching the FA trophy final against Spennymoor Town. What a great achievement for her local club. A lot of football clubs are being mentioned today, and I am sure she might want to raise this next week on Second Reading of the Football Governance Bill. I also join her in congratulating Aldershot Town on being the first football club to get the armed forces gold standard achievement.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Harrogate's LGBT community was appalled by homophobic comments made by Anthony Murphy, a Conservative town council candidate, who described it as a "truth" that acts of homosexuality are of "grave depravity" and "intrinsically disordered". An organisation he directs even claimed that AIDS is a disease spread by the depraved, and he called on the Church to "purge the filth". This was not a vetting failure; the local Conservative association knew and selected him anyway. It has refused to withdraw support or answer whether he is the same Anthony Murphy who was linked to organising Enoch Powell rallies. The local association has either gone rogue, or the nasty party is well and truly back as the Conservatives chase votes from Reform. I have written to the Leader of the Opposition but have had no reply. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on candidate standards and party accountability?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear of the appalling homophobic remarks being made by a councillor, and a Conservative councillor at that. The hon. Member has raised them here this morning, and I hope that those on the Conservative Front Bench have heard his question, because action needs to be taken. The Conservative party needs to show, like the rest of us, that such remarks are completely unacceptable and will not be tolerated in our democracy or any of our parties.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Stoke-on-Trent has witnessed a proliferation of houses in multiple occupation in the city in recent years, with family homes being converted with little notice given to local residents. Working with Councillors Shaun Pender, Daniela Santoro and Adrian Knapper and with Labour's Maggie Bradley, we are prosecuting a case for Stoke-on-Trent city council to adopt an article 4 direction, but this is proving more difficult than it should be. Can I encourage the Leader of the House to bring forward legislation to remove this permitted development right for everybody across the country, so that HMOs can be properly regulated and looked after in communities?



**Lucy Powell:** I know that HMOs are a big issue in my hon. Friend's constituency, in mine and in many others. The Renters' Rights Bill, which is now in the House of Lords, will take some action on regulating HMOs, but he is right that we could go further on these matters. I encourage him to continue to raise them, and I will make sure that he gets a ministerial reply.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My constituent, Paul Pearson, tragically lost his granddaughter Lauren following an accidental drug overdose. He later discovered that she had been introduced to drugs by someone at her dance school. Safeguarding concerns were not passed to the Disclosure and Barring Service. It was suggested that the individual also was not DBS-registered. When I queried that with the Home Office, it said that Home Office legislation around regulated activity only provides eligibility for checks and does not make them a requirement. I am sure that the Leader of the House shares my concerns on this. Will she ask the Government to make time for a debate on DBS and how it can be strengthened to protect children?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear of the case that the hon. Member raises. The question of whether DBS checks are wide enough, suitable and so on does get raised in the House regularly. I will ensure that she gets a ministerial reply, but she might want to apply for an Adjournment debate; I am sure that many people would attend.

**Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): It was good to meet the Safeguarding Alliance this morning about its concerns, which I share, regarding the patchwork of different Departments, bodies and regulators with responsibility for safeguarding. That allows known offenders to slip through the gaps and continue offending. An overarching safeguarding regulator could close those gaps, and with a Cabinet Office review reportedly being undertaken on quangos and arm's length bodies, will the Leader of the House arrange for Government time for MPs to be part of that? Can she advise when the Data (Use and Access) Bill, which might allow opportunities for better regulation around safeguarding data and information sharing, will be coming back to the House?

**Lucy Powell:** The Bill's Report stage is on Wednesday 7 May, so my hon. Friend may want to raise some of these issues then. Tackling safeguarding and ensuring that we have the right safeguarding is a cross-Government issue, as she will know. It covers many Departments, but we have a number of measures coming forward in various pieces of legislation, which I hope will improve the safeguarding environment. I encourage her to raise these matters during the passage of some of those Bills.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): The UK Government have a legal and moral duty to ensure that the Union succeeds. It is therefore imperative that Ministers do not go on solo runs and make unhelpful comments in the context of Northern Ireland's place in the Union, given that support for Northern Ireland remaining part of the UK has remained unchanged in generations. Will the Leader of the House therefore consider providing time for a debate on the Government's responsibility to speak with one voice and their commitment to upholding Northern Ireland's place in this Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

**Lucy Powell:** I will certainly ensure that the Minister has heard the hon. Member's question. This Government speak with one voice—we certainly try to—and I am sorry if that has not been the case in what she describes. This Government are committed to the Good Friday agreement in all its parts, and she will know that these issues are a matter for those who live in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): Residents of the Throston ward in Hartlepool, in common with communities right across the borough, tell me that they are fed up with crime and antisocial behaviour following 14 years of Tory failure that destroyed neighbourhood policing. Does the Leader of the House agree that Labour's pledge to put a named police officer in every community, as championed by our brilliant council candidate, Lyndsey Allen, is a game changer in tackling antisocial behaviour and crime in Throston, Hartlepool and the country as a whole?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in thanking Lyndsey Allen for supporting these issues. He is absolutely right that we have to put neighbourhood policing back in our communities. We are committed to get 13,000 more officers into neighbourhood policing over this Parliament, and that is what we will do. The Crime and Policing Bill is passing through Parliament, and it will give the police the powers they need to tackle antisocial behaviour.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): Just before the recess, I was unexpectedly a guest of the NHS at the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Gateshead. It was a result of my delayed cancer diagnosis 17 years ago. I sometimes get cellulitis, and it needs very urgent intravenous antibiotics. I went in on Thursday night, and my records did not catch up with me from my local hospital until Monday. Can we have a debate in Government time, so that the Secretary of State understands the urgent need to have digital records, so that our local hospitals can pass on our details to hospitals in other parts of the country in a timely fashion, allowing treatment to be undertaken quickly?

**Lucy Powell:** I was sorry to hear of the hon. Member's admission to hospital, and it is good to see him here in his place today as fit and well as ever. He is absolutely right, and people might not understand that hospitals hold individual records, and there is not a national database for data sharing across hospitals. Many people imagine it just happens, and it does not. I can assure him that the Health Secretary is committed to breaking down these barriers and making sure we have got the data sharing we need and the digital records that he describes so that people can get the appropriate treatment when they need it.

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Beira's Place is a sexual violence support service run by women, for women. It opened in 2022 in response to the need for single-sex counselling services for survivors of violence against women and girls in the Edinburgh and the Lothians area, including West Lothian, which covers a large part of my constituency. Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of single-sex counselling services for survivors of violence against

[Kirsteen Sullivan]

women and girls? Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the all-women team at Beira's for the invaluable support they provide?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of single-sex spaces and counselling when it comes to tackling violence against women and girls and dealing with the aftermath of that. She will know that the Supreme Court ruling over Easter gave greater clarity on these matters for service providers, such as those in her constituency, and she might want to raise the great work that they do at the next Women and Equalities questions on 7 May.

**Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): The former chief executive of Woking borough council, Ray Morgan OBE, has been identified in a public interest report as the chief architect in bankrupting my council, leaving it with debts of £2 billion. Does the Leader of the House agree that the very least the Government could do is remove his OBE for services to local government, and will she agree to hold a debate in this House so that we can discuss Government policy on removing honours when wrongdoing has been committed?

**Lucy Powell:** I am really sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's case. He may be aware that there is a special committee—it is not a Government committee—that looks at where there is a strong case for nominations to be removed. I urge him to contact that committee, and I will write to him with the details. He is absolutely right to say that we need to make sure that people are held accountable for their actions. Where they have received nominations, that is something that we should consider.

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Like the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), more than 3,000 people living in and around my constituency have multiple sclerosis, including Simon, who manages a full-time job only because his employer provides the flexibility that he needs to cope with this unpredictable and degenerative condition. Neurological conditions such as MS are lifelong and often invisible, and profoundly impact on people's lives. Will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate on ensuring that neurology is a clear priority in the 10-year plan for the NHS?

**Lucy Powell:** I will absolutely join my hon. Friend in highlighting MS Awareness Week, which is next week. I thank her constituent Simon and his employer for being so flexible. As she describes, living with these chronic conditions requires good employers that are flexible, as well as a range of other support services. Given that it is MS Awareness Week next week, I will make sure that the relevant Ministers report to the House on what we are doing.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Nigerian Christians are at the forefront of Christian persecution across the world. As the majority of Christians worldwide enjoyed the start of Holy Week, many in the Plateau state of Nigeria had a different experience. On Palm Sunday, an hour-long massacre occurred in Zikke village, where some 54 people were killed and 103 households destroyed.

The entire village was displaced. Eyewitnesses report military inaction, the selective disarmament of Christian youths, and violence by armed Fulani extremists. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate or a statement to ascertain what steps the UK Government will take to support the protection of Nigerian Christian communities and to address the ongoing violence?

**Lucy Powell:** As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises the important issue of freedom of religion or belief for all—in this case, in Nigeria—which we raise with the Nigerian Government on a regular basis. We need to put an end to the inter-community violence that we are seeing in Nigeria.

**Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I know the Leader of the House has a sweet tooth, so she may be disappointed that she missed out on the very first chocolate festival held by The Oxford pub in Shawclough over the Easter break. The festival was attended by 800 people, and it was held in conjunction with the chocolate maker Slattery. As well as having a great time, customers and the pub donated free Easter eggs to children in need in Rochdale. Will she join me in congratulating the McNeeney family on putting on the festival, and will she join me for a candy and a shandy in Rochdale soon?

**Lucy Powell:** I will certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating the McNeeney family on putting on the chocolate festival, which sounds like a really great event. It ensured that those who perhaps could not afford to indulge over the Easter weekend had the opportunity to do so at The Oxford pub. I gently say to him that next time he should bring us back a few chocolates, so that we can make sure that they are up to the standard that the whole House would want.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): All of us made sacrifices when Parliament was recalled to save the steel industry, and mine was missing a slice of a cake that was baked to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Balerno farmers market. I met the baker, Emma Galloway, at St Mungo's Easter service last week, and she explained to me that my slice was gone. The House can imagine how I felt. My low-calorie alternative is early-day motion 1091, on the 20th anniversary of the Balerno farmers market.

*[That this House congratulates Balerno Farmers Market on celebrating its 20th anniversary on 12 April 2025, marking two decades of consistent service to the local community and surrounding areas; recognises the market's vital contribution to promoting local food, sustainable farming and small independent producers, while strengthening the sense of community and supporting the local economy in Edinburgh South West constituency; commends the dedication of the organisers, stallholders, volunteers and community partners whose continued efforts have made the market a well-loved and successful monthly event since its founding in 2005, which helps define Balerno; acknowledges that the market has grown into a community hub, supporting not only local commerce but also arts, culture, fairtrade and environmental awareness, reflecting the values of resilience, sustainability and civic pride; and congratulates all those involved in the Balerno Farmers Market on this significant milestone, wishing it continued success in the years ahead.]*

The early-day motion highlights that the market is vibrant and defines Balerno. It supports the local economy and, through the Fairtrade group, also supports sustainable farming right across the world. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing Balerno farmers market a happy 20th birthday, and suggest that Emma bakes a slightly bigger cake next time?

**Lucy Powell:** I will absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Balerno farmers market. It sounds like the bakers produce great cakes, which are so popular that none was left for him, so next time they definitely need to make a bit more.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. We have around 15 to 20 minutes left for these questions, so please help each other out.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Labour's brill and totally committed Greater Lincolnshire mayoral candidate, Jason Stockwood? He is truly putting Lincolnshire first, having just completed his countywide cycle tour, raising over £16,000 for charities across the area—and he is the only candidate to brave Lycra in public.

**Lucy Powell:** I will absolutely join her in wishing Jason Stockwood, whom I know well, all the very best in standing to be the first Mayor of Greater Lincolnshire. He will make a fantastic Mayor for Lincolnshire, and I hope people will vote for him next week.

**Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): Fantastic local businesses, such as SugarBeat on the A140 in south Norfolk, are being hammered by drawn-out roadworks that have been signed off by Norfolk county council and carried out by EDF, with little care for the financial damage caused. Can we have a debate in Government time on holding utility companies to account when roadworks run riot?

**Lucy Powell:** There is nothing more frustrating than poorly delivered roadworks, especially roadworks that come on top of other roadworks or just after them. I think this would make a very popular topic for a debate if he were to apply for one.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Earlier this month, my hometown football club, Clydebank FC, were crowned West of Scotland premier division champions. On Saturday, they play their final home league game of the season at Holm Park, and it will be my pleasure to be there and see them lift the trophy. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all the players, the manager, the coaches, the staff and the Bankies supporters on such a wonderful and successful season? Does she wish to join me—never mind the FA cup semi-final—in West Dunbartonshire on Saturday to celebrate the Bankies winning the league?

**Lucy Powell:** I will absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Clydebank FC, known as the Bankies. What a great honour it will be for a new Member of Parliament to see their football club lifting the league

trophy at their home ground on Saturday. I am slightly otherwise engaged this weekend with my own football interests, but I look forward to seeing him with the trophy at Clydebank on social media.

**Oliver Ryan** (Burnley) (Ind): Burnley is a premier league town once more. I am sure the whole House—though perhaps not the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Hussain), who is not in his place—will join me in congratulating Alan Pace, Scott Parker, Josh Brownhill and all the lads at Burnley football club on their ascension to the premier league. They are back where they belong. Up the Claretts! Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating them?

**Lucy Powell:** We have really had a football theme today. I put on the record my congratulations to Burnley FC on getting promoted to the premier league. I look forward to Man City putting a few goals past them next season.

**Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): My constituents John and Evelyn Preston contributed to Digital's pension scheme before 1997. They expected discretionary increases to counter inflation, but since Hewlett-Packard took over in 2002, their pensions have stagnated—in some cases, people have experienced 60% losses. Thanks to the Pre-97 Alliance, we know that this issue affects hundreds of thousands of people across the UK. Will the Leader of the House find time to discuss how this injustice can be addressed?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. There is nothing worse for pension holders than seeing the value of their pension eroded because uprating is not happening in line with inflation. Pension scheme trustees have a duty to act in the best interests of their members, and I will ensure that a Minister looks into this case for her.

**Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Just this morning, my office received notice of the intent to cancel two key bus services in my constituency—the 125, which connects Castle Donington to Coalville and into Leicester city, and the 129, which connects Ashby-de-la-Zouch to Loughborough and is the only service for some of my rural villages. Will the Leader of the House join me in expressing concern about these proposed cuts, and call on Leicestershire county council to work with me and local bus companies to save these services to keep my communities connected?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear that Leicestershire county council is cutting vital bus services in my hon. Friend's constituency. We have confirmed over £1 billion extra for local bus services such as those she describes, and we are bringing forward—in fact, it is passing through Parliament at the moment—the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, which will give local communities much more say on bus services in their area.

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): On 16 April 1850, the Cumberland Co-operative Land and Benefit building society first opened its doors. The Cumberland, which is headquartered in my Carlisle constituency, is celebrating 175 years of serving my constituency and the wider area. Will the Leader of the House please join me in



[*Ms Julie Minns*]

wishing the Cumberland building society a happy birthday and thanking it for the part it is playing in supporting Labour's pledge to build 1.5 million new houses?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Cumberland building society on its 175 years—what a remarkable achievement—and on all the work it is doing in supporting house building and homeowners in her constituency and beyond.

**Mr Connor Rand** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): Bar Etna, a fantastic family-friendly restaurant in Altrincham, has suffered to the tune of thousands of pounds from a business rates scam. Thankfully, the licences of the fraudsters were suspended, but they have since changed their company name and are back scamming small businesses again. It was the fourth time they have pulled this trick. Can we have a debate on the business rates scams crisis in our country, so that we close for good the loopholes being exploited by these con artists?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry to hear that businesses in my hon. Friend's constituency have been victims of business rates scams. We are committed to reducing the number of these scams, and we will take steps to do that, but I will ensure that he gets an update from Ministers.

**Maya Ellis** (Ribble Valley) (Lab): Girlguiding and its volunteers provide endless opportunities for girls and young women in my constituency of Ribble Valley. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Waddow Hall Trust group of Girlguiding members on successfully campaigning to secure Waddow Hall, which provides adventure and outdoor education for future generations of young people? Will she make time for this House to discuss the importance of outdoor education within the Government's national youth strategy?

**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating her local girl guides on their campaign to secure the future of Waddow Hall. The girl guides do a great job, and they are a vital part of the youth services and youth community activities that we want to see across the country.

**Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Fly-tipping is a blight on local communities across Cramlington and Seaton Valley in my constituency, yet under Conservative-run Northumberland county council, fly-tipping has increased by a massive 76%. The Government have taken action to keep our communities safe and tackle fly-tipping. Can we have a debate on the action being taken to strengthen enforcement, and how we are clearing up the mess the Conservatives have left nationally and in Northumberland?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that fly-tipping is a blight on many of our communities, and we are determined to take further steps. We are currently seeking powers in the Crime and Policing Bill to issue statutory fly-tipping enforcement guidance, but I know she will want to raise these issues as the Bill passes through Parliament.

**Jon Pearce** (High Peak) (Lab): The Hawthorns care home in Buxton recently celebrated 90 years of service to our local community. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending the warmest congratulations to the staff, the residents and their families. This stands in stark contrast to the Conservative-led Derbyshire county council closing care homes and adult day care centres across High Peak, including the sudden and shocking closure of Queens Court in Buxton earlier this month. Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate in Government time to consider the future of care homes and day centres run by local councils?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of care homes such as the Hawthorns in his constituency. I am sorry to hear that his local county council—the Conservative-run county council—is closing care homes at this time. We have seen a record settlement for local government, so the county council should really reconsider its decisions.

**Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): Getting a driving licence in Ilford South has become almost impossible. Learners are having to wait for more than 18 months to book their tests, because rogue individuals and unscrupulous driving schools are booking up the spaces and charging residents up to 10 times the cost of a single test. Learners are being exploited and honest instructors punished. Would the Leader of the House facilitate a positive outcome, including a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss common-sense solutions for our constituents who are locked out of driving by these manipulative practices?

**Lucy Powell:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that, and he is absolutely right that access to driving licence tests and other things are not what we would expect them to be. The Secretary of State has taken steps this week to address some of these challenges, and we can go further. I will ensure that he is given a ministerial update on these important issues.

**Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): UK homes bin 1.7 billion pieces of plastic every week. Thanks to companies such as the British Dudley-based business Iron and Velvet, there are viable alternatives to using plastic in cleaning products. Would my right hon. Friend help encourage others and this place to ditch plastic, and could we have a debate about the importance of reducing plastic waste?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend highlights an important issue. We do need to reduce plastic waste, and I will ensure that the House plays its part in reducing plastic waste. We want to see a circular economy, which means more recycling and less use of plastic.

**Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Engineers at JCB have pioneered the world's first hydrogen combustion engines that can power heavy machinery. That world-leading British engineering has been developed and built by my constituents. These diggers are unable to drive on UK roads, but thanks to this Labour Government, that is going to change on 29 April. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming this change, which will bring increased jobs and investment?



**Lucy Powell:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the engineers at JCB in his constituency on their brilliant work. I am pleased that this Government have been able to unlock road access for these diggers, which will unlock further job opportunities in his constituency.

**Lee Barron** (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): In Corby, residents of Hooke Close were denied the chance to object to plans for a huge warehouse to be built immediately next to their homes, and they now live under its shadow. This was due to admitted failures by North Northamptonshire council, including consulting the wrong streets. Residents took the matter to court, and the judge criticised the council, but the case had to be ruled out because it was out of time. The council—which did not consult the residents, but consulted the wrong streets, and which the judge criticised—is now pursuing the very people it failed for £5,000 in legal costs. Does my right hon. Friend agree that authorities should be held accountable when serious consultation failures occur, and that residents should not be financially penalised as a result of the incompetence of the consultation?

**Lucy Powell:** This sounds like a troubling case in my hon. Friend's constituency. He is right that high-quality consultation for developments is imperative, and it does not sound as though that happened or that proper procedures were followed in this case. I will certainly raise it with Ministers for him.

**Kirith Entwistle** (Bolton North East) (Lab): Too many of my constituents in Bolton are trapped in overcrowded homes. As a result, too many parents are left with no option but to share rooms with their adolescent children. Outdated overcrowding rules and a shortage of housing mean that pleas for help are routinely dismissed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that families deserve better and that everyone deserves a decent home that is fit for purpose?

**Lucy Powell:** As my hon. Friend will know, this Government are committed to providing more affordable homes, so that we can tackle the issues of overcrowding and poor housing that she describes in her constituency. I think this would make a good topic for a debate.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House is tired of hearing about the constant road chaos in Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, but my constituents and I are at our wits' end. Conservative-run Staffordshire county council continues to ignore the chaos at the A51-A53 Blackbrook junction, failing rural areas such as Baldwins Gate yet again. Will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate on Labour's serious plans for fixing our roads and how we actually get Conservative-led councils to do that?

**Lucy Powell:** I am sorry that my hon. Friend has yet again had to come to the House to raise with me the poorly managed roadworks in her constituency. Staffordshire county council really needs to get a grip on them, because it sounds like it is making a real mess.

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): From conversations with my constituents, it is clear that after 14 years of Tory government there is a systemic issue of overcrowding in social housing. Under the Housing Act 1985, a living

room is classed as sleeping accommodation, which means that many families in my constituency find themselves stuck on the housing register for extended periods, with no priority when bidding and often with teenage children having to share a bedroom with a complete lack of privacy. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time to address this critical issue?

**Lucy Powell:** Housing waiting lists are far too high in this country. That is why we need more social housing. It is why we need more housing, full stop. That is what the Government are committed to delivering.

**David Pinto-Duschinsky** (Hendon) (Lab): Leaseholders in Hendon and across the UK are being ripped off by managing agents charging excessive fees while delivering poor service. That is why I, along with colleagues on the Labour Benches, have called many of those companies into Parliament to explain themselves. In the recent White Paper, the Government set out a strong plan to end the feudal leasehold system for good. May we have a debate in Government time on what can be done at constituency level to support the reforms, and specifically to help the Government hold managing agents to account while the reforms are enacted, lowering the unfair and unaffordable service charges that leaseholders are being forced to pay?

**Lucy Powell:** Leasehold and unscrupulous managing agents are a huge issue for many of our constituents. We are committed to ending the feudal leasehold system for good. We have the commonhold White Paper. The Minister has announced how he will bring into effect measures from the previous Government and we will have a leasehold reform Bill later in the Session. My hon. Friend's constituents will get the recourse and the services they deserve.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): At the last session of business questions, the Leader of the House kindly joined me in congratulating one of my constituents, Jean Gallagher, who had just received a provost award from the Renfrewshire provost for her 25 years voluntary service at the Johnstone learning centre. Little did we know that at the same time as recognising Jean's incredible service, the council was planning cuts to that vital service, leaving it in jeopardy. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning those cuts, and does she agree that the local SNP-run council should instead be using the money it has been given by this UK Labour Government to invest in these vital services?

**Lucy Powell:** Absolutely. This Government have ended austerity in Scotland by giving the Scottish Government the biggest boost to their budget that they have ever had. They have the money; they have the powers. We really should not see services being cut like they are.

**Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): Rob Oliver, Kevin Joynes, Matthew Humphries and Tom Hayward from Redditch will be rowing across the Atlantic ocean in December as part of a challenge known as "The World's Toughest Row". The challenge will involve them rowing 3,000 miles from the Canary Islands to Antigua to raise funds for three fantastic charities: the Frank Bruno Foundation, Arrive Alive, and Redditch Self Defence

[Chris Bloore]

and Youth Engagement, which helps to educate young people in Redditch on the dangers of knives. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending these self-described “four ordinary blokes” for taking on such an extraordinary challenge to support these critical causes?

**Lucy Powell:** I thought there was an invite to Antigua coming there, Madam Deputy Speaker, but alas no. I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating and wishing well those four blokes—Rob, Kevin, Matthew and Tom—on their amazing charitable endeavours.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** We need very short questions.

**Dr Jeevun Sandher** (Loughborough) (Lab): Potholes are a blight across my constituency and cost us £500 each time they damage our cars, and the reason is that our roads have not been maintained by the Conservative-run county council. Does the Leader of the House believe that on 1 May my constituents should vote to fix our potholes and vote for all the brilliant Labour candidates across Loughborough, Shepshed and the villages?

**Lucy Powell:** Absolutely. After more than a decade of Conservative chaos, our roads were left in a shocking state. If people want this country’s potholes fixed, they need to vote Labour at next week’s local elections.

**Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Play spaces should be accessible to all regardless of ability or disability, but that is not always the case. Young people in my county of Norfolk are leading the charge to change that through the “MAP Right to Play” campaign. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the young people of Norfolk for pushing this issue, and will she make time for a debate on the importance of inclusive play?

**Lucy Powell:** Absolutely. The right to play is critical and I am really pleased to hear that young people in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and across Norfolk, are making it such a priority.

**Julia Buckley** (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Minsterley village has recently seen its rural outreach post office service withdrawn with just two days’ notice. The unplanned closure affects three villages. No explanation or consultation was given to residents, the postmaster, the council or the three Members of Parliament, in clear breach of the principles of engagement set out by the Government. Will the Leader of the House please raise with the relevant Business and Trade Minister my residents’ serious concerns and ensure that the Post Office is fulfilling its obligations to rural communities such as mine?

**Lucy Powell:** Post office closures are a really serious matter for this House. I implore my hon. Friend, as the local MP, to stand up for post office services in her constituency, as she is doing today, and campaign for them to remain open. I will absolutely ensure that she gets a ministerial reply about what is happening.

**Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; all good things come to those who wait. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to my constituents Yvonne Yorke and Jackie Wood from Newcastle-under-Lyme, Sue Jackson from Stafford, and Linda Lock from Stoke-on-Trent South, all members of the Potteries branch of Alzheimer’s Research UK? They have raised more than £15,000 in many different ways, including their “human fruit machine”. Can the Leader of the House assure me and my constituents that conditions such as Alzheimer’s and dementia will be at the heart of our plans for early diagnosis?

**Lucy Powell:** Absolutely. Tackling Alzheimer’s and dementia is at the heart of our early diagnosis strategy. We are determined to expand research and innovation into Alzheimer’s across all areas.

**Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Yesterday and today, hundreds of young people in my constituency celebrated their final day at school, with the Scottish Qualifications Authority exam period starting tomorrow. Leaving school and moving on is a big transition in life. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing those young people all the best with their exams and what comes next, and may we have a debate on the importance of celebrating such transitions?

**Lucy Powell:** I absolutely join my hon. Friend in wishing all the young people in her constituency and across the House the very best of luck in all the exams they will be sitting over the coming weeks.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** For the final question, I call Chris Vince.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—and congratulations to you on that. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the players, staff and volunteers of a team often known as the “non-league Man City”, Harlow Town football club, on its promotion from the Thurlo Nunn first division? And as I have time, will she also wish the club luck to do the double in two weeks’ time in the league cup final?

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend may be last, but certainly not least. I certainly join him in congratulating Harlow Town football club—maybe they have a Haaland as well, if they are bit like Man City—on its promotion and wish it the very best of luck in the league cup final in two weeks’ time.

## Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill [Lords]

*Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee*

### New Clause 3

#### CREDIT UNIONS ACCESSING BANK OF ENGLAND LIQUIDITY FACILITIES

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within twelve months of this Act coming into force, prepare and lay before Parliament a report on the impact of this Act on credit unions.

(2) The report must include—

- (a) an assessment of the arguments for granting credit unions access to Bank of England liquidity facilities, considering their similarity to small building societies;
- (b) an analysis of the competitive disadvantages faced by credit unions compared to start-up banks, particularly concerning access to liquidity and resolution mechanisms;
- (c) recommendations for any legislative or regulatory changes to support the stability and competitiveness of credit unions.”—(Mark Garnier.)

*This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to prepare a report on the impact of the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Act on credit unions.*

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

1.18 pm

**Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 1, in clause 1, page 1, line 20, at end insert—

- “(2A) The Bank of England must not require the scheme manager to make a recapitalisation payment if it has directed the financial institution to maintain an end-state Minimum Requirement for Own Funds and Eligible Liabilities (MREL) exceeding minimum capital requirements.”

*This amendment seeks to prohibit the use of FSCS funds to recapitalise large financial institutions, defined as those which have reached end-state MREL.*

Amendment 3, page 1, line 22, at end insert—

- “(3A) No application to the scheme manager for recapitalisation payments may be considered by the Bank of England for a financial institution which has been directed to maintain an end-state Minimum Requirement for Own Funds and Eligible Liabilities (MREL) exceeding minimum capital requirements, unless permission has been given, through regulations, by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

- (3B) Regulations made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, subject to subsection (4), shall be made through Statutory Instrument under the negative procedure.”

*This amendment would ensure financial institutions that maintain an end-state Minimum Requirement for Own Funds and Eligible Liabilities exceeding minimum capital requirements are excluded from the provisions of the Bill, unless permission has been given through regulations.*

Amendment 4, page 2, line 3, at end insert—

- “(5A) As a further objective to the special resolution objectives in section 4 of the Banking Act 2009, when discharging its functions in respect of the exercise of recapitalisation payments under this section, the Bank of England must observe the competitiveness and growth objective.

- (5B) The competitiveness and growth objective is facilitating, subject to aligning with relevant international standards—
- (a) the international competitiveness of the economy of the United Kingdom, and
  - (b) its growth in the medium to long term.”

*This amendment would place a further objective on the Bank of England to consider the competitiveness and growth of the market before directing the recapitalisation of failing small banks through a levy on the banking sector.*

Amendment 2, in clause 5, page 4, line 14, at end insert—

- “(2B) The code must include guidance to the Bank of England on the exercise of its functions in relation to building societies to ensure that, in circumstances where the use of a recapitalisation power may result in demutualisation, due consideration is given to the impact of such demutualisation on members and on the mutuals sector.

- (2C) In preparing the guidance required under subsection (2B), the Treasury shall consider the feasibility of selecting a purchaser from the mutuals sector as a means of avoiding demutualisation, provided such a purchaser meets the resolution objectives.”

*This amendment seeks to ensure that, where possible, the selection of a purchaser from the mutuals sector is considered to avoid demutualisation, provided this aligns with the Bank's resolution objectives.*

**Mark Garnier:** Before speaking to new clause 3 specifically, let me reiterate that the Opposition welcome the Government's decision to carry over the legislation from the previous Parliament, and that the principles underpinning the Bill continue to enjoy strong cross-party support. We all want and need confidence in our banking sector, yet the failure of Silicon Valley Bank UK exposed a gap in our resolution framework for smaller banks. Unlike larger institutions, they do not hold the bail and bond mechanism known as MREL—the minimum requirement for own funds and eligible liabilities—reserves to facilitate recapitalisation in the event of a crisis. By providing the Bank of England with new tools to manage small bank failures, the Bill remains both prudent and necessary to protect financial stability and public funds.

Moving on to the amendments we have tabled on Report, I want to make it clear that our approach is constructive and focused on strengthening the Bill, not obstructing its progress. As the Bill has made progress through both Houses, our intention has been to address a series of smaller but none the less significant issues that we believe require further attention. I appreciate that this might be a conversation we can continue in today's debate, or beyond it, and I would certainly welcome conversations with the Minister, who has been incredibly open to direct conversations in her usual pragmatic style, to further discuss these matters.

We have three measures selected for discussion today. I will speak first to new clause 3, which addresses a critical gap in the Bill's scope: the protection of credit unions. These community-focused institutions have seen significant growth in recent years, driven in part by the eradication of predatory payday lenders, and they continue to provide a vital role in delivering affordable finance to those underserved by traditional banks.

Membership of credit unions rose from 1.89 million in 2019 to 2.14 million in 2024—an increase of more than 260,000. However, while their importance has grown, their inclusion in our resolution framework has



[Mark Garnier]

not kept pace. The Financial Services Compensation Scheme has paid £10.1 million in compensation to credit union depositors over the past three financial years, primarily due to small-scale failures, underscoring their potential vulnerability and the need for a tailored approach as the sector expands.

The growth of credit unions is a success story, but it demands proportional safeguards. The Bill, however, excludes credit unions from its recapitalisation mechanism. While their smaller size and unique nature may differentiate them from banks, questions remain. How does the current resolution regime account for credit union failures as the sector scales up? Is there scope to develop a mechanism that protects members without imposing undue burdens on these community institutions? New clause 3 seeks clarity on this matter, requiring the Minister to produce a report outlining how the resolution framework can be adapted to protect credit unions, ensuring that their growth does not outstrip their regulatory safeguards. The vast amount of legislation for credit unions was written back in the 1970s. The previous Government made significant reforms for credit unions through amendments to the Financial Services and Markets Act, and I welcome the common bond reform consultation, which closed last month.

I know that the Government are giving the sector serious consideration, and I am sure the Minister will agree that this is not about applying bank-style rules to mutuals, but about recognising their unique role and risks. Credit unions are more than financial institutions; they are engines of financial inclusion. They often serve small, working-class communities, whom I know the Government want to support specifically. As the sector evolves, so too must our approach. We must ensure that our regulatory framework grows. I hope the Government will support this amendment, which simply seeks to look more clearly at the options available when a crisis happens.

Amendment 2 seeks to address a concern that has been raised with me by the mutual and building society sector. These institutions are not relics of the past, but vital components of our financial ecosystem. Although the first known building society was set up in 1775 by ordinary working people helping themselves to build their financial resilience and get a home of their own, they remain current today. Building societies today hold more than £360 billion in assets and provide mortgages for more than 3 million people in the UK. They represent a significant proportion of the housing market and are a trusted source of savings for millions more. They provide a clear and important diversification in our financial markets, offering a clear alternative to shareholder banks.

The Labour party stood on a clear manifesto commitment to double the size of the co-operative and mutual sector, which the Opposition agree is a very good policy. Today presents a good opportunity for Labour Members to demonstrate that commitment to the sector by enshrining in the Bill a requirement that the Bank of England consider the risk of demutualisation when using the mechanisms enshrined therein. There is a genuine fear in the building society sector that, without proper safeguards, the recapitalisation mechanism offered by the Bill could inadvertently become a back door for

demutualisation. When a mutual institution faces resolution, the selection of a purchaser from the plc sector risks permanently dismantling its mutual status, undermining the very ethos that makes these institutions unique.

Our amendment would provide a proportionate solution, requiring the Bank of England to consider the impact of demutualisation on members and the sector as a whole, while also exploring the feasibility of selecting a mutual sector purchaser, if one exists and meets the resolution objectives. This is not about privileging mutuals at the expense of financial stability; it is about ensuring that the Bank's resolution tools do not inadvertently homogenise our financial landscape. Silicon Valley Bank demonstrated the need for agile resolution frameworks, but it also highlighted the importance of preserving institutional diversity.

Mutuals and building societies often serve communities and demographics that larger banks frequently overlook. Their potential loss would leave gaps in financial inclusion and weaken the resilience of the sector. Importantly, without the millions of mortgages provided by the building society sector, particularly for first-time homeowners, Labour's house building plans would be simply impossible.

I hope the Minister appreciates that our amendment strikes a careful balance between safeguarding financial stability and honouring our commitment to a pluralistic banking system—one where mutuals continue to thrive as a cornerstone of community-focused finance. I remind Labour Members that it will be much harder to double the size of the mutual sector if, in the event of a failure, recapitalisation defaults towards the banking sector. I hope the Government will therefore demonstrate their manifesto commitment to the mutual and co-operative sector by voting today for new clause 3 and amendment 2.

There remains genuine concern—shared across this House and reflected in the debates in the other place—over the risk of the recapitalisation mechanism being applied too broadly and potentially capturing larger banks that already hold substantial loss-absorbing resources, such as MREL. We continue to believe that the mechanism should be limited in scope and targeted at smaller banks that do not have the same capacity to manage their own failure. Amendment 1 would limit the use of the mechanism to what it was always intended to be: a mechanism for smaller banks outside the MREL regime.

I appreciate that new clauses 1 and 2 have already been ruled out of scope, but it may be worth noting a couple of points on these measures. I wish to place on the record today that the Opposition believe the time has come for a review of how we set the threshold for MREL, as well as the protection ceilings for depositors under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. The current static nature of MREL thresholds disproportionately affects smaller and mid-sized banks, particularly challenger banks. By indexing MREL thresholds to inflation, we can ensure that the regulatory framework remains robust over time without stifling competition. These institutions often operate on tighter margins and face significant barriers in meeting rigid capital requirements, hindering their ability to scale and compete effectively with larger incumbents. While we appreciate that the Bank of England's consultation on MREL closed earlier this year, we hope that the Government will consider these points. Threshold limits should not stay static with time.

Likewise, we welcome the Government's recognition of the need to review the Financial Services Compensation Scheme deposit limit. The recent announcement of the increase of the deposit protection scheme from £85,000 to £110,000, although very welcome, is certainly overdue. It is worth noting that if the limit had kept pace with inflation, it would be nearly two thirds higher, at around £140,000, according to the Federation of Small Businesses. It is worth noting that only 4.6% of Silicon Valley Bank's UK deposits were insured by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. May I just remind the hon. Gentleman that we are discussing what is in scope, rather than what is not in scope and has not been selected?

**Mark Garnier:** My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. These are points that we feel are worth noting, but I take your comments.

I will turn to amendment 3, tabled by the Liberal Democrats. Although we share the intent behind the amendment, which mirrors the Conservatives' amendment on MREL limits for banks, there is a critical difference in its approach that gives us pause. Like us, the Liberal Democrats recognise that end-state MREL banks should not be the primary target of this legislation. However, their amendment introduces a requirement for a statutory instrument under the negative procedure that we believe would create more problems than it solves.

Our concern lies in the potential impracticality of this approach. Banking crises can unfold rapidly, as we saw with Silicon Valley Bank UK, where decisions were made in a matter of hours, not days. A statutory instrument subject to the negative procedure becomes law the moment the Minister signs it, which is a good thing, and it remains in law unless either House rejects it within 40 sitting days. That creates a window of uncertainty. If Members were to pray against the statutory instrument, particularly in a hung Parliament, it could trigger market instability, which is precisely what this Bill seeks to avoid, so although we agree with the principle of limiting the Bill's scope, we worry that the mechanism could tie the hands of a future Chancellor, hindering their ability to respond swiftly and decisively in a crisis. For those reasons, we cannot support the Liberal Democrat amendment.

1.30 pm

Finally, I turn to the Liberal Democrat's growth amendment, amendment 4. Here we find ourselves in a familiar and supportive position. This amendment, which seeks to place a further objective on the Bank of England to consider the competitiveness and growth of the market before directing the recapitalisation of a fail small bank through a levy on the banking sector, echoes concerns raised in the House of Lords. We were happy to support the proposal there, and in Committee.

The Government frequently repeat the point that their focus is on economic growth. That is a goal that all of us in this House share. The decision to place a levy on the banking sector to cover the cost of a competitor's failure must be carefully weighed against the broader growth objectives. This is an economic climate in which taxes and borrowing are up, and business confidence, jobs and growth are down, but the Government have an

opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to economic growth through this legislation—and we, of course, hope that they will.

In conclusion, we support the overall aim of the Bill. It will strengthen our banking system and our banking resolution framework. As I said, the Bill was originally drafted by the previous Government and retains cross-party support. We have highlighted several key areas that require further consideration, and I hope the Minister will consider them. From ensuring that the mechanism is not extended to MREL banks to protecting mutual societies and credit unions and safeguarding the Financial Services Compensation Scheme against inflation, our amendments aim to improve the Bill's effectiveness and fairness, which is entirely in line with the promises made by the Labour party before the general election. I very much look forward to Labour supporting its own manifesto promises.

**David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab):** I rise to speak in opposition to amendments 1, 3 and 4. Under the previous Government, the country was subjected to years of economic chaos. This Government have made restoring stability a cornerstone of our strategy to boost long-term growth. Ensuring macroprudential stability, underpinned by an effective recovery and resolution regime, is a key part of that. Changes undertaken in the UK and globally through the Basel III reforms have made our large banks safer and more resilient, and we should welcome that. The reforms have improved solvency and reduced risks for the taxpayer.

However, the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank in 2023 has demonstrated the need for new tools to help minimise the risk to consumers, taxpayers and broader financial stability posed by small bank failures. We need an approach that goes beyond the bank insolvency procedure, and that is why the proposals in the Bill enjoy so much support across our financial services sector, as I know from my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on financial markets and services. But in designing this new approach, we must make sure that the proposals reflect the lessons of experience. In all candour, I am concerned that the amendments do not do that, and will impede the functioning of the new regime, rendering it less effective at moments of crisis.

I was an adviser in the Treasury to Alistair Darling during the global financial crisis, when we had to resolve and recapitalise a number of major banks. The action that the Labour Government took then—often in the face of resistance from Conservative Members—helped to save our financial sector from catastrophe and stabilise not just the UK, but the global economy. There are many lessons to be learned from that period, but in relation to the Bill, one stands out. When we had to act to save our banking sector, we learned that successful resolution relies, among other things, on two key factors: speed and flexibility. It was the combination of those factors that was so important in 2008, and since then, I would argue, they have only become more important.

In 2008, we watched banks' liquidity and solvency deteriorate by the day, but now, as the collapse of Signature Bank in the US in 2023 shows, the combination of banking apps and social media mean that a full-scale banking run can develop in hours or even minutes. If we are to resolve banks successfully, regulators must be able to move as quickly. Speed has become more important

[David Pinto-Duschinsky]

than ever. So, too, has flexibility. As we see increasing financial innovation and diversification among banks, with new challengers, new forms of institutions and new types of markets and assets emerging, allowing regulators sufficient flexibility has become more essential, not less.

The value of flexibility was demonstrated in the case of Silicon Valley Bank's UK subsidiary. The creative use of powers to resolve that bank through a sale, rather than putting it into the bank insolvency procedure, protected consumers, minimised market turbulence and shielded the public purse. Contrast that with the US regulators' approach to the parent company, SVB. There, rigidity and a mechanistic failure to apply major bank rules led to failures of regulatory oversight that contributed—as US regulators have acknowledged—to the bank's failure. I raise this matter because I fear that amendments 1, 3 and 4 will militate against speed and flexibility, and will reduce the effectiveness of the Bill, especially in acute crisis situations.

Let me start with proposed amendment 4. This would require the Bank of England to consider competitiveness and the growth impact on the market before directing resolution through the FSCS. However well-intentioned the amendment is, it could have a catastrophic effect. At a time of crisis—policymakers have sometimes just hours to act—it would place a duty on them to make a market assessment, which, by the way, could presumably be challenged. This is simply impractical and could fatally slow down action to restore financial stability. As someone who has sat in the room during a bail-out process, I have to tell the proposer of the amendment that spending time on this kind of exercise during a disorderly bank failure is simply a luxury that we do not have.

I am also concerned that such a requirement would have a chilling effect, staying regulators' hands when they have to act quickly. This could not only increase the risk of disorderly collapse, but raise the cost to the FSCS of a recapitalisation if it does proceed. Experience tells us that the longer we put off a resolution, the more expensive it becomes. This is a recipe for higher risk and higher cost. Moreover, leaving aside the practical difficulties, the underlying logic is flawed. First, in seeking to analyse the market before deciding on whether to resolve an institution or wind it up, we are putting the cart before the horse. Surely a much better course of action is to prevent the potentially disorderly collapse of the institution, and then to work out its long-term future and the role, if any, it should play in the market.

Secondly, the amendment fails to take into account other objectives that the Prudential Regulation Authority should properly consider in deciding whether to act, including the protection of retail savers, the prevention of contagion and the safeguarding of macroprudential stability. As drafted, the amendment, however well-intentioned, could distort PRA decision making. Its intentions may be good, but its impact might not be.

The same is unfortunately true of amendments 1 and 3. Both seek to circumscribe the use of the FSCS via statute, to prevent it being used to bail out larger institutions. The amendments would rob regulators of the flexibility to use the instrument in unusual or unforeseen circumstances, in the name of solving a problem that does not exist.

The powers provided by the Bill are already aimed squarely at smaller banks, and there are various safeguards in the Bill to prevent the use of those powers for larger banks in most scenarios. For example, the Bill states that the FSCS-funded resolution may be used only for institutions that are placed in a bridge bank or transferred to a new institution, and this would not be applicable for larger bank in most scenarios, as they are expected to be resolved through an MREL bail-in. The Bill also provides for de facto Treasury sign off, requires the Chancellor to report to Parliament on the use of the powers and mandates the bank to inform the Chairs of the relevant parliamentary Committees whenever an FSCS-funded resolution is undertaken. As such, it is already well-policed and circumscribed. There is little danger of this approach being regularly or routinely used with large banks. Adding a statutory prohibition on using this approach with firms meeting their minimum MREL thresholds would add little, but it would create risk.

My experience in the Treasury during the global financial crisis, and in my work across financial services since then, is that we cannot say that the highly improbable will never happen, and we cannot always predict what form the next crisis will take, or what will trigger it. Conservative Members should surely understand this lesson better than most. After all, it was Liz Truss's disastrous mini-Budget that sparked market chaos through a product—liability-driven investments—that most people had never even heard of, and were thought to be very stable and low risk. Given this, it would be exceptionally unwise to statutorily bar the Bank from being able to use all the tools at its disposal in exceptional circumstances. There are eventualities that, however unlikely, are possible, such as a well-capitalised bank suffering a very rapid deterioration of its position due to a mass redress event. We must allow the Bank flexibility to access the tools that the Bill provides in exceptional circumstances, in order to ensure stability and protect the taxpayer. We must not bind its hands in a crisis.

The power of the Government's proposals lie in their ability to be deployed rapidly and with flexibility. That is what will give them their traction and help safeguard our financial stability. It is critical that we preserve those facets of the Bill. For that reason, I urge the House to join me in rejecting the amendments.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): The Liberal Democrats are supportive of the Bill, because the last thing taxpayers need to worry about are the consequences of an under-regulated banking sector. I have brought amendment 3 back from Committee, because the size of banks eligible for the new mechanism has been a key debate through the Bill's passage.

The Minister has regularly set out that the Bill's stated aim is to enhance the resolution regime, so that we can respond to the failure of small banks. However, the Bill does not restrict the regime to small or medium-sized banks. If applied to large banks, it would create high costs for banks and customers. The costs would persist for many years, adding a significant long-term burden on the banking sector and consumers. Amendment 3 would ensure that the Bill does not apply to banks that have reached the end-state minimum requirement for own funds and eligible liabilities—put more simply, the largest UK banks. That would mean that only small



and medium-sized banks could be supported by the mechanism. That would protect consumers and the banking sector from unnecessary financial burden.

Amendment 4 has also been brought back from Committee. It would place a further objective on the Bank of England to consider the competitiveness and growth of the market before directing the recapitalisation of a failing small bank through a levy on the banking sector. We believe that further consideration of the effect on the competitiveness and growth of the market is important before directing the recapitalisation of failing small banks.

To conclude, I would be grateful if the Minister could expand on the remarks made in Committee and explain how precisely the amendment would complicate the process of managing a bank failure.

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds):**

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank the hon. Members for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) and for Wokingham (Clive Jones) for their amendments and their constructive engagement throughout the Bill's passage. The Bill will ensure that the Bank of England remains equipped with the necessary tools to effectively manage bank failures in a way that minimises risk to the taxpayer and to UK financial stability, protecting the taxpayer.

While there may be some disagreements on the finer detail of the Bill, what we have heard today, and on Second Reading and in Committee, demonstrates that there is cross-party support for the principles and overall objectives of the Bill. I thank the hon. Member for Wyre Forest and the hon. Member for Wokingham for supporting those.

The amendments cover a broad range of issues, and I will explain the Government's position on them in turn, but first I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) for setting out his experience of the banking crisis and stressing that the mechanism we are seeking to provide through the Bill must allow the Bank of England, in close consultation with the Treasury and other financial services regulators, to act with speed and flexibility at times of crisis. There are hours, not days, in which to make decisions during crises, and at the forefront of our minds when discussing the Bill should be that they often happen over the weekend, as happened under the previous Government with Silicon Valley Bank. I will turn to that example shortly, but I wanted to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon for setting out his concerns about the amendments that would essentially stymie the effectiveness of the Bill.

I note that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest, raised a number of issues on new clause 3, on the Bill's impact on credit unions. Some were not strictly relevant to the Bill, but I will come on to them. As he noted, the Government absolutely support credit unions. They play a vital role in providing saving products and affordable credit in local communities across the country. However, they are not in scope of the resolution regime that we are discussing, and therefore not in scope of the new recapitalisation payment mechanism introduced by the Bill. That is a benefit to the credit union sector. Indeed, it asked the Government to ensure that it was not included in the payment mechanism. Credit unions will therefore not be liable to pay towards the cost of a failure where the mechanism is used.

1.45 pm

I will set out the detail of the resolution regime and remind the shadow Minister and others why credit unions are not involved in this case. Under the resolution regime, the Bank of England has a set of powers it can use to manage the failure of banking institutions in order to protect financial stability and public funds. In order for the Bank of England to use these powers, certain conditions must be met, including that resolution action is necessary and in the public interest. It is unlikely that these conditions would be met in the case of credit union failures, given their size and the reduced likelihood of contagion if they fail. It is therefore appropriate and proportionate that these firms are out of scope of the resolution regime and placed into insolvency when they fail instead.

The Government do not therefore believe that it is necessary for a report to be produced on the impact of the Bill on credit unions. Nevertheless, I appreciate the points the shadow Minister raised about access to liquidity facilities. Credit unions are not currently eligible to access the Bank of England's liquidity facilities, but the Bank does continually assess the types of firms that are eligible. I would gently say to him that with eligibility to these liquidity facilities comes additional responsibilities on behalf of the firms that benefit from them. That is worth bearing in mind.

I reiterate the Government's clear, strong support for the credit union sector. We continue to engage regularly with the sector to understand the barriers it faces to being able to grow and compete.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I support wholeheartedly what the Minister has said about credit unions, because credit unions have a big role to play in Northern Ireland, as they do in other parts of the United Kingdom. My concern when it comes to crises in banks is that credit unions belong to their members, but banks have a different hierarchy—they have chief executives and directors to pay. I believe it is unfair for bankers to retain their bonuses while the pensioner who has saved his pennies all his life suffers. No matter what the crisis is, the executives still get their dividends and bonuses. I have a simple question: within this legislation and the rules we have here, can we be assured that the bankers—the ones at the top who may be responsible for the banks, or certainly act responsible for them—will find that their bonuses are not delivered to them?

**Emma Reynolds:** The hon. Gentleman draws me on something that is not pertinent to the amendments, but I understand why he has asked the question. When a bank fails, there is a hierarchy of creditors. I can write to him with that hierarchy, as I do not have it in my head at the moment. The hierarchy ensures that if, for example, the bank is bailed in, those who have already invested in the bank become stakeholders, although it depends on the resolution scenario and where they are in that process. The people who have deposits in the bank—in more simple language, people who have bank accounts—are protected up to £85,000. Soon that will increase in the way that the shadow Minister suggested.

Amendments 1 and 3 in the names of shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest, and the hon. Member for Wokingham respectively both relate to the scope of the Bill, which has been discussed at length during the

[*Emma Reynolds*]

Bill's passage through this House and in the other place. The Government's position remains that the mechanism in the Bill is not intended to support the resolution of the largest banks. The hon. Member for Wyre Forest set that out in his speech, as did the hon. Member for Wokingham. The largest banks will continue to be required to hold MREL to self-insure against their own failure. For banks that are required to hold MREL, the Bank of England should in the first instance use those resources to recapitalise such a firm in resolution rather than resorting to the new mechanism in the Bill. It is right that shareholders and investors in the firm should bear losses before anyone else, which goes to the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I return to the primary purpose of the Bill, which is to protect the taxpayer. Bank failures are by their nature highly unpredictable, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon said. In the unlikely circumstances where a top-up is needed to resolve a bank once all its MREL resources have been used, hon. Members must consider whether they want those costs to be borne by the taxpayer. It is the Government's belief that the taxpayer should not be on the hook for those costs.

I made the point in Committee, and do so again today, that safeguards are in place to prevent inappropriate use of the mechanism. The Treasury, for example, is involved in the exercise of any resolution powers through being consulted about whether conditions for resolution have been met. It would also need to approve any resolution action with implications for public funds. If the Bank of England requested a large sum from the Financial Services Compensation Scheme that the scheme could not provide through its own resources, additional amounts would need to be borrowed from the Treasury and would therefore require the Treasury's approval. Therefore, in practice, Treasury consent would be required if the Bank of England had requested a large sum.

The shadow Minister attempted to draw me into many different subjects related to MREL. You rightly reminded him, Madam Deputy Speaker, of the scope of the Bill and the amendments under discussion. I will always be happy to have those discussions with him—as he knows, the Bank of England recently consulted on the thresholds—and I note what he said before he was called to order. He also tried to draw me into questions about the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, which are also for a different day; as he said, there will soon be increases.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): I appreciate that the Bill's scope is limited, and the Minister is making an excellent case for the Government. I realise that bank collapses are unusual and that the Government take a range of steps to try to protect the interests of consumers, but could she write to reassure me on the related point of bank branches there were a bank collapse?

**Emma Reynolds:** Perhaps my hon. Friend and I could have a discussion outside the Chamber so that I can better understand his question. The mechanism in the Bill is about what happens when the resolution regime is triggered. Four different conditions have to be met for that to happen. The Bill seeks to continue the work that the Opposition started to take forward when they were

in government before the election about what we do in cases like that of Silicon Valley Bank. In that case, there was not any recourse to public funds, but this is about how we protect the taxpayer in a scenario where there is. Perhaps we can have a discussion about bank branch closures, which is obviously of great concern to Members across the House.

I appreciate that amendment 3, tabled by the hon. Member for Wokingham, aims to introduce an additional safeguard by permitting the Bank of England to use its new power on the largest banks only if the Treasury permits that through regulations. He talked about that in his speech. However, there may be risks associated with that approach, particularly if the Bank of England needed to take a decision at pace in a crisis. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon was in the Treasury when many such situations arose. [*Interruption.*] Well, let us not rake over the history. We discussed some of these issues in Committee.

As the shadow Minister suggested, we are trying to avoid a window of uncertainty during which a statutory instrument would be laid. The Bank of England, working in close partnership and consultation with the Treasury and the other financial services regulators, needs to be able to act swiftly and decisively—often over the weekend. I ask hon. Members, and the hon. Member for Wokingham in particular, to cast our minds back to the weekend when Silicon Valley Bank UK was failing. The Bill derives from the lessons learned from that event.

What we saw from that incident is how quickly the authorities—the Bank of England in consultation with the Treasury, the PRA and the FCA—must move to find a solution before markets open and resolve a failing firm in a way that protects financial stability, depositors and the taxpayer. That has to be at the forefront of our minds when we are thinking about the amendments.

Amendment 3 could add a further stage to that process, whereby the Treasury must lay regulations to enable the Bank of England to act. That may well—it is most likely that it would—hamper those efforts to implement a solution swiftly to achieve those objectives. Had Silicon Valley Bank UK been caught by such requirements, that certainly would have made achieving the solution by Monday morning, before the markets opened, much more challenging. Again, the priority is to protect the depositors and to protect financial stability.

Overall, the Government firmly believe that it is better to leave flexibility for the Bank, noting the safeguards in place that I have already mentioned. On the basis of those points, I hope that hon. Members will be persuaded to support the Government's position on this matter; I know that it is an issue of some contention.

Amendment 4, also in the name of the hon. Member for Wokingham, is on whether the Bank of England should have a growth and competitiveness objective when exercising its new power—another topic that we have discussed previously during the Bill's passage. Growth and competitiveness are fundamental priorities for the Government, and as I stated in Committee, a disorderly bank failure could pose a serious risk to the growth and competitiveness of the sector and to the UK economy. The Bill seeks to mitigate that risk.

Bearing that in mind, the Government do not believe that they should impose a requirement on the Bank of England to consider growth and competitiveness when it is taking urgent crisis management action in relation

to an individual distressed or failing firm. At such a time, the situation that it would have to manage would be challenging enough without an additional broad objective of that kind. The resolution objectives set out in the Banking Act 2009 already provide a solid basis on which it must make its decisions, including protecting financial stability, protecting covered depositors and protecting the taxpayer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon reminded us, the Bank of England, in close partnership with the Treasury and the other financial services regulators, needs to act with speed and flexibility to maintain financial stability. Those considerations are very different from those that the PRA and the FCA make in their policymaking roles. The Government strongly support the existence of their secondary objective on facilitating growth and competitiveness.

I note and accept that there is a broader question about how the Bank of England can support growth and competitiveness, but this is a complex matter, and one that is well beyond the scope of the Bill. We will be resisting the amendment for those reasons.

Finally—[*Interruption.*] I see that our debate has attracted quite a lot of discussion around the edges; if I could hear myself think, it would be nice. I turn briefly to amendment 2, tabled by the shadow Minister. First, I reiterate that the Government have made clear their strong commitment to support the mutual sector, and I reassure him that we take our commitment in the manifesto to double the size of the mutual and co-operative sector very seriously. Many hon. Members on the Government Benches who serve as Labour and Co-operative MPs have a great interest in this matter, as has been demonstrated.

I also direct the shadow Minister—to be fair, he referred to a couple of them—to the package of measures that the Chancellor set out at Mansion House, which included the consultation on the potential to reform common bonds for credit unions in Great Britain. The Chancellor asked the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority to produce a report on the mutuals landscape by the end of the year. She also welcomed the establishment of an industry-led mutual and co-operative business council, the first meeting of which I attended earlier this year.

2 pm

I am grateful to the shadow Minister for raising the issue in the amendment. The chief executive of the Building Societies Association has written to me about it, and we are engaging with him and the broader sector on the issues related to the Bill, as well as on many other issues that are relevant to financial services and the role that the sector plays in providing vital services to people throughout the country and as an engine of growth for the wider economy.

I understand that the sector's interest in this matter stems from a provision in clause 7 that gives the Bank of England an explicit power to require the issuance of securities by the firm in resolution where the new mechanism in the Bill is used. This provides a means for the Bank of England to give effect to a recapitalisation under the new mechanism established by the Bill. Its purpose is to provide additional operational certainty that, if the Bank of England needs the failing firm to issue shares as part of its resolution, doing so will not be put at risk by the usual administrative process of share issuance.

Of course, mutuals have a different ownership model, with no shares, so the use of the power with respect to a mutual would require the firm to be demutualised. That brings me to amendment 2, which would require further detail to be included in the code of practice in relation to demutualisation. Specifically, it would require the Treasury to include guidance in the code in respect of the Bank of England's exercise of its resolution powers in respect of a building society in circumstances where the use of the recapitalisation power may result in demutualisation. The guidance would require the Bank of England to give due consideration to the impact of such demutualisation on members of the building society in resolution and on the mutual sector, particularly when the Bank of England could select a buyer from the mutual sector to avoid demutualisation. The Bank of England is required to have regard to the code, so would be required to have regard to such new guidance when exercising its resolution powers.

In responding to the concerns raised by the amendment, I note first that the Bank of England already has the power to require the demutualisation of a mutual firm when exercising its powers, if that is necessary to execute a resolution effectively in the public interest. The Bill does not change that. There are also circumstances in which demutualisation would not be necessary, such as the transfer of a mutual firm's assets to another mutual acquirer. We saw that back in 2009, with the transfer of the Dunfermline building society's assets to Nationwide. Indeed, if the Bank of England is seeking to resolve a failing building society, its assets may well prove an attractive acquisition for another mutual, so a sale within the mutual sector may already be a likely outcome under the existing regime, whether in resolution or in recovery in the period prior to resolution.

It is worth remembering, however, that the issues we are considering relate to banks and building societies once they have failed. In such circumstances, the alternative to demutualisation as part of a resolution may be insolvency, which may have far more adverse consequences for members of the mutual, as well as for the wider mutual and banking sector.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

**Emma Reynolds:** I am afraid I am being urged to wrap up. I remind Members that the Bill is fundamentally about protecting the taxpayer—

**Gareth Snell:** We have Third Reading—it's fine.

**Emma Reynolds:** We have not come to that yet; my hon. Friend can intervene on Third Reading. [*Laughter.*]

Taking what I was saying into account, although the Government appreciate the point raised by the sector and by the shadow Minister, we do not believe it is necessary to hardwire in legislation a requirement to update the code of practice on this matter. I understand, however, that the mutual sector feels strongly about this issue, and my officials and I will continue to engage with the sector on it. I commend to the House our position on the new clauses and amendments, which is to resist them.

**Mark Garnier:** With the leave of the House, I wish to address one or two of the points made in the debate. The hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky)



*[Mark Garnier]*

is an incredibly valuable contributor to the debate because of his experience back in the days of the 2008 financial crisis. If I remember correctly, that was largely a result of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, which almost compounded the problem by having a tripartite regime that looked after the banking sector at the time. If I remember rightly, the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time found it so scary that his eyebrows nearly turned white. One of the surprising things about that crisis was that just 10 years earlier we had seen the Asian banking crisis, which basically laid the groundwork for what subsequently happened in the west. Perhaps we in the west were too arrogant to believe that it could happen to us, yet it sure did.

In my role as a member of the Treasury Committee from 2010 to 2016, and on the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards, I looked at all these issues very extensively. It is incredibly important that we resolve the issue. As it has turned out, the Financial Services Act 2012 and the Financial Services (Banking Reform) Act 2013 have worked well in respect of some of this resolution.

On the point about LDIs and the financial crisis as a result of the Budget, we dealt with the problem pretty swiftly and pretty brutally. When one of our leaders gets it wrong, we get rid of them fairly quickly. I suggest to the Labour party that if Government Front Benchers get things wrong, it is worth cauterising the problem and moving on.

On credit unions and mutuals, we absolutely recognise the point about the mutual sector. We are not asking for demutualisation to be ruled out; we are asking for the prospect of avoiding demutualisation to be part of that very swift process. That is why we will press amendment 2 to a Division. I met the credit unions yesterday, and they are keen that the principle of new clause 3 is voted on, so we will press that as well.

*Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.*

*The House divided: Ayes 88, Noes 212.*

**Division No. 174]****[2.6 pm****AYES**

Adam, Shockat	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Amos, Gideon	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Anderson, Stuart ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i> )	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Andrew, rh Stuart	Dyke, Sarah
Argar, rh Edward	Forster, Mr Will
Atkins, rh Victoria	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bennett, Alison	French, Mr Louie
Blackman, Bob	Fuller, Richard
Bool, Sarah	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Brandreth, Aphra	Garnier, Mark
Burghart, Alex	Glover, Olly
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Gordon, Tom
Chowns, Ellie	Griffith, Andrew
Cocking, Lewis	Griffiths, Alison
Coutinho, rh Claire ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i> )	Harding, Monica
Cross, Harriet	Harris, Rebecca
Darling, Steve	Hayes, rh Sir John
Davies, Mims	Hinds, rh Damian
Denyer, Carla	Hobhouse, Wera
Dewhurst, Charlie	Holmes, Paul
	Huddleston, Nigel
	Hudson, Dr Neil

Johnson, Dr Caroline  
Jones, Clive  
Jopp, Lincoln  
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
Lake, Ben  
Lamont, John  
Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
Lowe, Rupert  
MacCleary, James  
Malthouse, rh Kit  
Medi, Llinos  
Miller, Calum  
Mohamed, Iqbal  
Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
Morello, Edward  
Morgan, Helen  
Morrissey, Joy  
Mundell, rh David  
Obese-Jecty, Ben  
O'Brien, Neil  
Olney, Sarah  
Patel, rh Priti  
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Rankin, Jack

Robertson, Joe  
Shannon, Jim  
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
Simmonds, David  
Slade, Vikki  
Smith, Greg  
Smith, Rebecca  
Snowden, Mr Andrew  
Spencer, Dr Ben  
Stephenson, Blake  
Stride, rh Sir Mel  
Stuart, rh Graham  
Swann, Robin  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Taylor, Luke  
Thomas, Bradley  
Vickers, Martin  
Vickers, Matt  
Wild, James  
Wood, Mike  
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Gregory Stafford and**  
**Sir Ashley Fox**

**NOES**

Aldridge, Dan	Carden, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Carns, Al
Anderson, Callum	Charalambous, Bambos
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Coleman, Ben
Arthur, Dr Scott	Collier, Jacob
Asato, Jess	Collinge, Lizzy
Asser, James	Collins, Tom
Athwal, Jas	Conlon, Liam
Atkinson, Lewis	Coombes, Sarah
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Cooper, Andrew
Bailey, Olivia	Costigan, Deirdre
Baker, Alex	Coyle, Neil
Ballinger, Alex	Creasy, Ms Stella
Bance, Antonia	Crichton, Torcuil
Barker, Paula	Curtis, Chris
Barron, Lee	Dalton, Ashley
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Darlington, Emily
Baxter, Johanna	Davies, Jonathan
Beales, Danny	Davies-Jones, Alex
Betts, Mr Clive	De Cordova, Marsha
Billington, Ms Polly	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Blake, Olivia	Dickson, Jim
Blake, Rachel	Dixon, Anna
Bloore, Chris	Doughty, Stephen
Botterill, Jade	Downie, Graeme
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Eagle, rh Maria
Brickell, Phil	Eccles, Cat
Bryant, Chris	Edwards, Lauren
Buckley, Julia	Efford, Clive
Burgon, Richard	Egan, Damien
Burton-Sampson, David	Elmore, Chris
Butler, Dawn	Entwistle, Kirith
Byrne, Ian	Evans, Chris
Byrne, rh Liam	Farnsworth, Linsey
Cadbury, Ruth	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Caliskan, Nesil	Ferguson, Mark
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Footy, Emma
Campbell, Irene	Fookes, Catherine
Campbell, Juliet	Foy, Mary Kelly
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Francis, Daniel
	Gardiner, Barry

Gelderd, Anna  
Glendon, Mary  
Goldsborough, Ben  
Grady, John  
Griffith, Dame Nia  
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Hack, Amanda  
Hall, Sarah  
Hayes, Tom  
Hillier, Dame Meg  
Hinder, Jonathan  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire  
Hume, Alison  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hurley, Patrick  
Jogee, Adam  
Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
Jones, Louise  
Jones, Ruth  
Josan, Gurinder Singh  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Chris  
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Khan, Afzal  
Khan, Naushabah  
Kitchen, Gen  
Kumar, Sonia  
Kumaran, Uma  
Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
Lamb, Peter  
Law, Noah  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Lewin, Andrew  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Macdonald, Alice  
MacNae, Andy  
Madders, Justin  
Martin, Amanda  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mather, Keir  
Mayer, Alex  
McAllister, Douglas  
McDonald, Andy  
McKenna, Kevin  
McMorrin, Anna  
McNally, Frank  
Midgley, Anneliese  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Moon, Perran  
Morden, Jessica  
Murphy, Luke  
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Murray, Katrina  
Myer, Luke  
Naish, James  
Naismith, Connor  
Narayan, Kanishka  
Nash, Pamela  
Newbury, Josh  
Nichols, Charlotte  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
Osborne, Kate

Osborne, Tristan  
Owatemi, Taiwo  
Patrick, Matthew  
Payne, Michael  
Pearce, Jon  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Phillips, Jess  
Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
Pitcher, Lee  
Powell, Joe  
Prinsley, Peter  
Quigley, Mr Richard  
Race, Steve  
Ranger, Andrew  
Reynolds, Emma  
Rhodes, Martin  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rodda, Matt  
Russell, Sarah  
Ryan, Oliver  
Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smith, David  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Nick  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Stewart, Elaine  
Strathern, Alistair  
Strickland, Alan  
Sullivan, Kirsteen  
Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
Swallow, Peter  
Tami, rh Mark  
Tapp, Mike  
Taylor, David  
Taylor, Rachel  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thompson, Adam  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Tidball, Dr Marie  
Trickett, Jon  
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Laurence  
Twigg, Derek  
Twist, Liz  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaughan, Tony  
Vaz, rh Valerie  
Vince, Chris  
Wakeford, Christian  
Ward, Chris  
Webb, Chris  
West, Catherine  
Wheeler, Michael  
Whitby, John  
White, Jo  
Whittome, Nadia  
Williams, David  
Woodcock, Sean  
Wrighting, Rosie  
Yemm, Steve

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
Kate Dearden and  
Gerald Jones

*Question accordingly negated.*

## Clause 5

### CODE OF PRACTICE

*Amendment proposed:* 2, page 4, line 14, at end insert—

“(2B) The code must include guidance to the Bank of England on the exercise of its functions in relation to building societies to ensure that, in circumstances where the use of a recapitalisation power may result in demutualisation, due consideration is given to the impact of such demutualisation on members and on the mutuals sector.

(2C) In preparing the guidance required under subsection (2B), the Treasury shall consider the feasibility of selecting a purchaser from the mutuals sector as a means of avoiding demutualisation, provided such a purchaser meets the resolution objectives.”—(*Mark Garnier.*)

*This amendment seeks to ensure that, where possible, the selection of a purchaser from the mutuals sector is considered to avoid demutualisation, provided this aligns with the Bank’s resolution objectives.*

*Question put,* That the amendment be made.

*The House divided:* Ayes 89, Noes 230.

**Division No. 175]**

**[2.20 pm**

### AYES

Adam, Shockat  
Amos, Gideon  
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Andrew, rh Stuart  
Argar, rh Edward  
Atkins, rh Victoria  
Bennett, Alison  
Blackman, Bob  
Bool, Sarah  
Brandreth, Aphra  
Burghart, Alex  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Chowns, Ellie  
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
Cocking, Lewis  
Cross, Harriet  
Darling, Steve  
Davies, Mims  
Denyer, Carla  
Dewhurst, Charlie  
Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
Dyke, Sarah  
Forster, Mr Will  
Francois, rh Mr Mark  
French, Mr Louie  
Fuller, Richard  
Gale, rh Sir Roger  
Garnier, Mark  
Glover, Olly  
Gordon, Tom  
Griffith, Andrew  
Griffiths, Alison  
Harding, Monica  
Harris, Rebecca  
Hayes, rh Sir John  
Hinds, rh Damian  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Holmes, Paul  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hudson, Dr Neil  
Johnson, Dr Caroline  
Jones, Clive  
Jopp, Lincoln

Lake, Ben  
Lamont, John  
Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
Lowe, Rupert  
MacCleary, James  
Malthouse, rh Kit  
Mathew, Brian  
Medi, Llinos  
Miller, Calum  
Mohamed, Iqbal  
Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
Morello, Edward  
Morgan, Helen  
Mundell, rh David  
Obese-Jecty, Ben  
O’Brien, Neil  
Olney, Sarah  
Patel, rh Priti  
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Rankin, Jack  
Robertson, Joe  
Shannon, Jim  
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
Simmonds, David  
Slade, Vikki  
Smith, Greg  
Smith, Rebecca  
Spencer, Dr Ben  
Stephenson, Blake  
Stride, rh Sir Mel  
Stuart, rh Graham  
Swann, Robin  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Taylor, Luke  
Thomas, Bradley  
Vickers, Martin  
Vickers, Matt  
Wild, James  
Wood, Mike  
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Sir Ashley Fox and  
Gregory Stafford

## NOES

Aldridge, Dan  
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas  
Anderson, Callum  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Arthur, Dr Scott  
Asato, Jess  
Asser, James  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Bailey, Olivia  
Baker, Alex  
Ballinger, Alex  
Bance, Antonia  
Barker, Paula  
Barron, Lee  
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
Baxter, Johanna  
Beales, Danny  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Billington, Ms Polly  
Blake, Olivia  
Blake, Rachel  
Bloore, Chris  
Botterill, Jade  
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
Brash, Mr Jonathan  
Brickell, Phil  
Bryant, Chris  
Buckley, Julia  
Burgon, Richard  
Burton-Sampson, David  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, Ian  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Caliskan, Nesil  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Campbell, Irene  
Campbell, Juliet  
Campbell-Savours, Markus  
Carden, Dan  
Carns, Al  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Coleman, Ben  
Collier, Jacob  
Collinge, Lizzi  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam  
Coombes, Sarah  
Cooper, Andrew  
Costigan, Deirdre  
Coyle, Neil  
Creasy, Ms Stella  
Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Dalton, Ashley  
Darlington, Emily  
Davies, Jonathan  
Davies-Jones, Alex  
De Cordova, Marsha  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Anna  
Doughty, Stephen  
Downie, Graeme  
Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
Eagle, rh Maria  
Eccles, Cat  
Edwards, Lauren  
Efford, Clive  
Egan, Damien  
Elmore, Chris  
Entwistle, Kirith  
Evans, Chris  
Farnsworth, Linsey  
Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
Ferguson, Mark  
Foody, Emma  
Fookes, Catherine  
Foy, Mary Kelly  
Francis, Daniel  
Frith, Mr James  
Gardiner, Barry  
Gelder, Anna  
Glendon, Mary  
Goldsborough, Ben  
Grady, John  
Griffith, Dame Nia  
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote*  
*cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Hack, Amanda  
Hall, Sarah  
Hayes, Tom  
Hillier, Dame Meg  
Hinder, Jonathan  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire  
Hume, Alison  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hurley, Patrick  
Jogee, Adam  
Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
Jones, Louise  
Jones, Ruth  
Josan, Gurinder Singh  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Chris  
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast*  
*by Chris Elmore*)  
Khan, Afzal  
Khan, Naushabah  
Kitchen, Gen  
Kumar, Sonia  
Kumaran, Uma  
Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
Lamb, Peter  
Law, Noah  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Lewin, Andrew  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Macdonald, Alice  
MacNae, Andy  
Madders, Justin  
Martin, Amanda  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mather, Keir  
Mayer, Alex  
McAllister, Douglas  
McDonald, Andy  
McKenna, Kevin  
McMorrin, Anna  
McNally, Frank  
Midgley, Anneliese  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Moon, Perran  
Morden, Jessica  
Murphy, Luke  
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote*  
*cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Murray, Katrina

Myer, Luke  
Naish, James  
Naismith, Connor  
Narayan, Kanishka  
Nash, Pamela  
Newbury, Josh  
Nichols, Charlotte  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
Osborne, Kate  
Osborne, Tristan  
Owatemi, Taiwo  
Patrick, Matthew  
Payne, Michael  
Pearce, Jon  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Phillips, Jess  
Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
Pitcher, Lee  
Powell, Joe  
Prinsley, Peter  
Quigley, Mr Richard  
Race, Steve  
Ranger, Andrew  
Reynolds, Emma  
Rhodes, Martin  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rodda, Matt  
Russell, Sarah  
Ryan, Oliver  
Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smith, David  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Nick  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Stewart, Elaine  
Strathern, Alistair  
Strickland, Alan  
Sullivan, Kirsteen  
Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
Swallow, Peter  
Tami, rh Mark  
Tapp, Mike  
Taylor, David  
Taylor, Rachel  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thompson, Adam  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Tidball, Dr Marie  
Trickett, Jon  
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote*  
*cast by Adam Jogee*)  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Laurence  
Twigg, Derek  
Twist, Liz  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaughan, Tony  
Vaz, rh Valerie  
Vince, Chris  
Wakeford, Christian  
Ward, Chris  
Webb, Chris  
West, Catherine  
Wheeler, Michael  
Whitby, John  
White, Jo  
Whittome, Nadia  
Williams, David  
Woodcock, Sean  
Wrighting, Rosie  
Yang, Yuan  
Yemm, Steve

**Tellers for the Noes:**

**Kate Dearden and  
Gerald Jones**

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Third Reading*

2.30 pm

**Emma Reynolds:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

We can hopefully do Third Reading in a more relaxed fashion. As we have discussed through the Bill's passage, the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill will strengthen the UK's bank resolution regime by providing the Bank of England with a more flexible toolkit for responding to the failure of banking institutions.

As volatility over recent weeks has shown, global uncertainty can have a real impact on financial markets across the world. That is why it is important that the UK remains equipped with an effective financial stability toolkit. The primary objective of the recapitalisation mechanism introduced by the Bill is to protect the taxpayer; it will provide more comprehensive protection for public funds when banks fail. I think both sides of the House can agree that this is of vital importance to ensure that our constituents are not left on the hook when a bank collapses. The Bill achieves that without placing new up-front costs on the banking sector, and therefore strikes the right balance between protecting financial stability and supporting the Government's No. 1 priority of driving economic growth.



I would like to thank all those in this House and the other place who have contributed to the scrutiny of the Bill. In particular, I would like to thank the Opposition for their constructive engagement. As I said on Report, there is broad agreement on the primary objectives and principles of the Bill, but differing views have been expressed on the scope of the mechanism and certain finer details. I reiterate the Government's position: it is important to learn the lessons from the case of Silicon Valley Bank UK, which demonstrates that the implications of a firm's failure cannot always be anticipated, and things move very quickly. It is important that the legislation avoids overly restricting the Bank of England's ability to use the mechanism in unpredictable and fast-moving failure scenarios, and can achieve its primary objective of protecting the taxpayer. I hope that those in the other place will agree with the Government's position when the Bill returns there for their consideration.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), the hon. Members for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan) and for Wokingham (Clive Jones), and others who were on the Committee. I thank the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), and the hon. Members for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) and for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), for their contributions on Second Reading. I thank the Minister with responsibility for pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), who assisted me on Second Reading, and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for his input. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) for his speech on Report.

I would like to extend my gratitude to my officials in the Treasury for their hard work in developing this highly technical Bill, which could not easily be rushed, and for supporting me throughout the Bill's passage. I am also grateful to the House staff, parliamentary counsel and all other officials involved in the passage of the Bill.

This Bill supports the UK economy's resilience to the risks posed by bank failures. We all remember the damage caused by the financial crisis, and the Bill, alongside other measures that allow failures to be managed in an orderly way, upholds the economic and financial stability that will deliver on the Government's growth mission. I am pleased that the Bill has received broad

cross-party support in this House and the other place, and I look forward to its enactment. I commend it to the House.

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

**Mark Garnier:** May I first say a hearty congratulations to the Minister on bringing through her first Bill in the new Government? She was parachuted into the job rather recently, but she has done a magnificent job, and it has been a pleasure to engage with her. We share the aim of working in the interests of the wider economy, and we have worked together on the Bill. We may differ on a few tiny details, but we agree on its overall objective.

As I mentioned on Report, I spent some time on the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards looking at how we can stop another banking crisis, and on the Treasury Committee doing pre-legislative work on the Financial Services Act 2012. This is an iterative and organic process. We will never be able to stop financial crises happening, but working together, we can ensure that there are no more instances of contagion flooding through the system. This Bill is extraordinarily good in following that iterative process, in order to make the banking system unsinkable, I hope—and I do not use that term lightly, as someone might have done in the film "Titanic"; this is genuinely very important.

I pay credit to the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), and the former Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), and their officials, who worked tirelessly to ensure that Silicon Valley Bank UK was transferred to HSBC over that weekend, which undoubtedly avoided wider disruption to the financial system. We are delighted that the Bill was introduced in the previous Parliament, and we welcome the Government's decision to carry it over into this Parliament. I was about to say that our swords will cross in the coming months and years, but I do not think they will; I think we will almost certainly agree on things. We will engage with the Minister and her officials to ensure that we have a world-class financial system that is the envy of the world.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.*

## Flood Preparedness: Carlisle

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

2.38 pm

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): I am pleased to have secured an Adjournment debate on a topic that is so important to my constituency of Carlisle. In the last two decades, Carlisle has suffered two devastating floods, which have left local people fearful whenever there is a forecast of heavy rain.

In the flood of January 2005, which was the worst flood since 1822, three local people—Margaret Threlkeld, Margaret Porter and Michael Scott—tragically lost their life. Thousands were forced from their homes as 1,800 properties were overcome by water from the three rivers that converge in the centre of Carlisle. Power and telephone lines were disrupted. Road and rail networks were closed. All the city's buses were damaged. The civic centre, designated as the emergency control centre, along with the police station, the fire station, the main electricity substation, the telephone exchange and the sewage treatment works, were all severely flooded.

It was record rainfall that caused the flood of 2005, but just 10 years later that record was shattered, and Carlisle was flooded again. This time, 2,200 properties were breached with floodwater. Given that the floods were in 2005 and 2015, I think the Minister will understand why many of my residents are concerned that 2025, another year ending in a "5", might bring further devastation to our city. That fear is heightened, because the defences promised by the previous Government following the 2015 flood were never completed.

It is a fear I can personally relate to. In 1985, my family's home in the Denton Holme area of Carlisle—one of the areas still at risk because of those incomplete flood defences—was flooded when the River Caldew burst its banks. I can personally testify to the terror and helplessness that people feel when their home is invaded by water. We waded through what was once our living room, surveying possessions and furniture destroyed beyond repair. It is a horrible, crushing feeling, and even after the water subsides, the smell of damp and sewage remains. Returning to any sort of normality can take months, even years. My parents had spent the best part of two decades creating a home in Denton Holme that they loved, and my mam—who, incidentally, will turn 91 on Saturday—still talks of it. After the flood, she said she could never shake the sense or smell of damp, and within 18 months we had moved house.

In response to the 2005 flood, the then Labour Government commissioned and completed new flood defences, and over the next five years, £38 million was spent on the design and construction of flood defences at the Eden, Petteril and Caldew rivers. These were designed to protect Carlisle from a storm with a one in 200 chance of happening, and they did make a major difference. In 2012 and 2013, the defences were estimated to have prevented in excess of £180 million-worth of flood damage to the city. But on 5 December 2015, Storm Desmond hit Carlisle. It was a storm with a one in 333 chance of occurring. The rainfall triggered the highest level of flow ever recorded on the River Eden. In some locations, flood levels were approximately 600 mm higher than those experienced in 2005. Such was the

extent of the flood that the crossbar posts at Brunton Park, Carlisle United's famous stadium, were submerged under water. Fortunately, no one lost their life in 2015, and while the recently constructed defences were effective at reducing damage and delaying flooding in some locations, it was clear that more needed to be done.

Progress has been made in subsequent years, and I commend the Environment Agency for that. Since the catastrophic floods of 2015, some 1,650 homes are better protected, thanks to over 6 km of new or raised flood defences. There have also been improvements to two culverts and their associated inlet or outlet structures. The Carlisle phase 1 and 1a schemes, completed in 2021, have increased protections for homes and businesses around the Warwick Road and Botcherby areas of Carlisle. The Carlisle phase 2 scheme, also completed in 2021, raised the flood defences along the River Eden, providing further protection to the Hardwicke Circus and Castle Way areas. The Rickerby and Low Crosby schemes have also reduced the flood risk to local communities. It is particularly excellent that the latter took an award-winning, innovative, low-carbon approach; it removed historical embankments to increase the effectiveness of natural floodplains.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent and powerful speech about this awful problem that affects so many people, particularly in her part of England. Can wider lessons be learned from the techniques she is describing—for example, lessons about the use of natural materials, and about changes in land use, particularly in a range of river catchments? In my area in the Thames valley, both the Thames and the Kennet have flooded; as a result of climate change, they pose much greater risk than they did. Many residents have concerns about a range of issues, and I wonder if my hon. Friend thinks there is a wider national lesson to be learned.

**Ms Minns:** I do think there are lessons to be learned, not least because Carlisle has been so badly affected by flooding and it is so devastating. Lessons could be shared from the schemes that have been introduced in the city, particularly in relation to maximising the use of the floodplains. In a short while, I will discuss more generally some of the natural flood defence work that has happened on the outskirts of the city.

There have been a number of schemes to the north of Carlisle. In the town of Brampton, natural solutions like tree planting and the creation of wetlands have been used to mitigate the risk of flooding from the Brampton beck, all while providing wider environmental benefits to the community. A new natural flood management scheme is currently being delivered at Brampton Fell farm, offering further protection to the town. There has also been the return of the "wiggling river" at Howgill beck, which was straightened more than 200 years ago. Thanks to the work of RSPB Geltsdale warden Jen Selvidge, a 1.8 km stretch of the beck has been returned to its natural wiggly state. During heavy periods of rainfall the river can now spill out on to the natural surrounding floodplain meadows, helping to reduce the chance of flooding downstream towards Carlisle, as well as having the added bonus of creating vital pools and damp patches for wading birds to feed on.

I am delighted that earlier this month the restoration project won the prestigious UK river prize project-scale award for 2025. Natural flood management schemes like these have an important role to play, and I urge the Minister to look closely at how a redesigned sustainable farming incentive can best encourage and compensate farmers who do the right thing by their local community for the loss of the income that they might otherwise have earned from the farmland that they have given over to natural flood management schemes.

One of the groups that particularly deserves praise in keeping Carlisle's flood preparedness under the spotlight is the Carlisle Flood Action Group. Since its founding in January 2016 in the wake of the December flooding, it has done an excellent job of campaigning for the defences that our city needs. Indeed, it is one of many examples that show Carlisle at its very best. Our community is one that pulls together, and nothing encapsulates that better than it taking just 49 days from the 2015 floods to get the aforementioned Brunton Park back up and running and ready for matches once again. Some might say that, given our form this season, we could use a little bit of a delay to the end of it, but I will not dwell on that point.

Let me be clear: more needs to be done. In January last year river levels threatened to overwhelm the city again. Last May, rainfall equivalent to a one-in-300-year storm led to the flooding of 100 properties in the village of Scotby, just outside Carlisle. Our changing climate only makes these sorts of storms more common. Indeed, the Environment Agency believes that the impact of climate change in the River Eden catchment, which covers near the majority of my constituency, will be more severe than in the vast majority of river catchments in England.

At the very top of the list of what must be done is the Caldew flood risk management scheme, which many people in my constituency will know as the long-promised Carlisle phase 3 scheme—the one that was not delivered by the last Government. The scheme's objective is to reduce flood risk to over 1,700 properties in the Denton Holme, Caldewgate and Willowholme areas of the city. I was grateful to Carol Holt, the Environment Agency area director for Cumbria and Lancashire, for accompanying me on a tour across the area in February this year, but despite assurances dating back years, residents have become frustrated by a lack of communication from the EA since the project was first paused in 2021 due to viability concerns.

We are not the only community waiting for defences or even trying to get maintenance done to existing defences. After 14 years of Conservative dither and delay, some 3,000 Environment Agency high-consequence assets were below the required condition. That is one of the reasons that I am glad we now have a Labour Government, and an especially responsive Minister for Water and Flooding. I welcome the planned investment of a record £2.65 billion in the next two years to build and repair over 1,000 flood defences, better protecting 52,000 properties across the country.

Last month, over £1 million was pledged towards a number of schemes in north-west Cumbria, including road surface work at Etterby Terrace and Wigton Road in Carlisle, and a property flood resilience scheme at Warwick Bridge, just outside the city, which I have been pushing the EA to deliver since I entered this place and which is planned to be finished by winter 2025. Some £300,000 was secured for the long-mooted Caldew scheme;

I have been told that feasibility studies are due by the end of the summer, and although I look forward to their conclusions, I am concerned that even if a path is identified, it may be five to 10 years until the scheme can be delivered.

Tackling the risk from the Caldew cannot just be about creating ever higher and more expensive and imposing flood defences. Instead, we need a range of measures, both in Carlisle and outside it, to help slow and hold the water away from the city, buying precious time for the river levels to ease. I understand that the Caldew scheme will be one of the largest schemes that the Environment Agency has ever undertaken, but it is vital to the lives of over 100,000 residents in Carlisle and to the prosperity of a place that has been the centre of trading in north-west England since before Roman times. I recognise that delivering the scheme will not be quick and I urge the Minister to ensure that a suite of measures is employed in the interim to mitigate the immediate threat from the River Caldew. Those measures could include a plan to remove aggregate and vegetation build-up that slows the flow of the river through the city.

I wish to address one other aspect of flood preparedness: emergency planning. I am glad that further expansions of the flood warning provision have taken place in Carlisle, including two new flood warning areas at Warwick Bridge and Parham beck, covering a combined 330 properties. I am also grateful for the flooding text alerts that I receive on a regular basis, but one issue that has been pointed out to me, particularly by the Carlisle Flood Action Group, is the need for more information to be made available to the public ahead of an incident, so that people can see where their nearest emergency shelter is planned to be in the event of a flood. I understand that such information is not currently available, so the first time the public hear of those locations would be when a flood occurs.

**Matt Rodda:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point. In my own experience and that of local residents, alerts sometimes happen in the middle of the night, so it is extremely worrying and difficult for residents to respond quickly. She is right that there needs to be a proactive element, but does she also believe that there needs to be better co-ordination between private landowners, local authorities and the EA to tackle this issue? Particular concerns about private landowners have been raised with me. Will she comment on that point?

**Ms Minns:** I am aware, certainly in the Denton Holme area, that a number of different landowners have responsibility for the maintenance of the river banks. As my hon. Friend identifies, that patchwork of responsibilities gives rise to a number of issues. It would be desirable for more information about flood alerts to be available in advance, so that people could plan for such an eventuality, but I recognise that those plans need to be dynamic; as I highlighted, in 2005 people could not get to the emergency centre because it had been cut off by the flood water. I recognise that providing that information in advance will not be absolutely perfect, but it would be beneficial for it to be made available.

If emergency locations were known, residents would have a better understanding of where to move to in the event of an emergency and would begin to do so, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda)



[Ms Minns]

indicates, when that all-important flood alert came through. I would be grateful if the Minister could consider that point in her response.

In summary, I urge haste. I have already said that we are in another year ending in a “5”, and that does present concerns for my constituency. We passed the 20-year anniversary of the tragic 2005 floods in January and we approach the 10-year anniversary of the 2015 floods in December, so it is vital that we get on with delivering the schemes needed to keep our great border city safe and secure for many years to come.

2.55 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) for securing this debate. I wish a happy birthday to her mam, who I believe has her birthday at the weekend. I am really delighted to have the opportunity to hear about and discuss the steps being taken to prepare for flooding in Carlisle and across England. On a personal level, I have to say that my hon. Friend’s constituents made an excellent choice in making her their Member of Parliament, because she always lobbies me so nicely. That is always nice, but it also makes it very difficult for me ever to say no. I spoke with the Environment Agency earlier, and its representatives also told me how engaged my hon. Friend has been on flood risk reduction in Carlisle and were very complimentary about her persistent and kind lobbying.

Protecting communities, homes, businesses and farmland is our priority, and that is more important than ever as climate change brings more extreme weather to the nation. I have met my hon. Friend twice in the last year formally, and many times informally, to speak about some of the challenges that her constituency faces. I understand the awful experience of flooding, and I know full well that flooding of any kind is devastating for those affected. My hon. Friend has spoken in this House on the issue of flooding 20 years after the terrible 2005 floods, which are considered the worst in Carlisle since 1822 and, as she said, tragically claimed the lives of three people. In 2015, Carlisle saw further devastation from Storm Desmond. I know that she raised that issue last December, asking the Prime Minister what assurances could be given on delivering flood defences that might prevent a repeat. Only last year, Carlisle was badly affected again, so I understand my hon. Friend’s urgency.

Unlike the last Government, who left our defences in a state of disrepair, I am pleased to share that the investment for this year between April ’25 and March ’26 includes more than £1 million across nine schemes in my hon. Friend’s constituency alone. Her constituency is receiving £1,015,000 this financial year, of which £660,000 is allocated to the city of Carlisle itself. I know that she has expressed particular concern about the delays to the Caldew flood risk management scheme, which I am delighted to confirm has an investment of £300,000 this year for further development. I hope that reassures her that efforts to reduce flood risk to more than 1,700 properties in the Denton Holme, Caldewgate and Willowholme areas of the city are firmly in motion.

My hon. Friend mentioned the Caldew flood risk management scheme, which in ’25-26 will receive an investment of £300,000, in relation to feasibility studies.

In 2021, Environment Agency consultants carried out a feasibility study on further flood risk management options for the city of Carlisle, the outcome of which was that that option was not viable. However, another feasibility study is live on other potential options for flood risk management schemes, including, as my hon. Friend mentioned, work upstream of the city. The EA expects that study to conclude this summer.

Great progress has been made in Carlisle in recent years. Parts of the area have some of the highest standards of river and flood protection anywhere in the country, with new flooding schemes designed with a 0.5% annual probability of flooding. My hon. Friend highlighted the work of Jen Selvidge, the RSPB Geltsdale reserve warden, in helping to return 1.8 km of Howgill beck to its natural state of wiggleness, and the work of the Carlisle Flood Action Group to keep Carlisle’s flood preparedness in the spotlight. Local flood action groups play such an important role across this country. Led by the communities themselves, those groups give a voice to local areas and allow communities to work in partnership with local authorities and the Environment Agency. I pay tribute to all of them up and down the country.

Turning to the use of emergency shelters in a flooding event, it is of course local authorities that are responsible for setting up and managing rest centres during evacuations, providing temporary shelter and support for those who have been evacuated. Typically, those locations are not published in advance, as the locations in use will depend on availability, the location of the emergency, and the number of people who may need to use them. The concern is that publishing in advance could risk people attending an inactive location, or one affected by the emergency itself—my hon. Friend mentioned one of the emergency centres itself being flooded, and therefore unable to be used. We will, however, work with the local authority to ensure that a list of potential shelters is published, which can provide residents with notice of where their nearest shelters may be set up.

During a flood emergency, local authorities and the Environment Agency work closely with other emergency partners to co-ordinate messaging—including the possible use of emergency alerts—to affected communities and local flood groups, to ensure that residents have timely and consistent guidance during an emergency. I spoke to the Environment Agency this morning, which informed me that it would contact my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle to discuss the location of emergency shelters in Carlisle and how to make people aware of where they could be, while taking into account that in an emergency, some of them might not be able to be used. We do not want people going to the wrong place, so there is a balance to be struck, but the Environment Agency is happy to talk to my hon. Friend in more detail.

Carlisle is one of the many areas in England that will be receiving investment this year. I am therefore proud to share that in delivering on the Government’s plan for change, we are investing a record £2.65 billion over two years in the construction of new flood schemes and the repair and maintenance of existing ones. With that funding, 1,000 flood schemes have been supported or will continue to be supported, helping to protect 52,000 more homes and businesses. Maintenance of existing flood defences is also being prioritised, ensuring that a further 14,500 properties will have their expected level of protection maintained or restored. In total, 66,500

properties will benefit from that funding, helping to secure jobs, deliver growth and protect against economic damage.

We recognise that many flood defence projects have stalled over time, due partly to an outdated formula for allocating money. We have therefore made available £140 million from the £2.65 billion investment programme, which has been prioritised for 29 projects that are ready for delivery, ensuring that nearby communities are protected as soon as possible. The full list of schemes to receive funding in 2025-26 was announced on 31 March and can be found online, and we will of course continue to invest in new defences.

Because we have inherited flood assets that are in the poorest condition on record following years of under-investment, 3,000 of the Environment Agency's 38,000 high-consequence assets have been left below the required condition. In a November 2023 report, the National Audit Office recognised that increasing investment in operating and maintaining existing flood defences was critical to reducing the frequency and impact of flooding. As such, we are taking decisive action to fix the foundations, giving communities confidence that flood defences will protect them. To support that action, we are re-prioritising £108 million of investment in repairing and restoring critical assets: £36 million in 2024-25 to target repairs towards assets damaged in storms last winter and ongoing flood events; and a further £72 million this year to continue repairs and ensure that assets are as resilient and reliable as possible, and that they operate as expected in flood events.

In addition, the environmental land management schemes present a valuable opportunity to support flooding and coastal erosion risk management aims through direct funding of actions, providing a revenue stream to support landowners working with EA capital schemes, and indirect actions, which will lead to reduced watercourse maintenance requirements and increase the lifespan of our assets. I would like to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle that the EA actively monitors aggregate and vegetation throughout the year for critical locations that are trigger points, and when those trigger levels are met, gravel and vegetation is removed when timing allows. If she has any concerns about those levels—if she believes they have already been met—that can be another conversation to continue with the Environment Agency.

Protecting communities around the country from flooding is one of the Secretary of State's five core priorities, which is why we set up the flood resilience taskforce to provide oversight of national and local flood resilience and preparedness. That taskforce brings together Ministers from DEFRA, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Cabinet Office and the Department for Transport—the fact that we have so many Ministers in the same room to discuss flood resilience demonstrates the priority given to that issue across Government. It marks a new approach to preparing for flooding by bringing together representatives from national, regional and local government, the devolved Administrations, the emergency services, charities and environmental interest groups. I was pleased to chair the taskforce when it met on 5 February to look at learning from flooding since last September and longer-term funding and investment reform. The discussions from that meeting are now being taken forward through

collaborative action groups of taskforce members, and we are looking at flood warnings, flood recovery and flood insurance. The next taskforce meeting will take place in May 2025, where the action groups will report back on their work to improve flood resilience and better protect and support vulnerable communities, because flood warnings are frequently mentioned as a concern after flooding events.

We are also providing vital funding to support greater resilience for farmers and rural communities. The Government announced last month an additional £16 million boost to the internal drainage board fund, which has been bolstered to a total of £91 million from the previously allocated £75 million. It will enable investment in modernising and upgrading IDB assets and waterways to ensure they are fit for the future. More than 400,000 hectares of agricultural land and around 91,000 homes and businesses across England are expected to benefit from the IDB fund.

Turning to the sustainable farming initiative, more than half of all farmed land is now being managed in environmental land management schemes. That includes more than 37,000 live SFI agreements undertaking a range of actions, including to strengthen natural flood defences. We announced on 11 March that the current SFI budget had been fully allocated, and we will continue to support farmers to transition to more sustainable farming models, including through the thousands of existing SFI agreements over the coming years, and a reformed SFI offer.

Now is the right time for a reset of SFI, supporting farmers, delivering for nature and targeting public funds fairly and effectively towards priorities for food, farming and nature. The Government will work with the farming sector to prioritise funding for future years, so that we can target those who will benefit most before reopening to new applicants. There will be a new and improved SFI offer, with details to follow in summer after the spending review. The improved SFI scheme will be another step in this Government's new deal for farmers to support growth and farm profitability. If my hon. Friend would like, I can share details highlighting her interest in providing views to the officials responsible.

Looking ahead, I have set out plans to consult on a new strategic vision for floods investment. I am pleased to say that a consultation on reforms to the funding formula will be launching shortly this spring. We will ensure that the challenges facing businesses and rural and coastal communities are adequately taken into account when delivering flood protection. Flood schemes proceeding in 2026, 2027 and beyond will continue to be subject to the annual regional flood and coastal committees consenting process, with local elected representation, and to decisions from the upcoming spending review.

**Matt Rodda:** I appreciate the work that the Minister is doing in this area. She is proving herself to be an excellent Minister who is willing to listen to those of us with concerns about flooding. As part of the review, is it possible to investigate the role of locks and weirs in river catchments and how they are maintained and operated when rivers are at a high level? Concerns have been raised with me by local residents that some weirs or locks—this is an issue within the community, which I have not yet been able to fully check out—may have been opened at times of high flow, when perhaps it might

[Matt Rodda]

have been better for the water to have been managed in a different way. Is it possible to have further consultation on that?

I understand that in some catchments there are different ways of locks and weirs being managed, and it may be that there is no national standard. On the Thames, there are often lock-keepers who are paid employees, but with some tributaries, it is not as organised as that, and it may be individual landowners who are responsible. In our area, the way that the Kennet—it is a large tributary, but still only a tributary—is managed is different from and less professionalised than the Thames, and concerns have been expressed about that.

**Emma Hardy:** I thank my hon. Friend for his thoughtful contribution as always and for his interest in this area. The management of locks and weirs probably does not come into the scope of the flooding formula review, but I have heard the point he is making, and I will talk to officials about whether the management of locks is taken into account with flood plans and how that is managed consistently around the country. I will write back to him on that, if that would be useful.

The Government's record two-year investment in our flood defences will better protect communities across the country from flooding. It will also boost economic

growth in local communities by protecting businesses, delivering new jobs and supporting a stable economy in the face of the increasing risk of flooding as a result of climate change.

Through our plan for change, this Government will deliver a decade of national renewal and economic growth, and we are committed to ensuring that communities are better protected from flooding in the first place. We will continue to deliver and repair flood defences, improve drainage systems and develop natural flood management schemes. As ever, the emergency services, the Environment Agency, local authorities, voluntary organisations and Government Departments stand ready to support affected people in any future flooding event, and I pay tribute to them all. It is a personal priority and a privilege to be the Minister responsible for flooding, and I will continue working to ensure that this country is more resilient to floods.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** As the Member for Carlisle mentioned her mother's 91st birthday, it is only appropriate that I wish Freda Minns—what a beautiful name—a very happy birthday.

*Question put and agreed to.*

3.10 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Thursday 24 April 2025

[DAWN BUTLER *in the Chair*]

## Lesbian Visibility Week

1.30 pm

**Kate Osborne** (Jarrow and Gateshead East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Lesbian Visibility Week.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. In this debate we are considering that this House believes LGBTQIA+ women and non-binary people should be recognised for the work that they do and the joy that they bring.

Lesbian Visibility Week originated in 1990, and has been given life and observed annually in the UK since 2019, enabled by my good friend and ex-publisher of *DIVA* magazine, Linda Riley. I am so pleased that we are once again acknowledging its importance in a Parliament that boasts the largest number of openly lesbian, bisexual and gay women MPs in history.

Maureen Colquhoun, the first openly lesbian MP, was elected 51 years ago but was deselected by her local party the year she came out—a stark reminder of the struggles faced by lesbian politicians. It took 23 years for there to be another openly lesbian MP. Thankfully, there are now a lot more of us, including some of my brilliant colleagues who will be speaking in this debate.

Lesbian and gay women face intersecting discrimination based on their gender and sexuality, and of course, people of colour and lesbians with disabilities also face unique challenges and discrimination due to intersecting identities. But while it is crucial to address those challenges, it is equally important to celebrate the significant contributions that lesbians make in fostering solidarity and sisterhood within their communities. Lesbian women have played, and will always play, a pivotal role in not only supporting each other but leading and strengthening the broader women's and LGBT+ rights movements.

For the past five years we have set aside this week in April to celebrate and uplift lesbians everywhere, from all backgrounds and all walks of life. We are a community that grows stronger each and every year for it. This year, the theme is celebrating rainbow families, focusing on LGBT+ women and non-binary people's families and recognising the importance of all family structures.

On Tuesday night I was proud to host the second annual parliamentary launch of Lesbian Visibility Week. At the event, London Women's Clinic launched its new IVF equality manifesto. As a mum of two wonderful boys, one of whom was conceived through IVF, it is a subject close to my heart. Everyone deserves the chance to start a family, no matter their sexuality or gender identity.

It was around 16 years ago that I started the IVF process as part of a same-sex couple. At that time we went through unnecessary procedures, a long waiting list and significant costs. But despite the hurdles it was achievable, and my wonderful youngest son is now 14.

Since the IVF journey that I was part of, the hurdles that LGBT+ couples have to jump through have increased, with a fragmented NHS meaning a postcode lottery in provision, while the financial cost is significantly higher.

The event was attended by many MPs and guests, and I thank everyone who came. I particularly thank the Minister for Equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), for attending the event and speaking, and for responding to this debate, as well as *DIVA*'s Linda Riley and Anya Sizer from the London Women's Clinic for their speeches. It is disappointing that despite multiple promises there remain far too many unnecessary financial and practical barriers for same-sex couples, and a postcode lottery on IVF. I have written to the Secretary of State and Ministers on that on a number of occasions, and I will keep fighting until all barriers are removed.

I have dedicated most of my political career to campaigning for LGBTQIA+ equality. My first political activism was campaigning against section 28 and highlighting the damage it did, and continues to do, to our community. Section 28 was intended to silence the discussion of lesbians and gays. It failed. It united and energised our communities.

**Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Like her, my first political activism was campaigning against section 28; that is what made me join our wonderful party. I feel truly supported by her and by my other lesbian colleagues in this place. It was that rhetoric, and comments that our relationships and families were somehow pretend family relationships, that was so hurtful. Does she agree that we now need to safeguard against the risks of the rhetoric about trans people doing the same sort of harm to them as it did to us in the 1980s?

**Kate Osborne:** I absolutely agree, and will touch on that later. As a community, we are always stronger when we are together, and we will always have T as part of the LGBT community.

Given the global attacks on our LGBT+ community, we need to find that fighting spirit again. The attacks on our community did not just start happening again; they were driven by far-right money from America, hate in this country and globally, the media and—yes—politicians, who should know better, continuing to demonise the LGBT+ community. Last year, I spoke about the increase in the lesbophobia that I faced: from being called a rug-muncher to being called a nonce, and having pride flags in my home town of Hebburn ripped down.

We have seen a rise in hate crime, and we must make active efforts to support our non-binary and trans community, who still face unique day-to-day challenges for simply being themselves and loving who they love. Under current hate crime legislation, hate crimes based on race or religion can attract a greater penalty because they are classified as aggravated offences. Our manifesto committed to ensuring that hate crime based on sexual orientation, gender identity and/or disability would also be classified as aggravated offences. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about moves towards that happening.

I sit on the Council of Europe and its committee on equality and non-discrimination. Part of my brief is reporting on the ban on so-called conversion practices

[Kate Osborne]

across Europe. As part of that, I visit and speak to people in other countries about their legislation. One country was Italy. Outrageously, the official visit request was rejected, and I was unofficially told that this was because they did not want more of our finger-wagging critique. Thankfully, the very nice Maltese Government have offered us a visit instead.

Just last month, as I got off a train at King's Cross, I was verbally abused by a man who shouted at me that I was obviously a lesbian, that I was a sexual deviant and that I was going to hell. I am frequently misgendered. I do not mean occasionally—it is a weekly occurrence. In January, I was misgendered three times during one two-hour train journey. I have been misgendered by staff of this House. I was misgendered while buying some jeans last week. This is genuinely a frequent issue for me and a number of my lesbian friends.

I note that Ministers said yesterday that there will be guidance regarding the Supreme Court verdict. That decision will have a huge impact on my life, on many other cis lesbians and, indeed, on heterosexual women. I suspect that I will get challenged even more now when accessing facilities. The impact on my life will be problematic, but the impact on my trans siblings' lives will be significantly worse.

**Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and for securing debate. I know that she has spoken passionately about these issues over many decades and that, like me, she will have received lots of correspondence from concerned trans and LGBT+ constituents over the last few days. Does she agree that it is for the Labour Government to get on with advancing the LGBT rights in the manifesto—things like the trans-inclusive conversion therapy ban, modernisation of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and making LGBT hate crime an aggravated offence?

**Kate Osborne:** Yes, I believe that only now, with a Labour Government, will we see the continued advancement of LGBT rights, as we have in the past.

While we are on the topic of the judgment, let me say that it does not offer clarity. I believe that it has sown division and caused contradictions in legislation. The ruling was made without a single contribution from trans people and leaves them legally and practically at a huge disadvantage. I believe that the judgment raises many more questions than it answers, and I will be writing to the Secretary of State to set that out.

As a woman, a lesbian, a feminist and a proud dyke, the Supreme Court judgment, for me, is a step backwards. The court should not be telling me what a lesbian is or is not or how I should identify. We need empathy in finding ways to support people and let everyone live their own lives. Of course, we need to protect single-sex spaces in the very limited situations that they are needed—which is, and was already, covered in legislation and has never been disputed—while maintaining clear protections for trans people, especially trans women.

To see an already marginalised community attacked even more and the use of the law to increase discrimination, not prevent it, is deeply upsetting. Those celebrating the impact the decision has on trans women—that of curtailing their protections—should not be surprised when the

same people that funded and supported their attacks then push for rights to be rolled back for all women. Research from Just Like Us clearly highlights that young lesbians are more supportive of the trans community than any other part of the LGBTQIA+ community. They are most likely to know a trans person—92%—and to say that they are supportive or very supportive of trans people—96%.

**Ms Polly Billington** (East Thanet) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. In the light of what she is saying about young lesbians, I want to champion the work of Schools OUT, which is led and was founded by one of my constituents, Sue Sanders. The organisation educates people in school about the importance of LGBT diversity, challenges prejudice at exactly the important moment in young people's lives when they will be exploring who they may want to be as they grow older, and increases the tolerance and respect that everybody deserves.

**Kate Osborne:** In this as in so many other ways, young people can often teach us a lesson or two. I am pleased that my hon. Friend referenced Sue Sanders, as I did in my speech last year, and all the great work she has done over the years with Schools OUT, and indeed across the whole of our movement.

Contrary to the narrative being heard at the moment, most heterosexual women agree with young lesbians. We need to be clear that lesbophobia, homophobia and transphobia are driven by attacks from a far-right, hateful minority. Feminism has to be intersectional, recognising that all women, including trans women, deserve the same rights, safety and respect.

I thank the Minister for giving up her time today, and for all her work. Having an out lesbian Minister responding to a debate on Lesbian Visibility Week is something that we can all be very proud of.

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

1.44 pm

**Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I congratulate my hon. Friend and sister the Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East (Kate Osborne) on securing this debate. I am a proud trade unionist, a proud Black Country MP and a proud lesbian MP—out for 26 years and now out here in this place. I rise to add my voice and my visibility to the debate. I could talk about the advances made by Labour Governments or the advances we hope for from this Labour Government, but instead I want to talk about a subject very close to my heart, the subject of this year's Lesbian Visibility Week: being a mama.

There have always been lesbian mums. So many of us feel the urge to parent and to mother, often—sometimes in the past, sometimes today—in the face of huge homophobia and abuse, as well as practical obstacles. Indeed, a Radio 4 documentary in December, "The Lesbian Mothers Scandal", set out how homophobic judges removed children from their mums simply because they were lesbians and sometimes gave custody of the children to abusive fathers. These women, who are now

in their 70s and 80s, deserve an apology for the actions of the courts and the family court system. I hope the Minister will look at giving it.

I say again what I said in my maiden speech a few months ago:

“I grew up in a world where people like me could not get married, but now our beloved daughter has both her mothers’ names on her birth certificate.”—[*Official Report*, 8 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 194.]

One of the proudest achievements of our last Labour Government, but one that people sometimes do not speak of, was the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008. For the first time, it recognised lesbian parents with both our names on birth certificates, and it opened fertility treatment to us, as well as to single women. Sometimes I think it is missed off the list of achievements of the last Labour Government, because it was an achievement for women in particular.

Now that we have a Labour Government again, it is time to take the next step, for all the lesbians who would like to have a family, and make sure that we equalise fertility treatment on the NHS. It is so clear that lesbian women still face unequal barriers to accessing fertility treatment. They face an average cost of £25,000 before they become eligible for NHS treatment, because of the need to jump through the hurdles of self-funded IUI rounds—sometimes many rounds—before they qualify. My own integrated care board, the Black Country ICB, requires lesbian couples to undertake six cycles of self-funded IUI before they are eligible for IVF. That is in addition to the cost of donor sperm, which I know for sure is not cheap. In my area, just one cycle of IVF is funded, not three as per the NICE guidelines.

The financial impact of self-funding is huge. For many couples, the disappointment when one IVF round is not enough is completely avoidable. I would like to see revised NICE guidelines and a commitment that every area should meet those guidelines in full. After all, as well as being Lesbian Visibility Week, this week is Infertility Awareness Week. I send my solidarity to all the women and their partners who are trying to conceive—TTC, in the language of the message boards.

**Rachel Taylor:** I recently spoke to a constituent who wanted to have a baby with her partner. She was told by her ICB that because of her partner’s situation—her partner already had a child—she would not qualify for any rounds of IVF. I looked into it and found that to be the case in other ICBs too. This needs to be taken into account as people enter new relationships. That is so important for our community.

**Antonia Bance:** My hon. Friend and sister is absolutely correct. There are a load of stupid barriers that do not reflect modern families and how we form our relationships nowadays. People do form second partnerships, and people do have existing children. Frankly, when many people are delaying childbearing and when fertility problems are on the rise, although in many cases they are completely soluble with medical treatment that we know very well how to do, the fact that these barriers continue to exist is absolutely outrageous. Too many women are navigating a postcode lottery and unfair rules, piling costs on their credit cards—I know about that—and worrying about money when they should be concentrating on the medical process.

In this place, books for children depicting all sorts of families were once decried as depraved and were used as justification to deny that lesbian families existed, to silence us and to call our families pretend. No longer. Heather does have two mummies, and so do Sam, Sanjay, Jessie, Aaron, Lily, Albie, Clementine and so many more, because it is love that makes a family.

1.51 pm

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East (Kate Osborne) for securing this incredibly important debate and for her tireless work in advocating for the rights of lesbians and the entire LGBTQ+ community. I am very glad that she is in Parliament and that I have the privilege of working with her.

As an MP who is an out queer woman, I am also grateful for the foremothers who made living as my true self in the public eye possible, from the countless activists who fought for and won the rights that we all enjoy today to lesbian MPs such as Maureen Colquhoun, a campaigner for the abolition of women’s prisons, the liberalisation of abortion law and the decriminalisation of sex work who was deselected in a homophobic campaign, and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), a key architect of the Equality Act who I am privileged to call my friend.

Lesbian Visibility Week’s mission is to recognise and celebrate LGBTQ+ women and non-binary people. This year’s theme is rainbow families. Rainbow families have always existed and always will, but queer women and non-binary people both here and internationally face many barriers to having the families they want. In the UK, many people are shocked to learn that we still do not have equal access to IVF, despite the previous Government publishing a women’s health strategy in 2022 that promised to tackle the issue. Ninety per cent of integrated healthcare boards in England require LGBTQ+ couples to self-fund at least six cycles of artificial insemination before they are eligible for NHS IVF treatment. Lesbian couples should not be forced to pay for private treatment simply as a gateway to NHS care. That is why I am proud to back the IVF equality manifesto and the wider fertility justice campaign manifesto, which also campaigns for important changes to birth certificates.

It would be remiss of me to talk about family without emphasising the importance of chosen family in the LGBTQ+ community. Although there are many supportive parents and family members out there who should be celebrated, a common experience within our community is rejection, hostility and a lack of acceptance by those we are related to. That is why chosen family is so important. I want to be clear that just because someone does not share our DNA, it does not mean that they are any less our family. I am so grateful for the deep bonds that I have formed outside the traditional family unit, as well as within it. That is something I think many of us can benefit from, whether we are LGBTQ or not.

Visibility is something to celebrate. Every person should be able to live openly and freely, loving who they want, but sadly many lesbians still do not feel able to do so in certain contexts. Visibility sometimes comes at a price. Queer women are still the victims of hate crimes simply for being queer women, and rates are rising.



[Nadia Whittome]

Let us be clear that the overwhelming danger towards women, whether they are LGBTQ+ or not, comes from violent cis men. That is why I am deeply concerned about the impact of last week's Supreme Court judgment and the way in which it is being interpreted.

Making it legal to exclude trans women from bathrooms and changing rooms is discriminatory. Forcing them to use men's facilities would put them at greater risk of violence. It also sends a dangerous message, because it enables people who see themselves as the gender police to challenge people in bathrooms and harass them. Of course, trans women will above all be the victims of this behaviour and face being driven out of society, but other people will also be affected. Cis lesbians, women of colour, non-binary people, trans men, women with conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome and anyone who is gender non-conforming—who does not conform to these Eurocentric and ever-narrowing standards of femininity and womanhood—are likely to become a target too.

Incredibly, anti-trans campaigners regularly use lesbians as a justification for their agenda—an agenda that, by the way, undermines all of our rights. They claim that they are standing up for lesbians who do not want to share their spaces with trans women, when polling shows that cis lesbians and bisexual women are more supportive of trans people than any other group. They claim that trans people are forcing young cis lesbians to become trans men. This is the same as what was said about gay people under Thatcher: that we were “converting” children. Today, thankfully, most of society accepts that that is absolute nonsense, and there are more young women than ever before identifying as lesbian and bisexual. We should be pleased that people feel able to be their true selves, but it also puts to bed the lie that young lesbians are being forced to become trans men.

Finally, it is important to remember that many of the rights that queer people have now are relatively recent. The last Labour Government is quite rightly often remembered as a time of progress for LGBTQ+ people, but just as rights can be won, they can be lost. This Labour Government risks being remembered as a period when things went backwards for our community. We have only been in government for less than a year. It is possible to turn the ship around, but we must recognise that actions such as the blanket ban on puberty blockers and barring trans women from women's spaces are dangerous steps in the wrong direction. We must take action to remedy them.

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** I call Liv Bailey. I am very mindful that we have a vote coming up shortly, so I may have to stop you mid-speech, Liv.

1.58 pm

**Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): No problem. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Butler. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East (Kate Osborne) for securing this debate: she is a fantastic champion of our community and I thank her for all that she does.

It is a wonderful privilege to speak in this debate today as a proud lesbian MP. I am an historian by trade and I particularly enjoy learning about the social history

of our country and of the everyday people who organised, agitated and persisted to deliver the enormous social change that we have witnessed over the past few centuries, but it has always struck me that there was something not quite right about the books that I have pored over, which is that lesbians are completely missing. Women who we might now look back on and suggest may have been lesbians or LGBTQ+ are brushed past. There are pages of unwritten sentences and of unheard stories. In the words of the historian Rebecca Jennings, lesbian history

“has frequently been associated with silence, invisibility, and denial”.

Her excellent book “A Lesbian History of Britain” contains many examples that I will draw on today.

Throughout our history, lesbians have been forced to hide their love and their relationships out of fear, and it is no surprise that so few records exist. But I will admit to being somewhat surprised by the pains to which historians have gone to explain away what seems quite obvious. Two women in the late 1700s who eloped to Wales, shared a bed and addressed each other as “my beloved” in their correspondence were described by historians as having a “romantic friendship”, but not one that was intimate. I do not dispute the power of a friendship between women, but that seems a stretch.

The discovery of Anne Lister's diaries in the 1980s, which were carefully written in an ancient Greek code, were a turning point. She had the courage to document her relationships with women. The discovery of her diaries shattered the historical conspiracy to erase us. When I think about the women throughout our history who might now be stood proudly with us as lesbians but who did not have the power that we do of rights, an identity and a community, I think the most important thing we can do is tell our stories and be proud of who we are. We must never underestimate the power of being seen.

The theme of Lesbian Visibility Week this year is rainbow families. It is fantastic to celebrate all the families with LGBTQ+ parents. I know from my own experience of adopting my children that there is absolutely nothing more precious than having the opportunity to be a mum. My boys are the best thing that will ever happen to me. Growing up, I could never have imagined the possibility of being a mum, but being a family that turns heads is not always easy. I should not have had to hurry my family away from aggressive shouting in the street. I should not have to monitor every turned head in the street to see whether I will be met with a smile or a frown. And it should not feel like I am staging my own small act of rebellion every time I hold hands with my wife at the school gate.

**Ms Billington:** In the context of my hon. Friend's experience as a lesbian mother, will she consider the experience of lesbian mothers in their 70s and 80s, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance)? Does she agree with me and my hon. Friend that there is an argument now for an apology to those mothers, who experienced not just shouting in the street but institutional attacks on their right to family life as a result not of the law, but of the prejudice of the courts?

**Olivia Bailey:** Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention.

I am very proud to be an out lesbian MP, and I am prouder than words can describe of my family. With the privilege of the position that I have in this place, I will do my best to be seen to be myself, because that is the best way to honour those who have come before us and to ensure that, for those who come after, being a lesbian, being LGBTQ+ or being a rainbow family is finally non-remarkable. When the historians pen the books about our small window of time, it is not just that our whole lives will be documented but that it will be possible to read about them without a single sign of shame or controversy, because we deserve nothing less.

2.3 pm

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Butler. I congratulate the hon. Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East (Kate Osborne) for securing this vital debate and for her excellent speech. It is wonderful to hear from so many sisters across the House. Lesbian visibility matters because representation brings understanding, and understanding brings change. I want to talk about the inequalities that lesbians still face, the value of community and safe spaces, and what we as legislators can do to ensure that lesbians are not just seen but heard, respected and supported.

But before I do, I want to take a moment to celebrate a woman who spent her life working for lesbian rights and visibility. I was delighted to learn that earlier this year, Studio Voltaire and the London LGBT+ Forums' Network unveiled a rainbow plaque honouring the inspirational Jackie Forster outside her former London home. After her death, it was said that if she had served a cause other than lesbian rights, she would have been festooned with honours. She would have been called Dame Jackie Forster. So courageous was she that, in 1969, she came out by announcing to the world at Speakers' Corner,

"You are looking at a roaring dyke",  
a name I often get called.

Jackie was daring and unapologetic, and we must ensure that her fortitude and her legacy continue. Jackie spearheaded the launch of the triumphant and bold 1970s lesbian magazine, *Sappho*, a publication that reached out to women suffering crippling isolation at a time when the pressure of heterosexual compliance was high. *Sappho* created a much needed safe forum that allowed women to realise that they were not freakish outcasts or mentally unwell; they were lesbians, and there were many other women like them.

Fifty years on, in 2023, University College London published a sobering study showing that LGB individuals are three times more likely to self-harm and twice as likely to experience suicidal thoughts compared with heterosexual people. Within that group, lesbians face specific and significant mental health challenges, ranging from increased rates of depression to internalised self-hate. These challenges are even more pronounced among those who have not felt able to disclose their sexual orientation. The mental health inequalities that lesbians face stem in large part from what has been called "minority stress".

2.6 pm

*Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.*

2.31 pm

*On resuming—*

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** The debate may continue until 3.25 pm.

**Sarah Dyke:** As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted by the Division bell, the mental health inequalities that lesbians face stem in large part from what has been called "minority stress", which is the strain of navigating a world that too often marginalises or misunderstands them. Internalised stigma, fear of rejection and the emotional toll of either concealing or repeatedly disclosing one's identity all contribute. But there is a powerful antidote: community, a sense of belonging, support from others who understand. That is why lesbian spaces matter.

Lesbian bars, clubs and social venues have long provided a sanctuary—a space to be oneself, free from judgment or hyper-sexualization, free from the male gaze or a society that does not always understand. Yet in many parts of the UK and across the west, lesbian venues are vanishing. The 1990s saw a surge of women-only spaces in London including First Out, the Candy Bar, Vespa, Glass Bar, Due South and Oak Bar, many of which I have frequented. Sadly, they had all closed by 2015. In Amsterdam, a city long seen as a beacon of LGBT+ inclusion, one of the last lesbian bars, Vivelavie, closed in 2017 after nearly four decades.

A recent survey of more than 500 lesbians showed that 96% were concerned about the loss of lesbian spaces and community groups. This must act as a wake-up call. We need better research into this decline and greater innovation in how we support and preserve lesbian-only spaces and communities, both physical and digital.

We must also address how media, particularly online pornography, contributes to the damaging stereotyping of lesbians. Lesbian porn is consistently among the most-searched categories on mainstream sites, yet the portrayals are not reflective of reality. Instead, they are often harmful and degrading, and they distort how lesbians are perceived by others, and worse still, by themselves. Increasingly, young same-sex attracted women are distancing themselves from the term "lesbian" due to its association with those harmful tropes. Our education system must respond. It is essential that we reform relationships and sex education not only to protect children from the harms of online pornography, but to challenge these stereotypes and promote positive and diverse lesbian role models, because every child deserves to see someone like them reflected in the world around them.

Internationally, we must not turn a blind eye. In many countries, same-sex attraction remains a criminal offence and, in some cases, lesbians face abhorrent violence. The 2008 brutal gang rape and murder of South African footballer Eudy Simelane shone a light on the horror of so-called "corrective rape", a hate crime that is still reported around the world, especially in the global south. The UK must be a leader in global human rights, pushing for decriminalisation and protection for same-sex-attracted people around the world.

Lesbians also face different challenges when they begin to consider starting a family. All LGBTQ+ people deserve equitable access to the reproductive healthcare services they need, but inequalities persist and must be addressed urgently. Only three of the 42 ICBs in England give female same-sex couples access to fertility funding, while others give access to funding to women who have

[Sarah Dyke]

not conceived after two years of unprotected intercourse, or six to 12 self-funded rounds of artificial insemination. That is clearly discriminatory.

One cycle of IVF costs about £5,000 or more, so some women will need to find in excess of £30,000 to start a family. Some are so desperate to start their family that they are forced to seek alternative, often dangerous routes, where they put themselves physically, psychologically and legally at risk. As always, the costs of those risks far outweigh the costs of their fertility treatment. The Liberal Democrats will therefore push for an integrated care body to make this change a priority, to ensure that equitable access to IVF is available for all lesbian couples who are looking to start their own family.

Let me end on a note of hope. The British social attitudes survey shows our country has become significantly more open and accepting. In 1983, 17% of people believed that same-sex relationships were not wrong at all. In 2023, that figure stood at 67%. And those who say same-sex relationships are always wrong has plummeted from 50% to just 9%. Such progress matters. It helps to make people feel safer, more accepted and more empowered to live openly and authentically. Liberal Democrats believe in a freer, fairer and more compassionate society. That includes recognising and uplifting lesbian voices, protecting lesbian culture and ensuring that everybody, especially those who are most marginalised in our communities, feel safe, supported and seen.

2.37 pm

**Mims Davies** (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Butler. I thank the hon. Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East (Kate Osborne) for securing this debate and all Members for their important contributions. It is always a pleasure to speak on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition.

Today has been a real celebration of the role of lesbians in our society and the contribution we can all make, irrespective of who we are and who we love. That should be no different whoever we may be. I am very proud of our party's action on civil partnerships and equal marriage. It is important to recognise that around 1.2% of women identify as lesbian. The hon. Member for Jarrow and Gateshead was with her uncle just last night in East Grinstead as we celebrated Rotary's 39th birthday. We have different views on politics, but representation for all is something we very much agree on, so it is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

It is also a pleasure to speak opposite the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), who has shared her sexuality openly for many years, and added real value to this House since 2016 while sharing her personal journey. What is so amazing about being in this House is that we can share our personal journeys, our friends and families, and that enriches our debates.

I want to celebrate some party colleagues of mine who made their contributions at the very top in Cabinet. Conservative Justine Greening became the first lesbian Cabinet Minister in 2016. As she memorably put it:

"I campaigned for Stronger In but sometimes you're better off out!"

Movingly, she said afterwards:

"It really struck me in my constituency how many parents wrote to me saying: thank you because you made it easier for my child at school."

As many others have said, having visible role models is vital. Many women today are visible role models, making it easier for people to discover their true selves, which is what this week is really about.

Wider society having come so far, it is astounding that my former colleague Margot James, who was the MP for Stourbridge, was not only the first out Conservative lesbian MP, but the first MP to be out before her election back in 2010. I am pleased to see many others across this House continuing to come forward and being proudly who they are.

It was in 2011 that the Scottish Conservatives elected the first openly gay or lesbian leader of a mainstream political party, the magnificent Ruth Davidson. As a proud Unionist, it is hard to overstate the debt owed to Ruth for keeping nationalism at bay and Scotland's precious place in our Union. I notice that there are former colleagues in the room today who may feel differently, but being proudly who they are is surely something that unites. I am proud that we to continue to have the voice of Scotland in this place, for our party or otherwise.

Today in the shadow equalities team, we are ably supported by the first out peer, Baroness Stedman-Scott, whose contribution as a Minister in various Departments, not least to our shared work in the Department for Work and Pensions, was second to none. I apologise for continuing with the slightly backwards glance—I am conscious that I am very much on my own today as the only member of my party here—but I was proud, when part of Government, not only to work alongside the inspirational women I have mentioned, but to work with them on policy.

We see people who are out and proud, such as the author Jaqueline Wilson and the TV presenters Sue Perkins, Sandi Toksvig and the wonderful Clare Balding. It is brilliant for us to see out and proud lesbian women on our screens.

The hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington), who is not in her place, spoke about guidance and help for young girls. That is very much needed. I enjoyed her welcome contributions. The hon. Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) spoke about the historic gaps, which was very powerful, and about the power of being seen and the challenge of being a visible lesbian mother. I thank her for sharing that today.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East, the theme of this year's Lesbian Visibility Week is rainbow families. As a single parent—a straight woman, but a single parent—who quite often feels that people judge the shape of my family, I understand that. Access to fertility care, a theme of this year's Lesbian Visibility Day, was actively worked on under the Conservative Government through the women's health strategy, which removed barriers and requirements to prove infertility before access to IVF treatment. The regulations announced by Maria Caulfield, the former MP for the Lewes area, which I now partially represent, and the Health Minister at the time, came into effect last November and scrapped various tests for reciprocal IVF that potentially added an additional £1,000 to the cost of the treatment course. That cost has been mentioned today.



As far as I can see, the women's health strategy has been somewhat scrapped. Perhaps the Minister can confirm where the Labour Government are on that and assure the House that work is continuing in that area. That was touched on by the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), who asked for clarity around the women's health strategy. We agree on that, and I too look forward to the revised NICE guidance in that regard.

Removing barriers to IVF is important, but, as we have heard today, that is only one route for family formation. One in five adopted children are adopted by LGBT+ parents. When the necessary changes in the law were so recent, it is remarkable that we have come so far. Having a child in the right loving home can make an amazing contribution and difference, which is truly wonderful to see. I hope the Minister will use her good offices to push her Government on the women's health strategy.

The modern iteration of Lesbian Visibility Week is quite new, as the hon. Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East said in opening the debate, having been founded in 2020. Given the, dare I say newly understood, ambiguities in the Equality Act and elsewhere, it was no surprise that last year's debate got somewhat heated and entangled around biological sex, as we can probably remember. For many women, a lesbian—a same-sex attracted biological woman, of course—should not have her identity subsumed among other identities. I think all of us in the Chamber today can be very clear that we support others and how they identify, and that is perfectly valid. It is important not to allow this to continue to be toxic or hateful, and for any lesbian to feel that they need to identify in any other way.

Indeed, those points were made by organisations and submissions to the court ahead of this week's landmark ruling; I am thinking particularly of the Scottish Lesbians and The Lesbian Project, which allows me to talk about the importance of Kate Harris and the LGB Alliance. She was greatly moved by having to defend the very definition of what a lesbian is in court, and I had the pleasure of chatting to her not that long ago at an event celebrating the Equality Act. It has been reported in the media recently that lesbian-only spaces have been forced underground or cancelled entirely for women who to stick to this view, which the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) spoke about. Those places all sound marvellous, I must say.

This week we, the official Opposition, have roundly welcomed the Supreme Court's ruling, which has given much-needed clarity on the Equality Act. It will rightly allow lesbian-only spaces where they are free from intimidation and threats of cancellation. That has been very evident today in this afternoon's debate. We await guidance from the various bodies, directed by the Labour Government. Perhaps the Minister will say more about this, but hopefully, as the Minister for Women and Equalities has promised, that will be produced at pace. I hope it gives clarity on the law and in practice, which is exactly what the debate is about today. Our communities and our opportunities for lesbian women or any women must be fair, equal and safe. Women's rights and freedoms cannot and must not be eroded, but celebrated and protected, particularly as we approach the 100th anniversary of universal suffrage.

2.48 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dame Nia Griffith):** It is an immense pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Butler. You have always been a fantastic ally of the lesbian community and the LGBT+ community. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East (Kate Osborne) for organising us all to stay on a Thursday afternoon to debate this very important topic, and for the other events she has been instrumental in organising for Lesbian Visibility Week. She has an amazing track record. She never looks old enough—she might be mis-aged sometimes—to have been around to fight against clause 28. More recently, she has become known for her campaigning on equal access to help with fertility. She has reminded us again of our commitments to ensure that LGBT hate crime becomes an aggravated offence, and that we go forward with our ban on conversion practices.

To be seen, known and accepted for who we truly are is not just a privilege but a fundamental human need. Not so long ago, women who did not fit into the expectations of traditional family life were denied that need. To be a lesbian or bisexual woman was to face the choice between conformity and the risk of isolation, discrimination and violence. We were told we were not real women, and that it was just a phase, while simultaneously experiencing sexualisation by male-dominated media—and that was when we were seen at all. Even at the height of the homophobic panic of the '80s and '90s press, we were largely erased, with the focus on gay and bisexual men as the true threat. Our opponents often sought to erase or trivialise us, in spite of the tremendous solidarity that many lesbians showed to their GBT allies and friends.

I pay tribute to colleagues who have raised issues today. My hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) set out the cases of the women whose children were taken from them by court judgments, no doubt influenced by the prejudices of the time. I will certainly take back her request for an apology on that particular issue. She also highlighted the importance of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, passed by the then Labour Government, in terms of lesbian recognition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) referred to the ladies of Llangollen—although I note that she carefully avoided saying Llangollen. The point is a serious one, which is that when we read through the history books, lesbians are invisible. That is why the idea of a visibility week is so powerful. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) emphasised the discrimination that families can face. She referred to a second family being started, and the questioning and refusal of fertility treatment that then ensued.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) made a very impassioned speech, really putting on the record how absolutely horrific, uncalled for and unjustified the prejudice we have seen against trans women is. She made it very clear that the violence that women, and indeed trans women, experience is 99.9% from cis men. My hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) mentioned the importance of LGBT+ inclusive education in supporting students who want to question their identity, and in bringing a greater and broader understanding by everyone in society of all of us in society.

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

The Lib Dem spokeswoman, the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), spoke powerfully of Jackie Forster flying the flag for lesbians back in 1969—a time when that was very difficult. She reminded us that, 50 years on, the mental health challenges faced by lesbians are significantly greater than those faced by the population in general. The hon. Member referred to the horrors of the harmful and degrading portrayal of lesbians on the internet, as well as making the case again for greater equality and access to fertility treatments.

The Opposition spokeswoman, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), spoke eloquently of her former colleagues, Justine Greening, Margot James, and Ruth Davidson, as well as her current colleague, Baroness Stedman-Scott. The hon. Member asked about the women's health strategy, and I can assure her that we are continuing our work with NHS England and the women's health ambassador to implement the strategy.

It is really important to remember those who did come before us, as many Members have done in this debate. For me, the late Member for Northampton North, Maureen Colquhoun, is an integral part of the story of lesbian women in this country and in this Parliament. Maureen was a woman ahead of her time. In 1973, while she was the Labour MP for Northampton North, she took the impossibly brave step of coming out of the closet. The scale of hatred, fear and ridicule that fell upon her is hard to imagine, and yet in 1974, she achieved re-election with a larger majority. However, the pervasive ignorance and discrimination that defined attitudes to homosexuality at the time could not be overcome. Her sexuality and her commitment to women's rights saw her own constituency party deselect her, and she did not return to Parliament after the 1979 election. At a time when hostility was the norm and lesbian role models were almost non-existent, her refusal to be erased is nothing short of heroic, and I am proud to remember her in this debate.

Today, the visibility of lesbian and bisexual women is greater than ever. Whether it be singers, sports heroes or fictional couples, young women in our community have more visibility and role models than before. However, despite that progress, compared with the media exposure and visibility of gay and bisexual men, we still lag behind and we are still subject to clichés and ignorance. That is why it is so important that people like Linda Riley, founder of Lesbian Visibility Week, have sought to address the imbalance by providing a platform for lesbian women to celebrate their achievements and share their experiences. Linda has helped countless people to feel part of a community.

As we continue to work towards meaningful visibility and equality, it is also essential that we have legal clarity on the rights of women, including lesbian women, to single-sex spaces and services. Last week's ruling by the Supreme Court in the case of *For Women Scotland Ltd v. The Scottish Ministers* confirms that the definition of woman in the Equality Act 2010 refers to biological sex. I want to highlight the remarks made by the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), to provide reassurance following the ruling that trans people will also continue to be protected. The Government are clear: trans people deserve safety,

opportunity and respect. There remain protections in place for trans people to live free from discrimination and harassment, and have their acquired gender recognised. Trans people will still be protected on the basis of gender reassignment, which is a protected characteristic.

Lesbian women have always stood in solidarity with gay men and trans people, from the frontlines of the HIV/AIDS epidemic to today's shared struggles for equality. I strongly recommend and encourage that unwavering allyship at this time of uncertainty for many within the LGBT+ community.

Previous Labour Governments have driven forward equality, and this Labour Government are no different. We will reverse the backsliding and politics of division that we unfortunately saw under the previous Government, although I do not include the Front-Bench spokeswoman, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield, in that comment. We will certainly push progress forward once more for the entire LGBT+ community.

Take conversion practices, for example. Recently I was privileged to visit Galop, which operates the Government-funded victim support service for people who have or are in danger of experiencing conversion practices. I heard the deeply troubling experiences of young people subjected to such abusive practices, and I was reminded of the very real attempts, not just to erase our community but to delegitimise our existence. The Government are clear: conversion practices are abuse. They don't work, and they inflict deep and lasting harm on victims. The fact that such acts continue to occur in our society, which is largely accepting of LGBT+ people, demeans us all.

The previous Government failed to act. This Government will not. That is why we committed in the King's Speech to publishing draft legislation to introduce a fully trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. Of course, any ban must be carefully designed to ensure that it does not inadvertently criminalise legitimate psychological support, non-directive counselling, or support for those who are exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity. We are also working to strengthen legal protections for lesbians. That is why we are working with the Home Office to equalise all hate crime strands, ensuring that lesbians, and indeed the entire LGBT+ community, receive the same protections under the law as other groups targeted by hate.

Equality must mean more than just words. It must mean action to protect the most vulnerable in our community. We know that LGBT+ people are disproportionately affected by homelessness compared with their heterosexual peers. Some studies suggest that as many as one in five LGBT+ people have experienced homelessness at some point in their life, and women are particularly vulnerable to the difficult and often dangerous reality faced by those without a home. The Government are committed to tackling all forms of homelessness, including LGBT+ homelessness. That is why we will establish a dedicated inter-ministerial group, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, to bring together Ministers from across Government to develop a long-term strategy to end homelessness for good.

Although visibility has grown and some barriers have fallen, lesbians still face unacceptable disparities in health and wellbeing. According to the Government Equalities Office, lesbian women are more likely to report long-term mental health issues than their heterosexual peers, and many report avoiding healthcare altogether due to a fear of discrimination, or previous poor treatment. Lesbian

women are also less likely to attend cervical screening appointments, in part due to outdated assumptions and dangerous misconceptions that they are not at risk. Too many lesbians still face invasive questioning and unequal treatment when engaging with the healthcare system. Health should not be determined by sexuality, and that is why the Government are committed to closing the health gap. We will work with public health bodies to ensure that lesbian women are no longer invisible in data or ignored in care.

The theme of this year's Lesbian Visibility Week is rainbow families. The previous Labour Government introduced the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to allow same-sex couples to adopt for the first time. That momentous legislation has seen thousands of children find loving homes in which to grow up, and has afforded the joys and challenges of parenthood to many LGBT+ people.

I recently had the honour of being at the reception hosted by *DIVA* and the London Women's Clinic for the launch of their latest in vitro fertilisation manifesto, and this week I participated in an event with Stonewall for the presentation of its family formation guide. For so many, parenthood is the most significant journey that they will ever embark on, yet too many lesbian and bisexual women's journeys to motherhood are still complicated by ignorance and practical obstacles, including problems accessing NHS fertility treatment. Although we have made great strides in assisted reproductive technologies, including IVF and intrauterine insemination, we must now ensure equal access to those treatments by removing unnecessary obstacles and advocate for a health service that treats all users with respect and dignity.

Ensuring that LGBT+ people feel welcomed in the health service is a key pillar of what the Government stand for. For too long, LGBT+ women have been priced out of having a family through fertility treatment, and NHS provision has depended on the luxury of having a postcode in the right area. The Government are ambitious about addressing those inequalities as part of our new health mission and through our commitment to make the health service work for its users. Last year, the Government finalised legislation that removed the additional screening costs that same-sex couples face when undertaking shared motherhood, simply for being an LGBT+ couple. Removing unnecessary burdens such as excess fees is extremely important in paving the way for full IVF equality.

Furthermore, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is currently reviewing its fertility guidelines, which aim to reduce variations in practice and improve the way that fertility problems are managed. We expect that to be published towards the end of this year, and we encourage integrated care boards to improve their offer to fertility patients in anticipation of and after receiving the new guidelines.

Finally, I emphasise the Government's commitment to equality beyond our borders. We are proud to defend LGBT+ rights worldwide. As members of the Equal Rights Coalition, we stand alongside those fighting for freedom in countries where being LGBT+ is still a crime. Our global LGBT+ rights programme is helping to improve political, social and economic empowerment by addressing outdated discriminatory laws, promoting protective legislation, enabling local civil society organisations and supporting the most vulnerable LGBT+ people in conflict and crisis areas.

We have come a long way from the days of Maureen Colquhoun's lone voice. Today, one in 10 Members of this House of Commons identifies as LGBT+—more than any other Parliament in the world—and yet that progress is threatened by renewed attacks on the legitimacy of our lives and our rights, by the inequalities that lesbians still face, compared with their heterosexual peers, across physical and mental health, and by the lack of secure housing and protection from deeply traumatic conversion practices and hate crimes. In such times, we should look to the Maureen Colquhouns and Linda Rileys of this world for inspiration. When the world tried to hide and vilify us, they stood up, because for progress to be realised, we must not hide; we must not retreat. We must be seen and heard, and answer the politics of division with unity.

**Dawn Butler (in the Chair):** It is nice to see so many Members turn up for the wind-ups.

3.5 pm

**Kate Osborne:** I thank all who spoke here and ensured that they did so with respect and care. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) for sharing her proud lesbian mama status, and for her commitment to fight for equal access to IVF, and for highlighting the local impact of the postcode lottery in fertility treatment. I am sure we will continue to fight that together in this place. I do not have time to thank everybody as much as I would like to, but I would like to thank Opposition Members, especially the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), for highlighting the legend and legacy of Jackie Forster and her contribution on global hate crime and the stress that our communities face. Somehow we have never bumped into each other in any of those bars that you mentioned; we must try harder to do that. The hon. Member is quite right: we need more lesbian bars and lesbian spaces.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), for her words. My uncle Frank and my dad will be absolutely delighted that she mentioned them today. He wants recognition for his 50 years as a councillor, and I hope that this goes some way to doing that. I agree that we will all be looking very closely at the NICE guidelines when they are brought forward. This debate has indeed been a lot less heated, which is to be welcomed, and I hope that continues, going forward, and that politicians of all stripes stop using our community as a political football. I thank the Minister for all the work that she has done and continues to do, for her kind words, and for her commitment to take away the many asks from this debate. Thank you, Ms Butler, for your expert chairmanship, I hope to be here in front of you in the future.

By our visibility and contributions today, we give hope and encouragement to lesbians who are not yet in a position to be out and proud, or who are at the start of their journey. Our hard-fought rights are under attack and we must defend them. I want to end by wishing all lesbians who work in this House, and all lesbians globally, a very happy Lesbian Visibility Week.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered Lesbian Visibility Week.



## EU Trading Relationship

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

3.9 pm

**Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the trading relationship with the EU.

I declare an interest as the chair of the UK Trade and Business Commission. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and to colleagues on both sides of the House who supported the application.

It has never been so timely to talk trade, but before we look forward, we need to look back at how we arrived here. It has been 4,744 days since Prime Minister David Cameron promised the country a referendum on our future relationship with the European Union: in his words, a

“simple in or out choice”.

Ever since, the UK’s relationship with the European Union has been anything but simple.

In the decade that followed Cameron’s speech, successive Conservative Governments did everything in their power to distance the UK from our largest trading partner. In 2020, the trade and co-operation agreement was signed with an ideological zeal to diverge as much as possible from the EU. Agreed by the Conservatives and cheered on by Reform, it is a choice that we are all paying for. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, the barriers to trade that were put up by leaving the EU have set the UK economy on course to lose more than £100 billion over the medium term. The London School of Economics has found that the increased barriers to trade have left the average person paying £250 more every year on their food shop.

Repairing the UK’s trading relationship with the EU is all the more important given the dramatic change in the position of the United States. Our Government deserve praise for their calm and measured response to tariffs, but none of us can presume to know what the position of the White House will be in six days, let alone in six months. By contrast, it is certain that the EU will remain the UK’s largest trading partner. The EU accounts for 42% of UK exports and 52% of imports. That is our most essential trading partnership.

I welcome all that the Labour Government have done in our first nine months to begin to repair and reset that relationship. Ours was the first Chancellor to attend a Eurogroup meeting since Brexit, and the Prime Minister has been in lockstep with fellow European leaders in shared support of Ukraine. The leadership of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor has established the opportunity for a substantive change in UK-EU relations, but it is vital that we seize that opportunity. I want to see the most ambitious trading deal possible and will focus my remarks on three points: first, the importance of a deal that includes mutual recognition of conformity assessments; secondly, the case for deep alignment between the UK and EU on goods and services; and thirdly, a bespoke visa-based youth mobility deal.

One of the failings of the trade and co-operation agreement was the lack of a mutual recognition agreement on conformity assessments, which are used to determine

whether a product meets a country’s regulations for goods and to ensure safety, performance and compliance with legislative requirements. Conformity markings include the UK conformity assessed mark and the EU’s CE mark. With a mutual recognition agreement, countries that recognise each other’s conformity assessment bodies and procedures avoid duplication of testing and certification for goods. Without such an agreement, products made in the UK and intended for the EU cannot be tested here, and vice versa. The EU has conformity assessment MRAs in place with countries including Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Canada. The UK has them with the USA, Switzerland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Last month, a coalition of 19 business groups, including the Confederation of British Industry, Make UK and techUK, called for a UK-EU mutual recognition agreement and said that it would support export-led growth, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises. I look forward to hearing the practical steps that the Minister is taking to help make that a reality.

My second point is about alignment with the EU on goods and services. When the Conservatives signed the TCA, the winners were the ideologues who advocated for the UK to become a version of Singapore-on-Thames. The losers were our businesses, especially those exporting goods. The last Government made an active choice to diverge from European Union regulations and standards. If we listen to business, it does not take long to see the impact. The British Chambers of Commerce surveyed its members on how they had been affected by the TCA: they listed challenges for business from red tape, bureaucracy, paperwork and delays in goods flowing through customs. Recently, the Chartered Institute of Export and International Trade has found that that has caused a staggering 2 billion extra pieces of paperwork for businesses since we left the EU.

Part of the answer must now come from closer alignment on goods and services once again. Earlier this year, Best for Britain commissioned Frontier Economics to model a scenario with

“an expansive approach to mutual recognition, in which the UK and the EU take active steps to minimise regulatory divergence and commit to recognising the equivalence of each other’s regulations.”

**Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): At my recent business roundtable in Monmouthshire, I spoke to Tri-Wall, a business that exports to the EU. Instead of sending one lorryload of its goods to different countries all across the EU, it now has to send a different lorry to every country, which really increases its costs. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need closer alignment to avoid that kind of problem?

**Andrew Lewin:** I agree entirely. I have heard far too many stories exactly like that in communities across the country.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point. I have given up days of my life to helping to free up fish exporters from Shetland from red tape, but the truth is that although we have put friction into those exports, the standards are still broadly the same. It would not be that difficult, at this point in history, to get the necessary alignment, especially through a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement, for example. We are looking at a market that

is important to us and in which we have similar standards—unlike across the Atlantic, where there are very different standards for food products.

**Andrew Lewin:** I defer to the right hon. Member's expertise on the fishing sector, but he is absolutely right about the need for an SPS deal. I am proud that that was in the Labour manifesto on which I was elected and that we are actively seeking to pursue it.

According to the important work commissioned by Best for Britain, if we get a deep alignment, the modelled impact is a boost in UK GDP of 1% to 1.5%. If in parallel we pursue deep alignment in the services sector, the combined benefit could be more than 2% of UK GDP. To put that in context, every 1% of UK GDP is worth approximately £26 billion, so the potential prize is a £50 billion boost to the economy.

Finally, on youth mobility, hon. Members may have seen that 70 Labour parliamentarians put their names to a letter yesterday calling for a new, bespoke youth visa scheme for UK and EU citizens under 30. As with all the UK's existing schemes, we believe that it should be time-limited and subject to a cap on numbers, but a bespoke scheme would extend new cultural, educational and economic opportunities to young people in the UK and the European Union.

**Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. I declare an interest as a UK citizen under 30. Does he agree that the upcoming EU-UK summit on 19 May provides an ideal opportunity for the Government to look at proposals such as a youth mobility scheme, which would surely provide a better opportunity for young people in the United Kingdom to explore, learn and find opportunities across borders?

**Andrew Lewin:** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend and remain jealous of both his wisdom and his youth.

For a clear majority of people in this country, extending opportunities for young people matters. It is a move that will unlock further opportunities for trade and co-operation and will strengthen our bonds with the European Union in future. It is also vital to underline why it is materially different from freedom of movement. Under a visa scheme, people will have to apply in advance, numbers can and will be monitored, and any deal will follow a similar shape to the ones that this country already has in place with countries such as Australia, Canada and even Uruguay.

After so much damage done by the Conservatives, the Government deserve huge credit for all that they have done to repair relations with the European Union. It is our largest and most important trading relationship and so much is at stake. I hope that we can be as ambitious as possible for the reset. I look forward to hearing from colleagues and from the Minister.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair):** Order. It will not have escaped anybody's notice that this is a popular debate, so I remind all Members to continue to stand if they want to be called. The debate can run no later than 4.55 pm, which gives you about two and a half minutes each. I ask you to exercise some discipline, and we will get in as many Members as we can.

3.19 pm

**Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. It is good to see how popular this debate is with colleagues. I congratulate the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on securing it.

Leaving the EU has been devastating for our economy. A hard Tory Brexit, which unfortunately this Government have embraced, continues to be devastating for the economy. The economic impact, particularly for SMEs, is something that they continue to live with from day to day, and so is the impact of the withdrawal of freedom of movement on our food and drink industry, care services and the NHS. In fairness, Scottish Labour, of which the Minister is a member, has embraced the issue by talking about decentralising and a potential migration system for Scotland; I hope that the Minister will be able to support my Bill on that subject tomorrow. We have also seen an impact on security. Every other country in western Europe considers the EU and NATO twin pillars of their security in the aftermath of Russia's aggression.

More than that, as the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield says, there has been an impact on all our rights, and particularly those of young people. This political generation is leaving behind fewer rights than we enjoyed ourselves. My sympathies go to the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean), who is under 30, because he enjoys fewer rights than the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield and I did.

The hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield talks about a cap. A cap on whom? Which young people do not get the opportunities that he himself had and that the Minister had? We should all feel deeply ashamed and deeply uncomfortable.

It does not have to be like this. As *The Economist* has said, we could rejoin the customs union, giving the Exchequer an immediate boost very rapidly. We could rejoin the single market. Even pursuing the trade deal promised by the Conservatives—there are precious few of them here today to defend their deal—would see 0.4%, after a 4% hit to the economy.

Today, Labour MP after Labour MP is going to stand up and tell us how awful the Brexit deal is. We have been through it before. Are they actually going to do anything about it? Are their Government going to do anything about it? This is the biggest crisis—the biggest disaster—to hit the UK, economically, socially and rights-wise. Instead of doing anything, they have stuck the architect of this deal, Lord Gove, into the House of Lords. Can we please see some action?

3.22 pm

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on securing this debate, on his superb speech and on the impact that he has made in this House.

We are all history's witnesses to a radical reshaping of the western alliance. Yesterday, the United States Treasury Secretary said:

“‘America First’ does not mean America alone.”

But if we look beyond the rhetoric to the reality, it is very clear that what Churchill called the sinews of peace are now under tremendous strain. America is now

[Liam Byrne]

exiting the multilateral alliances that it created under Presidents Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower between 1944 and 1960. What some have called Amexit must now force us to rethink Brexit. We have to look again at resetting our alliance with our closest neighbour.

I draw the House's attention to the draft Green Paper that we think the Government should have published: the report published by the Business and Trade Committee on 4 April, which sets out 20 ways in which we think we can reset our relationship with our closest neighbour, spanning defence, regulation, energy co-operation, services and innovation. There are 20 measures across that space that could give us as big an economic boost as is needed to offset the cut from tariffs. They include an EU-UK defence pact, a shared industrial policy, a joint plan to defend critical national infrastructure and deeper co-operation to defend ourselves against economic threats; an ambitious sanitary and phytosanitary agreement, the mutual recognition of customs schemes and of conformity assessments, streamlining customs declarations at the border, enhancing co-operation at our ports and rejoining the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention; and making sure that we have long-term regulatory road maps to maximise the alignment between sectors in our economy and in the EU. We found that there is widespread support for that across the business community in the UK, and in the European Union too.

The fourth big area is energy, which is one of the biggest opportunities for deeper co-operation between the UK and the EU. We need to avoid the cliff edge that may come when the carbon border adjustment mechanism is introduced in this country and Europe. We should join together to create a single CBAM. We should be linking our emissions trading schemes and reconnecting our electricity markets because that will ultimately help to drive down electricity costs in this country.

In the fifth area—services and innovation—it is clear that we have to secure a new data adequacy agreement. We have to advance co-operation in financial services and research, including by restoring mutual recognition of qualifications with a new road map that might actually make some progress. We have to strike a fair deal for our touring artists, and I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about the need for a visa-based, time-limited and number-capped scheme for youth mobility—that is also in our mutual interest.

What surprised us most is that it was not difficult to find 20 different measures across those five areas of co-operation where we can deepen our future relationship. That reset is now imperative if we are to reset the UK's power in the world and, crucially, deliver prosperity for the people we came here to serve.

3.26 pm

**Carla Denyer** (Bristol Central) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy, and I thank the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing this important debate ahead of the UK-EU summit next month. The summit comes in the throes of alarming uncertainty created by President Trump's dangerous, chaotic and authoritarian approach to trade and international relations. The Trump turmoil makes building close relationships with our EU neighbours even more urgent. We need to fix those relationships

because the UK's withdrawal from the EU has caused profound damage to our relationship with our nearest and biggest trading partner. I will not repeat the stats that Members have already highlighted, but I want to highlight that smaller firms are seeing the biggest fall in trade. I know that Brexit has caused major problems for independent local businesses in my Bristol Central constituency.

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The hon. Member is making an extremely powerful speech. On SMEs, does she recognise that the defence industry in Bristol suffers from the inability to receive adequate funding from across Europe, and that a defence, security and industrial bank underwritten by the UK, alongside its European partners, would be able to unlock the investment that Bristolian businesses vitally need?

**Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair)**: Order. Ideally, the hon. Gentleman would not sit there because there is no microphone and we are not picking him up. I am sure the hon. Lady heard him and can respond.

**Carla Denyer**: Thank you, Sir Jeremy. The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) spoke about defence industry businesses that are largely outside my constituency, so I am not familiar with the details, but it is an interesting point.

We need a bold and positive plan to get closer to the EU, rather than capitulation to an untrustworthy US President on vital trading standards and regulations. So far, the Government's reset of the UK-EU relationship has had some good points, such as some useful moves on reducing border checks on agrifoods, mutual recognition of qualifications and addressing problems facing touring artists, but we must go further. In particular, there is huge mutual benefit to be gained from greater climate and energy co-operation to ensure improved energy security and the delivery of net zero at a lower cost, so I hope the Minister can assure us that that will be a central part of the UK-EU reset and the upcoming summit.

The UK has been falling sharply behind EU chemical safety laws post Brexit, which is a point of particular concern. As well as supporting closer trade ties with the EU, alignment with EU chemical safety protections would be beneficial for the UK by minimising costs to industry, as well as maintaining high environmental, worker and public health and safety standards. Ministers will be aware that the Trades Union Congress, representing millions of workers across the UK, has recently said that a closer trading relationship with the EU is "more important than ever" in an increasingly fraught and volatile world, and I agree.

The Green party is clear that the UK would be better off inside the EU. Like many others, we were frankly astonished to hear the now Prime Minister say, just days before the general election, that the UK would not rejoin the EU—not only during his premiership but in his entire lifetime. I think that was a remarkable thing to say.

Recognising that the UK will not rejoin the EU imminently, the Greens and I still feel that it would be wise for the UK to rebuild trust and links, and to break down those barriers with a view to rejoining the EU when the domestic and international situation makes



that more viable. In the meantime, joining the customs union as a first step towards full EU membership would be vital, and a way of resolving many of the worst problems resulting from Brexit, not least the harm done to our trading relationship with the EU.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair):** I reassure hon. Members that the clock is not correct—the hon. Lady was not talking for seven minutes.

3.30 pm

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): This is an important and timely debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing it.

Some will query why we need to have this debate in the first place. They should not. It has been nearly a decade since the European Union referendum and nothing looks the same after a decade—I can assure hon. Members of that. That is particularly the case for our country, and indeed for the world. I think the British people know that.

The political system has changed beyond all recognition. My politics have always been personal, and that is especially true for this subject. The question of whether to remain or leave split my family, just as it split so many others, particularly in my constituency. I would speak with my father every night. We would put the world to rights and talk about his issues and how politics often failed to meet them. He is no longer with us, so I cannot have those conversations any more. I must say, I would have loved to have known what he thought about this particular debate—because he backed Brexit.

As an immigrant son of the 1950s, he had seen the wreckage of war and appreciated an economic union that sustained peace. As a disabled man of the 2010s who lived the pain of poverty, he rejected a political sentiment that scarcely listened. He voted for Brexit not as an ideologue, but as a pragmatist. He asked, “What will make my hard life better?”—and for him, Brexit was the answer.

Now, when I call for closer UK-EU relations, I do so as my father’s son, not as an ideologue but as a pragmatist. Because when we ask that same question—“What will make life better?”—the answer is not this painful, exhausting Brexit deal. Instead, it is closer economic ties with our nearest neighbour and biggest trading partner.

To be clear, I do not criticise anybody who voted to leave, because I cannot criticise my father. I respect the choice and the reasons behind it, but as the MP for Bournemouth East, I cannot serve my constituents without doing all I can to make their lives better. We have to be frank: Brexit has led to our GDP growing 4% to 8% less than it would have between 2016 and 2024. We have seen a significant loss of job opportunities, and smaller firms are suffering the most.

We also know that closer ties with the European Union and its members can improve our prosperity at a time when we need it more than ever. Of course, we should assert our rights as an independent trading nation, rather than cowering in the corner, unhappy about having that independence. However, with that independence we must do what is right by our national interest. With Trump’s tariffs and a Chinese regime that

is hard to trust, I believe that means a pragmatic approach to Europe. We should have a youth mobility scheme for work, study and travel that is balanced, time-limited and capped. We should have regulatory alignment to make aspects of trade easier, and we should have more aerospace collaboration. And we should ensure that UK firms and citizens can travel and work in Europe for longer, deepen security co-operation, and cut red tape.

In conclusion, this Government will not meet any of their goals—whether it is growing opportunities, achieving secure clean energy, ensuring opportunities for all or delivering safer streets—without closer economic ties with Europe. We are here to do the right thing for our constituents and to exercise our sovereignty, democracy and independence as a country. We believe that growth is the route to prosperity, and if trade is the route to growth, we have no other option but to have closer ties with Europe.

3.34 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for setting the scene so well.

I supported Brexit and voted for it, but unfortunately we in Northern Ireland did not get the Brexit that we voted for and that the rest of the United Kingdom got. We are stuck in the middle with no tangible benefit. We do not know whether my local firm, which has a large number of employees and ships its produce to the US, will be hit with untenable tariffs, as some of its products are sourced in the neighbouring Republic of Ireland. We do not know whether it can avail itself of the much friendlier UK tariff or whether EU retaliatory tariffs will be the death knell of its business. The sad thing is that this affects not just one business but a huge number throughout my constituency.

As we know, all businesses have an element of uncertainty, but the strain on exporters in Strangford is considerable. Any discussion of the trading relationship with the EU must note the difficult position that Northern Ireland is in until the EU ceases its death grip on the UK—the grip currently feels like a noose on the neck of Northern Ireland.

It has been said that the duty reimbursement scheme will be used to mitigate any effect on Northern Ireland, but the reality is that this scheme is time-consuming, and the delay in cash flow may not be sustainable for many traders. It is my firm opinion that any trade deal with the EU can only come with an end to the death grip of the Northern Ireland protocol, with an end to the red lane, with access to state aid and with a return to the UK-wide economy. That is what we need instead of being half in, half out, with duty paid and no representation given.

We have businesses in Northern Ireland that say they cannot continue to trade without sensible governance. I always try to be respectful to the Minister—it is the way I do things—and he will have his opinion, but he will have to go back to the Cabinet and ask the questions that need to be asked. Where is Northern Ireland situated in any enhanced trade with the EU? Will we be set to one side as an aggravating inconvenience? I believe that our Government must bring us back to a seat at the UK table once again.

[Jim Shannon]

Enhanced trade with the EU could be beneficial if it does not go against the Brexit decision, but the strangling of Northern Ireland must end. This House has a choice to make once again. I hope that this time the choice is made for the benefit of the entire United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

3.37 pm

**Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. This debate comes at a critical time, given the upcoming UK-EU summit. This summer we are at the pinch point of the trade triangle, with the trade strategy, the small business strategy and the industrial strategy coming forward to give British businesses certainty. In my limited time, I will focus on the impact to my constituency and the logistics sector and share my personal experience in the construction industry.

One in five people in Northampton South work in the logistics sector, which is a linchpin of my local economy. I spend a lot of time going to warehouses and distribution centres to hear from small and large businesses about the challenges they face. The No. 1 issue that comes up is friction with the EU—the red tape and the uncertainty about licensing agreements. It is all of the issues that have been created by the botched deal that the Conservatives put forward. Businesses cannot see how we can fix things in the short term without a hard reset of our trading relationship with the EU.

**Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): We have 20,000 people employed by the logistics sector in North West Leicestershire, in part because we have the second largest freight airport in the UK, with East Midlands airport being key to international trade. Does my hon. Friend agree that for constituents like ours, logistics needs effective trading relationships with the EU? The sector is key not only to our local economies but to long-term growth.

**Mike Reader:** My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. A big thing that businesses make clear to me is that we have to approach this with humility. We also have to recognise the impact that Brexit has had on European businesses and the cost they face in trading with the UK. This is not a one-way issue; it impacts both ways, and it is a real problem that firms are facing. The border target operating model is a real issue, particularly for businesses importing agriculture and plants. I have a large food manufacturer in my constituency, and the No. 1 issue it raised with me is getting stuff in and out of the EU, which is a real challenge.

Turning to my personal experience, I worked in the construction sector all my life, and I was very fortunate to work on a number of projects across the EU, including the Ellinikon regeneration in Greece, major airports in Poland and the Dublin metro in Ireland. One of the challenges we had was mutual recognition of professional services. Professional services are one of the eight verticals in the industrial strategy.

The ability to export our professional services globally is a real benefit to the UK, but the lack of a mutual recognition agreement between the UK and the EU is hampering our ability to take Britain's great expertise

and skills into Europe. Architecture is a great example—the Conservatives tried to match up architecture through the trade and co-operation agreement, but it was not achievable. UK architects are unable to work in the EU on a fair and equal playing field with EU architects. It is a crazy situation.

As we go towards the UK summit, I hope the Government are considering how those negotiations can help to bolster the industrial strategy. Its eight core vertical sectors, including manufacturing, clean energy and professional services, need a robust and clear trading agreement with the EU. There is clear consensus in the room on having a very hard reset of that relationship, to make it easier for all our businesses. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing this debate.

3.40 pm

**Brian Mathew** (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing today's debate. Recent times have shown how important reliable friends are. To our west, a United States under Trump has shown a reckless willingness to sacrifice prosperity across the globe and use bullying tactics to secure a trade deal that may well damage British interests. This could see a weakening of high British food standards, which would be to the detriment of our health, our farmers, our farm animals and, most importantly, our tastebuds and morals.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The previous Conservative Government's botched deal with Europe has strangled trade and investment in British farming. Rural communities and farmers in Glastonbury and Somerton have been badly let down. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should put the UK into a position of strength by forming a new and bespoke customs union with the EU that will unleash the potential of British farming in the UK?

**Brian Mathew:** I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and I am heartily in agreement. I have visited many farms across Melksham and Devizes, and it is clear that British farmers work incredibly hard to ensure that our food is high quality and produced to high welfare standards. We do not want British farmers or British consumers to be confronted with US chlorinated chicken or US hormone-treated beef in our supermarkets. Instead, we should look to trade with our partners who respect our standards and can provide a stable foundation on which to grow the UK economy. The European Union provides that, from logistics to standards. Trade with the European Union makes sense, which is why we must look to improve our relations with the world's largest trading bloc. I echo the calls of my colleagues for the Government to urgently work towards a new customs union by 2030.

From cheese to cask ale, there are a number of companies producing great British products in Melksham and Devizes. A positive export market with our closest neighbours is vital to allow such companies the opportunity to grow and expand into an international market. Today I spoke with Darren Larvin, managing director of local cheese manufacturer Coombe Castle International. He told me that his company exports right across Europe to the Netherlands, Lithuania, Spain, France and Germany.

His company has won four Queen's awards and one King's award for export. The experience of Brexit has not put his company off exporting to Europe, but it has made it harder and has cut margins. Prior to 2016, Darren told me, it was as easy for him to send his company's produce to Germany as it was to Manchester. It is surely time for us, as a country, to wake up and smell the very good European coffee and rebuild our relationship with the EU.

3.44 pm

**Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing this debate, in which he has spoken with passion and insight. I know that his constituents, and indeed many people across the country, care deeply about our future relationship with the European Union.

In South Norfolk, this relationship is not abstract but tangible. It is in the labs of the Quadram Institute, the Sainsbury Laboratory, the Earlham Institute and the John Innes Centre—the world-leading institutions that make up Norwich Research Park and whose discoveries in genomics, health and crop science are shaping the future. Innovation does not happen in isolation, and a more pragmatic relationship with the EU would allow those centres to collaborate more freely, access essential data and funding streams, and unlock discoveries that could change our lives for the better.

In Hethel, Lotus Cars is preparing for the next generation of electric vehicles. An opportunity is opening up, with European consumers losing faith in Tesla; with fewer trade barriers, Lotus can step into that gap and become a leader in the EV market across the continent.

Our farmers, too, are watching closely. South Norfolk grows and rears some of the best British produce. With a market worth \$2 trillion lying just over the channel, we should be exporting more of our food, not less. A sanitary and phytosanitary agreement—sensible, simple alignment—would remove unnecessary barriers and allow our horticulture sectors to flourish, too.

Jobs, investment, international strength and, most importantly, economic growth in Norfolk and across the UK—that is what a closer pragmatic relationship with the EU can deliver. Let me say this, Sir Jeremy: people in Norfolk are not led by ideology. We are a practical bunch. If something works, great. If it does not—let's fix it. This debate is not about going off at an ideological angle; it is about putting Britain first, taking control of our future once more and refusing to let the greatest nation on the planet be relegated to the status of a secondary power on the world stage.

**Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair):** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for keeping to below two and a half minutes. However, not everybody has, so I am afraid we are going to have to go to sub two and a half minutes each if we are to get everybody in. I am loath to impose a formal time limit, so I ask colleagues to be as disciplined as they can.

3.46 pm

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I commend the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for his evidence-based opening remarks.

The Conservatives' botched deal has been a disaster for Britain's trade and our economic growth, and the majority now believe that it was a massive mistake by the Conservatives. Trade deals should be designed to streamline processes and reduce barriers, but the previous Government somehow managed to negotiate agreements that only added mountains of red tape for businesses. Since Brexit, 2 billion pieces of paperwork have been added to UK exporters—enough paper to come from 250,000 trees or go around the world nearly 15 times. This mountain of unnecessary bureaucracy holds back businesses from reaching new markets, hiring more workers here in the UK and contributing to our economy through taxes. The Office for Budget Responsibility has warned that our economy will be 4% smaller in the long run; since 2019, UK goods exports have grown by a mere 0.3% a year—far below the OECD average of 4.2%. Let us not forget the 20,000 small businesses that have simply stopped exporting to the EU because of the Conservatives' red tape suffocating that part of their business.

We need closer alignment with the European Union. We need to work with our closest partners to boost our economy and create meaningful change. It will mean more public funds to pay for the services that nobody thinks are working any more, with new hospitals, more GP appointments, roads fixed and schools built.

Trump's tariffs will hit our businesses in so many areas, particularly the automotive business. Will the Minister give us an update on the trade deal negotiations with the US and confirm that his Government, unlike the Conservatives, will act only in the national interest, and that we will not be bullied by Trump and Vance?

3.49 pm

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. Before I begin, I declare an interest as the secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on Germany. It is our country's relationship with Germany—seen through the prism of the UK-EU relationship—that I will refer to today.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing a debate that is both important and timely, and hope that colleagues will join me in celebrating the 50th anniversary of Bolton being twinned with Paderborn in Germany, which occurred last week. That twinning is a symbol of the deep civic relationship between my constituency and our European neighbours. It is a partnership that transcends political developments and is testament to our inescapable geography as a nation in Europe and as a large trading partner with the continent.

Our best course of action must be to protect ourselves from the erratic and unpredictable global headwinds of Donald Trump's America and Xi Jinping's China. That must mean strengthening our trading relationship with our nearest and largest economic partner, the European Union, and the 27 countries that make up that bloc of 450 million people. Analysis from Frontier Economics has suggested that deeper alignment between the UK and the EU on goods and services could offset the impact of tariffs on the UK, and even help our economy grow by 1.5%. In 2023 the EU still accounted for 42% of the UK's total exports and 52% of our imports. Let me repeat that: over half of our imports, seven years after



[Phil Brickell]

the referendum result. Europe remains the bedrock of British trade. Yet, can we really say that we are currently taking full advantage of having such a huge market for British goods on our doorstep? Many British regions can have productive relationships with European partners. Look at Siemens, a major German engineering firm which has invested heavily in Greater Manchester's advanced manufacturing sector.

Instead of resigning from the challenge ahead and relitigating debates from a decade ago, we should be breaking down barriers that are causing friction and stunting growth. But we must go further than focusing purely on the economics. I benefited immensely from my own lived experience as an Erasmus exchange student at the University of Hannover in Germany. That is why I firmly believe in a bright future for Britain as a nation that must grasp the opportunity on youth mobility with Europe. It is time to back British businesses, back British workers and back Britain's rightful place as a key European nation.

3.51 pm

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. More and more people across the UK now recognise—even my dad, I suspect, like that of the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes)—that leaving the EU has come at the cost of making us all poorer.

My constituent, Alistair, rightly points out:

“There has never been a comprehensive, independent and trusted review of the full costs of Brexit”—

but if there were, I suspect the findings would be deeply sobering. In an increasingly unstable global landscape shaped by shifting US politics and rising tariffs, it is more important than ever that we secure strong, stable trading links with Europe. A recent YouGov poll of over 15,000 people showed that nearly half want trade with the EU as a top priority, compared with just 22% who prioritise America.

One area that deserves urgent focus is defence, and I declare an interest as a proud member of the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces and a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. We cannot ignore the growing pressure to spend more on defence, especially as the US steps away from NATO. But if we are going to invest more, let us do so by working with trusted European partners, not by handing more contracts to US defence giants. We must ensure that spending supports British jobs and industries, and that we make it easier for the EU to invest in our market-leading UK businesses like those based in my constituency, such as Atlas Elektronik, and those across Dorset, such as BattleLab.

Another area is the veterinary agreement. That gap in policy is having a serious impact on UK farmers, already reeling from the consequences of the Conservatives' botched trade deal and this Government's damaging and shortsighted budget changes. Without proper arrangements for animal health and streamlined border checks, exports have dropped. Yet research from Aston University shows that a veterinary agreement with the EU could boost exports by at least 22.5%. That is confirmed by major retailers including Sainsbury's, Lidl and Marks & Spencer, who have called for a veterinary deal, writing in the Financial Times that red tape is

driving up the costs of food and drink. We have heard Ministers express support, but no progress. That must change. It is time to rebuild our relationship with the EU. Let us put forward a modern trade deal that strengthens co-operation on defence, food, farming and a much-needed youth mobility scheme and brings us into a customs union—even if, for political reasons, it needs to have another name. We owe it to our businesses, farmers and young people and the future of the UK. Let us be honest about what has gone wrong and start putting it right.

3.54 pm

**Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin).

The post-Brexit trade deals delivered by the previous Conservative Government have just been appalling. They have not worked well for Wales. We have been flooded with New Zealand lamb—and, as we all know in this room, Welsh lamb is of course the best-tasting lamb in the world. I congratulate the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), on his continued work on an SPS deal. We desperately need that for our hard-pressed farmers and for the businesses in my constituency of Monmouthshire.

I recently had a business roundtable with businesses such as TXO, Siltbuster, GreenMeadow and others. They said to me that they are drowning—of the 2 billion pieces of paper that were mentioned earlier, the businesses in my constituency must have 1 billion of them. They are drowning in paperwork, and it is slowing them down. To be honest, after I met with them, during my two-hour business roundtable, I was astonished and amazed that they had all stayed in Monmouthshire, employing local people, while continuing to face such a barrage of barriers and administration.

The No.1 thing that those businesses need is for us to remove some of those trade barriers. In order to smooth their trade, we need to keep our standards the same as those in the EU. That was the No.1 priority of all those businesses, and I congratulate all those who signed the letter saying that. We must have regulatory alignment if we are to grow. We must remember that this Government's No.1 mission is economic growth. If we align with EU standards and continue to grow our trade with the EU, that is exactly what we will get.

I am delighted to be a member of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly and to have gone to Brussels recently. We were welcomed with open arms by our MEP colleagues, because they said they felt that the grown-ups were back in the room; they were delighted with the leadership of the Prime Minister bringing us closer to Europe. I encourage the Government to continue to do that work.

3.56 pm

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on his work in securing this debate. We have seen over the past few months the extent to which the current US Administration is no longer a reliable ally. We can see the extraordinary damage being caused by the

implementation of Trump's tariffs on trading relationships around the world. With the increasingly unpredictable and aggressive signals coming from across the Atlantic, this must be the moment to stand firmly with our European neighbours for our national security and economic stability, as well as to strengthen our trading relationships.

The UK-EU summit next month in London, hosted by the Prime Minister, will be an opportunity that must be seized for us to move on from the warm words of pragmatism that we have heard from the Government, but which are no longer good enough. We must move faster, and the Government must commit to serious action to rebuild our relationship with Europe.

While we know that the long-term wellbeing of the UK means being back in the heart of Europe, that requires strengthened trading agreements and a customs union. Closer ties with Europe are also key to our national security. We are glad that there are serious indications that the Government will commit to a defence agreement with Europe, but that must be just the beginning.

There are broader partnerships with our European neighbours, which the Liberal Democrats will continue to call for, that will be advantageous to British businesses. We know that a youth mobility deal would be good for our economy, especially our tourism and hospitality sectors, while providing young British people with the opportunity to work and study abroad. That is exactly the kind of pragmatic step that we hope the Government will take at the upcoming summit.

Having spent the last five years grappling with the bureaucracy of Brexit and with increased trading costs, many business owners across the country will now be deeply concerned by the additional challenges to businesses coming from Washington. The returning Trump Administration has fundamentally changed trading relations globally, which has created an obvious moment for us to take action to establish closer trading relationships with our European neighbours.

The EU is our closest neighbour and our largest trading partner, but the botched Brexit deal has been a complete disaster for this country, especially for small businesses, which are held back by reams of red tape and new barriers to trade, costing our economy billions in lost exports. I urge the Government to acknowledge the damage that the Conservatives' Brexit regulation has done and continues to do to not just to individual businesses but to the economy as a whole, and to take the sensible step of negotiating a new UK-EU customs union to ease the pressure that so many businesses are under.

3.58 pm

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing this debate, and all the Ministers who are working flat out on the European reset.

As others have said, the instability and conflict on European soil has changed the context in our continent, but the context has also changed globally, with long-held assumptions about globalisation, trade and economic certainty breaking down rapidly. The case for strong partnerships with like-minded countries based on free and frictionless trade, shared values and political trust has never been clearer, as the Chancellor set out in Washington this week.

I was elected last July to be the MP for Kensington and Bayswater, the most international constituency in the country, and I stood on a clear promise to those residents that I would be a pro-European voice in Parliament and advocate for a closer, more pragmatic UK-EU relationship, after years of chaos under the Conservatives. The global businesses, the world-class institutions such as Imperial, the international trade hubs and, most importantly, the blended families from all over the world all say the same thing to me: uncertainty and red tape from the current shambolic deal have hurt investment, jobs, growth and family relationships, and have hit our economy to the tune of £100 billion. My constituents voted not for more trade barriers and bureaucracy, but for co-operation, opportunity and a shared future with Europe.

First, we need to go further on security, deepening defence co-operation between the UK and the EU, to stand firm against Putin's aggression. Whenever I meet my Ukrainian community at our social club, the embassy or our school, I am reminded of exactly what is at stake in the EU-UK defence pact. Going further on procurement, on intelligence sharing—as we have done with Germany—and on stopping people smuggling shows what we can achieve together.

Secondly, we must open doors for our young people, not keep them closed. I have met so many young people who dream of studying, working and living in Europe. We should negotiate a bespoke youth mobility scheme for UK and EU citizens under 30, as we have with other countries, including Australia and Canada, not to return to free moment, but to create time-limited opportunities that benefit the next generation. We should embrace that as a positive step, not something to be feared or talked down.

Thirdly, we need to embrace the practical steps on trade that others have talked about, which would make a real difference for British businesses. This is a critical few weeks for our trading relationship with Europe, from von der Leyen's visit today to the summit on 19 May. It is time for maximum ambition, and the Government have my full support.

**Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair):** I will call the Front Benchers at 4.25 pm, so discipline will be required if everyone is going to get in.

4.1 pm

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing this debate.

The UK's relationship with the European Union goes beyond trade barriers. It prompts the fundamental question: in an increasingly dangerous and volatile world, do we wish to be adrift and isolated, or will we stand united with our closest neighbours? Despite Brexit, the EU remains our largest trading partner. A market of 450 million consumers lies on our doorstep and the Government are still failing to leverage that proximity. Despite their search for growth—apparently their one overriding mission—the botched Brexit deal has inflicted deep and lasting damage to our economy. Our trade volume is 15% lower and long-term productivity is 4% lower—and for what?

We are still waiting for the US trade deal, which is unlikely to be what we need it to be, under the "America first" presidency. Our current arrangements with the

[Monica Harding]

European Union are fragmented and bureaucratic, and that actively undermines our growth and prosperity. The consequences of Brexit are stark, and my constituents in Esher and Walton have been badly affected. Higher prices strain budgets. My local businesses, which once traded seamlessly, now face mountains of paperwork and costly delays. Meanwhile, the promised benefits of Brexit remain unseen.

The ramifications of this broken relationship have become even more apparent following recent developments across the Atlantic. The steel tariffs on British exports have dispelled the fantasy that the US-UK trade deal would compensate for the Brexit damage. As we face a stagnating economy, the Government cannot seriously claim to be exploring all the ways to boost growth, given that they are staying within the previous Conservative Government's red lines on Europe.

The Liberal Democrats are the only party offering a credible solution: forming a customs union with the European Union and revitalising our trade. That would provide certainty and optimism. It is workable and achievable, and would send a message to rogue actors and special relationships that we are united and determined in the face of aggression, even trade aggression.

If the Government are really serious about growth, they must show the leadership that our country needs. Follow the trade, follow the money and undo the botched Brexit deal that bust our country.

4.4 pm

**Ms Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy, and to be part of today's debate.

It is less than 100 days since Donald Trump entered the White House, and in those 100 days, I hope we have finally seen an end to the myth that leaving the European Union and isolating ourselves would somehow increase our sovereignty. We are now uniquely exposed to world events, whether it is tariffs, the actions of President Putin, or our ability to exercise influence in relation to the concerns we might have regarding Israel and Palestine. The public are paying the price, and they deserve better from all of us. Let us be frank: blue passports are no substitute for British jobs.

However, I come to Westminster Hall today not to say, "I told you so," but to play my part in fixing the problem. In the short time available to me, I want to say that, while the MPs may be getting younger, too often in this place, the debates are old. I reassure the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), that although I may be the chair of the Labour Movement for Europe—I declare that interest—I do not come here to campaign for rejoin. We have left the European Union. Instead, I come to campaign for my constituents and people across this country who need the jobs and growth that a reset with Europe will offer, moving on from the red lines of the old debates to look at what is in our mutual interest and the summit that is ahead of us on 19 May.

I agree with many of the points that colleagues have made, so let me try to offer two further points. Particularly given that President von der Leyen is here today and has talked about the importance of us working together on regulation, I want to talk about the energy summit,

and in particular about addressing the carbon border adjustment mechanism—I agree very much with the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne), about that. UK exporters of energy, including our electricity industry, our steel industry, our ceramics industry and more, will pay the price if we do not tackle the impact of having a different emissions trading scheme.

We also have to tackle all the paperwork—we in the Labour Movement for Europe are the reds against the red tape—so yes, we need to deal with the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention. We also need to deal with SPS and with the VAT differences that people are facing. Farmers, the chemical industry, the border target operating model and car industries will all benefit if we tackle those things; and of course, we need a visa system. We do not have time to talk about rejoin—it would take too long—but we can do something about the 17,000 businesses that have stopped trading with Europe. If we do that, we will bring back the British jobs and the British growth that we so desperately need. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that.

4.7 pm

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on securing this critical debate. It is an understatement to say that since the US elections, the plates of international politics have been shifting, especially since the Trump Administration announced the introduction of trade tariffs. British people are rethinking their opinions, and one welcome consequence of that process relates to the EU. An opinion poll commissioned by the TUC and conducted earlier this month found that two in three Brits now back a closer relationship with the EU, with just 20% opposed. That includes key target voters, such as eight in 10 of those who switched from Conservative to Labour at the 2024 election and more than half of Reform-leaning voters who voted Labour but may now vote Reform.

Perhaps that is not too surprising. As we have heard, according to official figures, the long-term impact of the UK leaving the single market and the customs union is the loss of between 4% and 8% of our GDP. As Trump seeks to raise trade barriers, it feels like a no-brainer that we should be seeking to reduce ours with our closest neighbours. Research by the think-tank that has already been referenced found that a deal with the EU that included deeper alignment on goods and services would completely offset the impact of US tariffs for the UK. Unfortunately, to date, the Government seem too in fear of being accused by the right of being too close to the EU to lead decisively on this issue. The Prime Minister's earlier rejection of the EU's proposal of a youth mobility scheme with the UK is just one example where the Government have baulked at acting in the national interest. Along with many others, I hope that the Prime Minister adopts an approach less driven by the fear of Reform at next month's EU-UK summit.

Although I voted to remain, I believe it is important that the democratic will of the people is respected, but it is also important that we are honest with the people about the lies they were told and the harms that Brexit



has brought to our nation. It is therefore time to stop being afraid to speak the truth about the damage of Brexit and to act in the national interest. Now is the perfect time to start writing a new chapter and move towards a more positive trading relationship with the EU.

4.9 pm

**Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing this debate.

As Members have stated so eloquently, it is time for a pragmatic reset of our relationship with our nearest neighbours and oldest partners. This is not about reopening old wounds, but about fixing the harm done to our economy and our security by mistakes under the last Government and recognising that our future prosperity can be improved with better UK-EU relations.

As Government Members referenced in our joint letter to the Secretary of State, we live in a period of increasing global instability. Certainties based on the post-world-war-two rules-based systems of trade are breaking down, and our stability, prosperity and security rely on having deep and resilient partnerships with like-minded nations. Therefore, we will be stronger when we work with, not against, our neighbours. That principle must guide our approach to Europe.

We already see the benefits of co-operation in the emerging UK-European defence partnership: standing together with Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, bolstering European security, and demonstrating that our shared values of democracy and the rule of law are more than just words. This is an area that must be deepened for the good of our joint defence and security.

Trade, too, should be an urgent area for renewal. There are many areas of UK-EU trade that we should aim to ease, and they have been referenced throughout the debate. One area that should be looked at anew is the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention. It is already used by many of our European neighbours, and it offers a model for streamlined trade across borders without being a member of an EU institution. It simplifies rules of origin, cuts red tape and helps goods move faster. The Government should be proactively exploring our alignment with this system. It will be good for many SMEs in Exeter.

**Rachel Blake** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): In addition to trade and the important points that have been made about defence, does my hon. Friend agree that we should also consider a cultural touring agreement? That would support cultural organisations across the country, including the Barbican, the Royal Opera House and those in the west end. Not only would it help them and their business, but it would encourage people to come to London, and it would support economic growth across the country.

**Steve Race:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. That would very much help the cultural institutions in my Exeter constituency, too, so I absolutely agree.

Since the end of the transition period, UK exports to the EU have faced barriers that did not exist before, with small businesses disproportionately hit. According to the OBR, our overall trade intensity has fallen by

15% compared with where it should have been. This is not inevitable; it was a policy choice by the last Government, and this Government can and should choose differently.

Closer economic ties mean growth. They mean investment in green energy, digital infrastructure and research, which are all sectors in which Exeter is already leading the way. They could now also mean opportunities for our next generation of young people to study, work and thrive across our shared continent.

This is not about going back. It is about going forward clear-eyed, ambitious for our future and in partnership with those who share our values and interests. My residents in Exeter deserve that future, our country deserves that future, and I encourage the Government to be ambitious for that future at the next summit.

4.13 pm

**Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on securing this debate. In the very limited time available, I will make two points. The first concerns the importance of economic co-operation, and the second is in support of a youth mobility scheme.

Over Easter, I had the pleasure of spending time in Northern Ireland, which coincided with the 27th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. Reflecting on that, there is no greater example of how trade with the EU, and trade more generally, is always about more than goods and services; it is fundamentally about people. The creation of the single market in 1993 brought down physical barriers and borders, and with it, diluted notions of allegiance and of “us and them”. Economic co-operation paved the way for one of the greatest political acts of the 21st century, and it is also a reminder that we must reject the isolationism that we see in countries around the world today. We should be proud to work with countries and proud of that co-operation.

Tied to that, I know that there is a lot of support in Beckenham and Penge for a youth mobility scheme. In fact, I had two work experience students with me this week, who are in the Public Gallery, James and Paula. We were talking at lunchtime today about that. It is a right that I enjoyed when I was growing up, and the next generation should be entitled to that as well. The shift in language used in relation to our closest neighbours and friends has been significant over the past nine months, and it is welcomed. I ask the Government to continue with that and to be bold ahead of the EU-UK summit next week.

4.14 pm

**Ben Coleman** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am most grateful to you, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on calling this important debate, which I am pleased about; as Members of Parliament, it is not often that we get a chance to speak so clearly about what we do to represent our constituents' interests and the British interest.

Our job as Members of Parliament is to keep our country strong and secure, with a strong economy and strong defence, and to provide opportunity to everyone, not least our young people. That is what this debate is about: promoting the British interest. That lies at the

[Ben Coleman]

heart of why we need to get a better deal from the European Union that gets growth for our country in the swiftest way possible, at a time when this Government are so committed to growth, by lowering the barriers and removing the red tape that have come out of the hopeless deal patched together so feebly by the last Government.

As has been said, we especially need to lower the barriers for small and medium-sized firms, which have been hit the hardest. I think of the specialist wine importer in my constituency that has to pay an extra £160 for every shipment.

**Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): Following the Tory Brexit deal, we have seen lorries backing up from Dover, through my constituency and deep into Kent now that we have customs and immigration checks. Does my hon. Friend agree that a deal to eliminate barriers on food and drink being exported to the EU would help to reduce friction at Dover and throughout our road network?

**Ben Coleman:** I absolutely agree. We need a veterinary agreement to improve the situation in our country. I agree with the proposal to allow British bands and creatives to tour more easily and that we should have more mutual recognition of professional qualifications to support our service industries. We should be as ambitious as we can. We should therefore start talking about a deal to end regulatory divergence, so that companies do not have to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on two sets of standards and two sets of testing regimes.

The situation we face as a result of the deal that the Conservative Government negotiated is not patriotism: it is self-sabotage, and we need to do something about it. Part of that is about us needing to do more to give opportunity to our young people, which is why I support having a controlled youth visa scheme that provides just that opportunity.

Finally, I turn to defence, which some of my colleagues have mentioned. The UK has a huge role to play in the defence of our continent; I do not think any European countries doubt that. It is clearly in all our interests across Europe for the UK and the European Union to sign a new security agreement. We need stronger defence and new jobs in the UK and right across the continent, and that is why our Government must be absolutely clear with some other countries in the European Union. Defence and security co-operation are too fundamental to dealing with the challenges that our countries face, and they must be decoupled from other political negotiations. They are too important to be tied to debates about fishing rights or quotas.

We need cool-headed, determined and ambitious negotiations with the European Union that back Britain. In that way, we can get the better deal that my constituents in Chelsea and Fulham and the British people deserve.

4.18 pm

**Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairing, Sir Jeremy. Due to the limits of time, I will focus on the UK's creative industries, particularly music and the performing arts.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport estimates that music, the performing arts and the visual arts add approximately £11.2 billion to the UK economy annually and employ 283,000 people. Without dedicated provisions in the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement, performers, artists and production teams face the challenge of navigating different regulations in each of the 27 EU member states, each of which has its own administrative and financial barriers. Although larger and more established acts may absorb those challenges, they pose disproportionate barriers to emerging talent. Furthermore, this acts as a barrier to cultural exchange between the EU and the UK. Ease of travel for artists and musicians helps to strengthen relationships and business connections across the continent and helps both cultural scenes to thrive.

While I welcome the Government's assurances that they are seeking some form of specific cultural carve-out, or at least allowances for music rules, performing arts and culture touring, there remains a greater need for a systemic change for the creative industry's access to Europe, and vice versa. That is why I urge the Government to consider a dedicated cultural mobility agreement with the EU or, at the very least, a meaningful cultural exemption to safeguard the future of our creative industries and restore the cultural exchange that has long enriched the EU and the UK. I hope that the Minister will say something on that in his response.

4.19 pm

**Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) for securing this important debate. I proudly stood on a Labour manifesto that placed growth at the heart of the Government's mission. That goal has never been more necessary, as Labour inherited a stagnating economy from the Conservatives. In the turbulent economic and diplomatic climate in which we find ourselves, it would be inexplicable not to recognise our geographically and economically closest trading partner, the European Union, as a key partner for growth.

I am pleased that the Government are set to seek a reset with our European partners. The next step is the upcoming EU-UK summit. I, too, was part of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly; I and many other colleagues here travelled to Brussels, where we were welcomed as friends and allies. They were pleased that Britain was back as a partner.

I have only a short time to speak, so I will touch on just one point. The SPS agreement is focused on ensuring food safety and protecting animal and plant health. Earlier this month, as vice-chair of the all-party group on international conservation, I was fortunate enough to visit the Zoological Society of London and meet its pygmy hippo, Amara. Hon. Members may wonder why I am talking about a pygmy hippo, but there are more parliamentary passholders on this estate than there are pygmy hippos in the wild. While at the ZSL, I learned more about its work to bring species back from extinction. By working across borders to ensure that genetically diverse and healthy populations exist, organisations such as ZSL and its partners around the world are actively bringing back from the brink species ranging from the scimitar-horned oryx to the partula snail, which just a few weeks ago was down-listed from "extinct in the wild" to "critically endangered".

However, ZSL's work has been put at risk. Transfers that would have once been completed in just weeks now take months or even years because of the new misalignment between ourselves and the EU. That could be solved as part of an ambitious SPS agreement, but the Government need to make sure that that is included in the discussions. Is that something that the Minister has considered? If so, does he plan to raise it with his EU counterparts? This may sound like a small change, but it could have species-defining consequences for us and our planet.

4.22 pm

**Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Yesterday, I visited Hinkley Point C, the largest building site in Europe, an international project built through close co-operation with European partners, and a powerful example of how trade and co-operation with Europe is essential to our success. "Big Carl" was at work. The largest crane in the world, manufactured by Sarens in Belgium and imported to Britain because it is the only crane capable of doing the job, Big Carl is just one example of why a smooth trading relationship is essential. British businesses thrive by selling into the European market and rely on importing specialised goods that only Europe provides.

Back home, in Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, we can see how vital the relationship is. We have one of the largest centres for paint and coating production in the country. PPG Industries runs a major manufacturing facility in Stowmarket with 350 people, mixing paints and coatings shipped around the world, and AkzoNobel, a Dutch paint company, employs 150 people. Those two companies have nearly 500 people out of the industry's national workforce of 1,400, and they are deeply entwined with the EU. Under the previous Government, they faced sharp increases in costs due to the barriers, they have had to contend with diverging chemical rules, and they face logistical headaches when importing raw materials. But these are large companies; imagine how much harder it is for small businesses.

Beautiful Beers specialises in selling fantastic Belgian beers imported from the continent. Its owner, René, faces a bureaucratic nightmare. He is doing it alone and struggling. I have heard the same story from businesses all over the place. Since Brexit, getting goods through customs has become a major hurdle, which we need to sort out with UK-EU customs co-operation. The previous Government left businesses and the country in a mess and Bury St Edmunds in the worst possible situation, so I am really glad that this Government are beginning to sort things out.

4.24 pm

**Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on securing the debate at such a timely moment for our relationship with the European Union, given this time of global insecurity. As a Cornishman, I would like to highlight concerns raised to me by our fishing industry. Its daily reality is far from the post-Brexit panacea that promised so much and delivered so little to the fishermen in Camborne, Redruth and Hayle.

**Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Given the willingness and readiness of other parties, including one conspicuously absent from this crucial debate, to

throw our fish under the bus and make fishing fleets again a political football, will my hon. Friend join me and our hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) in calling on our Government to ensure that that will not happen, and that we will, above all, protect employment in our fishing fleets in Mevagissey and elsewhere?

**Perran Moon:** That was a typically perceptive Cornish intervention from my hon. Friend.

This issue affects fishermen not just in my constituency, but elsewhere in Cornwall and across the UK. The Business and Trade Committee's report on EU relations points out:

"The fruits of the sea around our borders are a part of our shared ecology, and...must be managed carefully to protect the livelihoods of future generations."

Businesses and livelihoods in fishing communities must not be bargaining chips, as some media outlets are suggesting; they are invaluable elements of local economies that must be protected and strengthened. At the same time, we must make progress toward reducing trade barriers with our trading partners in the EU. The former is crucial to the latter, because the Government's current and future negotiations have to bring the British people, including our fishing industry, with them. I hope that the Minister will confirm that the Government are working towards a fair deal for our fisheries that will secure their long-term stability.

This is a moment for our Government to provide leadership, which was so severely lacking in the last Government's half-baked negotiations. Although, as we have heard, larger and higher profile sectors will form the basis of these delicate negotiations, we must not abandon the need to reassure our vital fishing communities and protect fishing stocks.

**Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair):** I thank all Back-Bench colleagues for their co-operation, which is very much appreciated. We move on to the Front-Bench spokesmen, beginning with the Liberal Democrats.

4.26 pm

**James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on securing this timely debate, and thank all hon. Members for their well-informed contributions. The debate has shown that the discussion has moved on from whether we need to improve our trading relationship with the European Union to how we improve the relationship. That is an important step in the right direction.

It is beyond dispute that our current trading relationship with the European Union has profoundly damaged our economy. Businesses across the country—small businesses, farmers and fishers—have borne the brunt of the Conservatives' botched Brexit deal. They face layers of unnecessary red tape and barriers that strangle trade, dampen growth and undermine prosperity. The numbers speak for themselves: British exports to the EU fell sharply after Brexit and have yet to recover, remaining 11% below their 2019 levels, and astonishingly, four out of every 10 British products once stocked on EU shelves have now vanished. The impact on farmers and fishers is starkly illustrated by the leap from a single, simple



[James MacCleary]

form to an absurd 21-step bureaucratic nightmare, which leaves our produce literally unable to cross the channel. British sausages, which were once sold freely from Paris to Berlin, are now banned outright—an absurd situation that captures perfectly the farcical outcome of the disastrous deal negotiated by the last Government.

This is not merely about statistics; it is about livelihoods. I speak regularly to small businesses in my constituency. They tell me directly that their market shrank overnight, while the complexity and cost of doing business with the rest of Europe ballooned. Our farmers face financial uncertainty, and fishers, including my local fishing fleet in Newhaven, having been promised prosperity by Brexit campaigners, now struggle under an avalanche of paperwork and export costs, which put their livelihoods at risk.

We urgently need a new approach—a pragmatic, ambitious plan to rebuild our relationship with Europe and reinvigorate our economy. Disappointingly, the new Government appear to lack precisely the ambition we need. They have ruled out even common-sense measures, including, as recently as today, a youth mobility scheme, which could restore opportunities for young Britons to live, work and study abroad. This Government are wrapped in their self-defeating red lines, which seem designed more to please the leadership of Reform UK than to benefit British business and growth.

I was glad to see this morning that the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield and 70 of his colleagues have signed a letter calling for a youth mobility scheme—it is encouraging to see that kind of resolve across the House—but contrast that with the Government's response. When my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) questioned the Government on it earlier, the answer was a resounding no. When are this Government going to get serious? If we do not show clear and consistent intent in time for the EU-UK summit in May, the EU will simply move on.

We cannot afford to squander what good will remains. That is why the Liberal Democrats have proposed a clear, four-step road map to heal our fractured ties with Europe, starting immediately with unilateral steps to restore good will and trust, which must include re-engaging proactively in vital foreign policy dialogues. We then need to rebuild confidence by rejoining crucial European programmes such as Erasmus+, participating actively in scientific collaborations, and reconnecting with a central body—the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, for example.

Central to our economic recovery must be deeper trade co-operation, particularly through a comprehensive veterinary and plant health agreement and the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Those measures would immediately remove significant barriers to British businesses. Most important, we must place ourselves firmly on the path to negotiating a robust customs union by 2030. That step alone would remove needless checks and bureaucracy at our borders, injecting desperately needed momentum back into our economy.

It is vital to understand what a customs union could achieve. It means tariff-free streamlined trade for most goods—a practical, proven solution already successfully embraced by other countries outside the EU. A customs union would place Britain back at the heart of European

trade, boost our economy and insulate us from unpredictable global disruption—especially from the protectionist forces emerging in the United States. Even a signal from this Government that they are open to a customs union would boost markets and stimulate growth. Recent experiences under Trump's aggressive tariff regime have clearly demonstrated the need for leverage in global trade discussions, and that is something that a customs union with our largest and nearest trading partner could provide. Instead of begging for special deals with America, we could strengthen our relationship with Europe, rebuilding from a position of strength rather than weakness.

We cannot afford more timid half-measures or missed opportunities. British businesses, workers and young people deserve better. The Liberal Democrats are clear and unwavering: we must restore confidence, rebuild trust and revitalise our economic ties with Europe. The public are watching: will this Government be defined by cuts to international development and winter fuel payments for pensioners, and job-killing taxes on small businesses, or will they instead take the hard-headed, pragmatic decision to ditch their disastrous red lines and enter into negotiations for a customs union, so that Britain can truly regain the strong, prosperous economy its citizens deserve?

4.32 pm

**Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on securing this debate. I thank the many colleagues who contributed, and commend your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy, in giving so many colleagues the chance to do so. I also commend the efforts of the Business and Trade Committee, which has come up with a report containing many worthy and sensible suggestions.

We owe it to the British businesses that create growth, jobs and the wealth of our country to secure for them the most favourable terms for the UK in the tapestry of global trade, wherever the markets may be. That means focusing on areas of maximum opportunity wherever they are, and on sectors where we can benefit from growing markets, innovation and indeed our shared values.

We all seek more trade with our European neighbours, but we already have a tariff-free deal for the export and import of goods. There are some wins to be had: the European Central Bank, for example, is restoring clearing to the UK, which is pragmatic, sensible and a reflection of the facts on the ground; but those opportunities do not appear to us to be what the Government are focused on. Perhaps the Minister will correct us on that.

It is clear that Labour's EU reset—perhaps to the welcome of many of the Minister's colleagues—is actually a plan carried forward from Opposition dating back to the referendum in 2016, with the objective of overturning that referendum in substance, if not in name.

**Ben Coleman:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Griffith:** I will not give way, as everyone has been very good on timing. I will get through my speech to give the Minister as much time as possible to deal with all of the points raised.

In all seriousness, across all western European economies, we face a real crisis of trust in politics and a rise in extremism among people who do not necessarily see the solutions to the problems their countries face in arguing them out reasonably, as we are doing today. Why any genuine democrat, whatever their personal views, could possibly think that reversing a decision made by the people in 2016 is the right approach—[*Interruption.*] Although it is refreshing to make common cause with the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), who indeed does not do that, it is also refreshing, sort of, to hear the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) set out the misguided but at least honest approach of desiring to return to the rule of Brussels via a full customs union, which I understand is not on the Government's agenda.

We Conservatives have set out five clear tests to protect people's trust and confidence. There must be no backsliding on free movement, no new money paid to the European Union and no reduction in our fishing rights, including—I will take an intervention from the Green party's hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) on this if she would like—no backsliding on the environmental protection for sand eels that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds says is vital to the protection of British seabirds and puffins. I see no intervention coming, so I will move on, but the EU is litigating against the British Government right now to prevent that environmental protection measure from being implemented. The last two tests are: no rule taking, dynamic alignment or ECJ jurisdiction; and, notwithstanding working with anybody on a defence pact—I agree with the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) that there must be no linkage between defending European soil and the transactional approach to British fishing taken by some countries—no undermining of or compromise on the primacy of NATO. Those are the tests that, in our view, will maintain the trust of the British people. I hope that the Minister will put our fears to rest.

The Product Regulation and Metrology Bill currently before Parliament is perhaps one of the most blatant examples of how a Government may fail the test. It is a Trojan horse, a blank cheque forcing this Government to become a rule-taker. I realise that many colleagues are new to this place, although many are not and have much more distinguished service histories than myself, but I hope that when colleagues look at that Bill and it is scrutinised in the House of Lords Constitution Committee and the Commons legislative Committees, they will look at the deficiencies of that Bill under this or any other Government going forward.

We have heard calls for a return to open borders via a youth mobility scheme. While previous Governments have put in place youth mobility schemes of a certain volume, as the Government considers that return, it would be interesting to hear what the impact would be on British graduates, whose wage premium is the lowest it has ever been. What impact would opening the floodgates have on the rental crisis in London, or on the burdens of the NHS? There was some talk about improving education, but we already have visa schemes for work and visa schemes to come here to study. What will be the incrementality of a youth mobility scheme?

We have heard a number of times about this being a moment for cool heads, not for piling on retaliatory tariffs in a global trade war, and Members will commend

themselves on how progressive and level-headed they are, but let us take a balanced view. It was not the US that unilaterally threatened to invoke article 16 to prevent British citizens having access to vaccines; it was not the US that kicked the United Kingdom out of Horizon, a scheme entirely separate from our membership of the European Union; and it is not the US that is still depriving British citizens of the use of e-gates when they travel—an opportunity that we afford visitors from the EU coming to this country, so let us just have some balance in that debate.

To be clear, given the relative scale of the opportunity and the fact that we already have a free trade goods deal with the European Union, were we in government, the Conservatives would have prioritised—right now—a US trade deal. It has been 170 days since President Trump was elected, but the Government have yet to publish any objectives for their negotiations with the US. Whatever we might think about those objectives, British exporters today are paying the price for the absence of that agreement. Through that absence of transparency, Parliament is being disrespected and none of us has any idea which businesses or farm sectors may pay the price for that deal in future.

Our hard-won freedoms offer us the unrivalled chance, if we seize it, to steer our own course in a difficult and uncertain world. We can have the best of all worlds: trade with Europe, North America, the gulf, Asia and Africa. The Conservatives would not pursue one of those many attractive opportunities in a prejudiced way at the expense of others, and I hope that is also the Government's position.

**Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair):** I call the Minister. He has until 4.55 pm if he wants it, but if he is feeling generous, he may want to leave the Member in charge a couple of minutes to wind up.

4.40 pm

**The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I will certainly endeavour to extend that generosity. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) on securing an important and timely debate, and commend him for his ongoing work on the issue as the chair of the UK Trade and Business Commission. The letter that he and a number of parliamentary colleagues present submitted to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who leads for the Government on UK-EU relationships, made some excellent points, many of which I will endeavour to address in my remarks today. I will seek to specifically address the three main points that he raised in his introductory speech—the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, the broader alignment and the youth mobility scheme. I also thank all hon. Members who have spoken today.

First, I will set out why we must use our strengthened relations with the EU to deliver a long-term UK-EU strategic alliance that grows our economy. I listened with care to the remarks of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), suggesting that if the Conservative party were in office, we would have the best of all worlds. I struggle to reconcile that with the universe that the rest of us live in: the Conservative Government not only abjectly failed to secure a trade agreement with the United States, but alienated our closest trading partners in the European

*[Mr Douglas Alexander]*

Union and were in a deep freeze with China. It is not entirely clear what the Conservatives' grand post-Brexit strategy involved.

Let us consider the numbers for a moment. In trade, geography still matters. As a bloc, the European Union is still the UK's largest trading market, covering 46% or about £813 billion of our trade. It is important to note that the UK is the EU's second-largest trade partner, but unfortunately, UK exports to the EU were 5% lower in 2024 than they were in 2018, which is the most recent stable pre-Brexit, pre-covid year for comparison, and UK imports from the EU have remained level at about plus 0.4%.

Moreover, our overall global trade performance continues to suffer, and we are lagging behind our G7 peers. In 2024, our global trade flows were only 4% above 2018 levels, while other G7 economies have seen an average trade growth of 8%. What explains those trends? There is an increasing body of external research studies, such as those of the London School of Economics Centre for Economic Performance and Aston University, which demonstrate that Brexit accounts for those changes. That is why it is in both the UK and the EU's interest to strengthen our trading relationship.

Let me turn now to some of the specific issues raised during the debate. The hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins), who I like and admire on a personal level, gave a sadly rather partisan speech in wilful denial of the fact that had his side prevailed in the 2014 referendum in Scotland, we would have found ourselves outside the European Union. A politics of manufactured grievance, flags and new borders is as wrong in Scotland as it is here in England. Thankfully, Scotland made its choice to support a sensible and pragmatic internationalist party in July.

**Stephen Gethins:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Alexander:** No, I am keen to make some progress.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne) made a characteristically brilliant speech—a judgment in no way related to the fact that he is the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee. In all seriousness, fresh from the spring meetings in Washington this week, he brought a wider geopolitical perspective to our debate that frames the conversations that are happening today between EU Commission President von der Leyen and the Prime Minister.

I note all the points that were made by the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer). I simply say that when I see images of the Prime Minister meeting President Trump in the Oval Office, meeting EU Commission President von der Leyen today, at the Lancaster House summit, or sitting with President Macron in Paris, I feel a sense of relief and change. There is change, because the clown show is over, and there is relief that we have a serious Prime Minister for these serious times.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), in a strikingly personal speech, spoke eloquently of the divisions we witnessed within families and communities at the time of the Brexit referendum. That explains why we as a Government have no interest

in reopening old divisions and wounds, and instead are working to remove unnecessary barriers and strengthen our trading relationships.

No debate in this House would be complete without the contribution of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I assure him, although he is no longer in his place, that in the work of both the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the concerns and needs of Northern Ireland are never far from their thoughts.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) brought to bear all his professional experience working across Europe and made a characteristically powerful case for the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. I made that case only this morning at a meeting with TheCityUK representatives here in London. The hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) then spoke eloquently of the need to maintain high standards in farming and the merits of strengthening our trading relationship with the European Union.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) took us on a veritable tour of research and innovation labs in his constituency. He is right to recognise that innovation today relies on not only often complex, integrated and international supply chains, but research co-operation. What was the opportunity cost of the years when the previous Government took us out of the Horizon cross-Europe research programme? It is exactly that kind of research collaboration that our own scientists need and demand if they are going to continue to be world leading in their research domains.

The hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) highlighted some of the statistics that I also used in this debate to highlight the damage done by our predecessors. He asked if we would act only in the national interest. That is an undertaking I am happy to offer. National interest is the north star by which we are navigating these frankly turbulent trading waters today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) spoke of the civic ties between his community and Germany. It was a timely and helpful reminder that first through the European Coal and Steel Community, then through the European Economic Community, and ultimately through the European Union, the European project has always been about peace as well as security and prosperity.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) also touched on the need for spending on defence to reflect the changing circumstances, not least in the Euro-Atlantic security area. That is a recognition that underpins the strategic defence review and the recent decisions that have been reached on defence expenditure by this Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) asked me to pass on her good wishes to the Minister for the Cabinet Office for all his excellent work ahead of the UK-EU summit next month. As a colleague in the Cabinet Office, and indeed as a friend, I will be happy to do so. She is right to recognise all the work that he is doing to undo past damage and to rebuild and reset relations with our friends, partners and neighbours in the European Union.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) urged us to take serious action to strengthen our trading relationships with the EU. Again, I assure her that that is exactly the work to which we have committed ourselves.



My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) rightly referred to the changed context on our continent, and indeed in our world. Red tape and uncertainty—his description—seems a pretty fair judgment of the inheritance that we secured in July. In these history-shaping days, it is right to recognise the changing geopolitical and geo-economic backdrop for the negotiations under way—not just the talks in Downing Street today, but those being led by the Minister for the Cabinet Office ahead of next month's summit.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) urged the leadership to follow the trade and follow the money. As I said earlier, we have chosen to follow the data, rather than the post-imperial delusions that were the hallmark of our predecessors' approach to trade.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), who has eloquently spoken of the need for closer ties with Europe on many occasions, talked of the need for new debates and offered a number of powerful suggestions for the way forward at the UK-EU summit. I have to say that she offered a fantastically large number of suggestions in the necessarily constrained time for her speech, but I listened carefully to all of them.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) urged the Government to write a new chapter. I hope we are doing somewhat more than that: we are actually writing a whole new trade strategy, which we aim to publish in the coming weeks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race) acknowledged the need for partnerships with like-minded nations. I agree with his powerful points about the particular need for security and defence partnerships given the changed geopolitical context with which we are all familiar.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) reminded us, with reference to the Good Friday agreement, that we must reject isolationism. I am happy to confirm that we have left behind the era in which a previous Prime Minister resisted the opportunity to confirm that President Macron is indeed a friend of the United Kingdom. Let me confirm today that we regard France as a trading partner, a close neighbour, a steadfast security partner and a country bound to the United Kingdom by bonds not just of shared history, but of shared and continuing friendship.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) spoke authoritatively of the need for cool-headed, ambitious negotiations. I assure him that that is the approach that the Government are taking to the coming summit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) made the case for recognising the challenges faced by touring artists. I put on the record my appreciation of all the work done for our country not just by touring artists but by the creative industries more broadly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran), in a veritable Noah's ark of a speech, highlighted not just the importance of the pygmy hippo that she met but, more substantively, the need for an SPS agreement. I assure her that we continue to work on all those issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) moved seamlessly on to a discussion of Carl the crane, and indeed his local businesses. I assure him that we noted all his points, and we will endeavour to ensure that small businesses are at the forefront of our thinking as we work not least on SPS and the other issues about which we have spoken.

My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) brought a Cornish perspective to the debate. I listened carefully to all the points that he made about the need to bring down unnecessary barriers.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) similarly spoke eloquently of the needs of fishermen in his constituency, and made the case for an SPS agreement. We committed in our manifesto to negotiate that veterinary agreement with the EU—an agreement on the application of sanitary and phytosanitary measures, to use the technical term. That is because agrifood producers across the United Kingdom are among those most affected, as they are buried in the paperwork left by our predecessors, and are affected by checks when exporting to the EU.

The EU remains an absolutely vital market for agrifood producers, accounting for 57% of the UK's agrifood exports in 2024. Between 2018 and 2024, UK exports of agrifood products to the European Union, excluding beverages, dropped by 16% in inflation-adjusted terms. I have to say, that does not sound like the best of all worlds to me. The potential benefits of an SPS agreement are clear: Aston University estimates that an SPS agreement could increase UK agrifood exports by fully 22.5%. Bearing in mind that we import more agrifood from the EU than we export to it, a veterinary agreement would of course be mutually beneficial.

A number of Members raised a youth mobility scheme. The UK and the EU are in talks ahead of the summit, but alas I will not provide a running commentary today in this Chamber. We made a clear manifesto commitment to bring down net migration and to have no return to free movement within the EU. It is important that we determine who comes into our country, and those things are not up for negotiation in the continuing discussions.

We would like to strengthen MRPQ arrangements so that businesses can access the right talent at the right time. Again, improvements would be mutually beneficial. UK and European industries have repeatedly asked for the recognition of professional qualifications between the UK and the EU to be strengthened. That includes 24% of respondents to the recent British Chambers of Commerce annual trade survey and the European Services Forum.

On strengthening relations with the EU, we have an opportunity to address some of the trade barriers that we did not explicitly reference in our manifesto, including regulatory co-operation—

**Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair):** Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Minister, but we are out of time. I thank all hon. Members who have participated in the debate.

4.55 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*



# Written Statements

*Thursday 24 April 2025*

## CABINET OFFICE

### **Windsor Framework Decisions: Northern Ireland Act 1998, Schedule 6B**

**The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds):** On 29 April, I will be meeting with the European Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, Maroš Šefčovič for this Government's first meeting of the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee. As part of this important meeting, the UK and the EU will take decisions to support our commitment to the Windsor framework.

We are moving to implement the next phase of the UK internal market system. This phase will deliver simplified processes for freight and parcels arrangements between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and reflects the substantial work undertaken on the delivery of those commitments to date. We will continue to implement the UK internal market system in good faith in line with the commitments set out in "Safeguarding the Union".

These changes will replace the burdensome requirements in the old protocol for international customs paperwork with internal market movement information—a much shorter, simpler dataset containing ordinary commercial information. They will further simplify processes for businesses and have been taken forward following considerable engagement with sector stakeholders to ensure full readiness for the new arrangements and, subject to the relevant procedures, will take effect from 1 May 2025. I will make a declaration for the UK at the meeting and expect that my EU counterpart will make a corresponding declaration.

The Government are pleased to be bringing these arrangements into effect, which demonstrate our commitment to the UK internal market and breaking down barriers to trade for businesses and traders. The effect of these new, beneficial arrangements for freight and parcels will continue to be monitored by the Independent Monitoring Panel on the Windsor Framework, whose first six-month reporting period will conclude on 30 June 2025. Marking this progress will be part of a productive Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee meeting, reflecting the closer, more co-operative relationship that the UK now has with the EU.

At that meeting, the Government will also agree specifically to three decisions that will add four Acts to the Windsor framework. This Government are committed to tackling barriers to trade for businesses across the UK. Northern Ireland obviously has a special trading relationship with the EU under the Windsor framework and it is therefore only right that the Government review all elements of Northern Ireland's regulatory arrangements to ensure it can make the most of its unique dual market-access.

In accordance with paragraph 18(3) of schedule 6B to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I am setting out in this statement why I am of the opinion that the conditions are met for these particular measures to be agreed on the basis that none of those Acts would create a new regulatory border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The condition in paragraph 18(2)(b) of that schedule is therefore met.

### *Ukraine/Moldova tariff liberalisation—Regulations 2024/1392 and 2024/1501*

These regulations will not create a new regulatory border. This is because the EU regulations reduce the EU tariff on goods coming from Ukraine and Moldova and because of the low volume of relevant trade flows. We expect that no goods moving to Northern Ireland will incur additional financial cost. These regulations follow on from similar previous measures which were added to the framework in 2023.

### *Critical Raw Materials—Regulation 2024/1252*

This regulation will not create a new regulatory border. This is based on the fact that most affected products in Northern Ireland are likely to be traded on a pan-European basis. As such, manufacturers and traders are unlikely to face additional barriers to placing products on the Northern Ireland market or an incentive to cease doing so.

The objectives of the regulation are broadly in line with those of the Government. This is with regard to both the UK's upcoming critical minerals strategy aimed at securing stable supplies of critical raw materials, and the forthcoming circular economy strategy. This regulation would not create a new regulatory border as it would not lead to a material diversion of trade or materially impair the free flow of goods.

In order to provide additional confidence that manufacturers and traders will not face new regulatory barriers to placing goods on the Northern Ireland market, the Government commit to taking any necessary steps to protect the UK's internal market, including considering equivalent measures in Great Britain where necessary.

### *Non-Agricultural Geographical Indications—Regulation 2023/2411*

This regulation will not create a new regulatory border. The regulation concerns geographical indications, which are intellectual property rights to indicate that a product has a specific geographical origin and possesses a certain quality or reputation due to that origin. The UK already enforces strong trade mark and consumer protection laws and GIs are another way of protecting products against infringement.

The Government have considered carefully the views expressed by Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly last March. Since that point, the Government have undertaken extensive assessment of the regulation, including detailed technical exchanges with the European Commission and conversations with stakeholders. They have also considered the relevant equivalent protections in Great Britain. This has been with the clear aim of understanding the impacts which would arise from its application in Northern Ireland and the points made by Assembly Members.

From that work, it is clear to me that the regulation would not materially impair the free flow of goods or divert trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and that it could indeed offer new opportunities. The



regulation would only affect a small number of businesses due to the specific nature of the products. Additionally, even where companies are selling such products, only minimal adjustments are likely required, such as updating packaging or marketing materials. Companies that are selling genuine products, as registered and protected, will not need to make any adjustments. Where businesses are using protected names when selling a product that does not meet the GI specification, they might be able to use exemptions (such as continued use of the product name if the product is already covered by a UK trade mark) or apply for transition periods of up to 15 years, as applicable, to change marketing materials. And many of these businesses will already trade with the EU market and make those adjustments regardless.

Businesses in Northern Ireland may also benefit by accessing this alternative way of protecting their products, as GIs may allow them to charge higher prices or improve sales. Agrifood products can already benefit from GIs and businesses have hugely valued the protection of products such as Irish whiskey.

I understand that for those who took part in the original debate in the Assembly, as well as others, concerns may still remain about the potential impact of this regulation. The Government will take any steps necessary for the protection of the UK's internal market and are also committing to reviewing the GB domestic regime in respect of non-agricultural geographical indications in light of this decision.

#### *Next steps*

The Government will shortly lay explanatory memorandums before Parliament pertaining to each of the three decisions that we will make. These will set out in further detail the Government's view on any impacts that the above mentioned regulations would have on Northern Ireland, as well as additional evidence I considered when reaching my conclusion that none of them would lead to a new regulatory border.

While the Government note that the EU has recently issued proposals to add regulations 2024/1689 (on artificial intelligence) and 2024/2847 (on cyber resilience), we are clear that both regulations are complex and will require further dialogue and consideration as to their interaction with the framework. At this Joint Committee, the Government will ask the EU to hold an exchange of views on these two files within six weeks. Therefore, at present no decision has been made and therefore the regulations will not be added to the Windsor framework at this Joint Committee meeting. I also note that Members of both Houses and the Northern Ireland Assembly have expressed interest in these issues in light of our domestic strategy and that they too will want to consider the issues when the Government have further clarity to share on them.

The Government are steadfastly committed to protecting the UK internal market and to implementing the Windsor framework. Our diligent approach to the Joint Committee, to assessing the potential impacts of these decisions, and to delivering the UK internal market system reflects the sincerity with which the Government treat those commitments. The full package of decisions and declarations for the Joint Committee are intended to achieve both of these objectives. Beyond these matters, the Government will continue to engage closely with

stakeholders and the European Commission on a broad range of regulatory issues of mutual interest in line with the outcomes of the Joint Committee.

I can confirm that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is writing to the Speaker of the Assembly to update him on these next steps, alongside the specific forward-facing commitments that the Government are making in respect of domestic policy to avoid trade barriers in future. These commitments are sincere and further demonstrate our commitment to ensuring the smooth flow of trade across the United Kingdom in its territorial entirety. I will place a copy of the Secretary of State's letter to the Assembly Speaker in the Library of the House for future reference.

[HCWS601]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Men's Health Strategy: Call for Evidence

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton):** In November 2024, the Secretary of State announced his commitment to publish a call for evidence to support the development of England's first men's health strategy.

Today we are publishing the call for evidence which is available on the gov.uk website at:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/mens-health-strategy-for-england-call-for-evidence>

The 12-week call for evidence will gather vital insights from the public, health and social care professionals, academics, employers and organisations with expertise on men's health so that the Government can consider how to tackle the biggest health issues facing men of all backgrounds.

The Government have set out an ambitious programme of reform for the NHS. The health mission has set the clear goals of achieving: an NHS that is there when people need it, fewer lives lost to the biggest killers, halving the gap in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest regions, and a fairer Britain where everyone lives well for longer. Our plan for change will rebuild the health service and deliver better care for everyone.

The men's health strategy for England will form part of this programme of reform, ensuring that all men get the support they need to live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives.

We know that men face unique challenges throughout their lives. Men are disproportionately affected by a range of health conditions including cancer, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. Life expectancy data also shows that on average women live four years more than men in England.

Around three in four people who died by suicide in 2023 were men. Suicide is the biggest cause of death in men under the age of 50.

Evidence suggests that men are also more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours such as, but not limited to, smoking, harmful gambling and alcohol consumption, and substance misuse.

Inequalities within men's health are stark. Those in more deprived areas are likely to die earlier on average than those who live in less deprived areas. The gap in life expectancy at birth between men and women increases in line with greater levels of deprivation.

We recognise that men can face various barriers to accessing healthcare services. We want to understand the challenges that men face in seeking and securing help and care, and to ensure that the services they receive are responsive to their needs.

The men's health strategy will tackle these problems head on.

Following engagement with stakeholder organisations, analysis of the responses to the call for evidence and submissions to the Change NHS website relevant to men's health, we intend to develop and publish the strategy by the end of 2025.

[HCWS602]

### **World Health Organisation: Pandemic Accord Negotiations and International Health Regulations**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton):** I would like to update the House regarding the final round of negotiations on the international agreement on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response—the pandemic accord—at the World Health Organisation, as well as the targeted amendments to the international health regulations, which were agreed in June 2024.

#### *Pandemic accord negotiations*

In March 2021, member states of the WHO, including the UK, agreed to draft and negotiate a pandemic accord to keep the UK and the world safer from pandemic threats. I am pleased to announce that following the most recent rounds of negotiations between 7 to 11 April and 15 to 16 April, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body has reached agreement on the full text. WHO member states will consider its formal adoption at the World Health Assembly next month.

This is a historic moment for the UK and global health security. The accord should meaningfully improve UK and global pandemic prevention, preparedness and response capabilities. It should protect lives, livelihoods, the economy and the NHS, and bring genuine benefits to UK health security, jobs and growth, in line with the Government plan for change.

Since the House was last updated, UK officials have worked closely with our global partners to resolve the key remaining issues in the accord, including on the pathogen access and benefit sharing—PABS—system. This will be a new, voluntary system for pharmaceutical companies to sign up to in order to gain faster access, with less red tape, to the pathogens they need to create new vaccines, treatments and tests in the event of a pandemic. This is good news for scientific innovation, good news for the UK's world-leading life sciences industry, and good news for all of us.

Negotiators also resolved outstanding and important issues on pandemic prevention. The accord will ensure that member states take comprehensive action, together, to better prevent pandemics and improve disease surveillance

so we can detect and respond to emerging pandemic threats promptly. In addition, the inclusion of a “One Health” approach in the accord—which recognises the vital link between animal, human and environmental health—strengthens multi-sectoral collaboration, helping to better address the emergence of pandemic risks, many of which originate in animal populations. At the same time the accord protects the sovereignty of member states, including the UK, to make their own public health decisions in the event of a global health emergency.

I now look forward to the 78th meeting of the World Health Assembly in May, where member states will come together to make a final decision on whether to adopt the accord. If adopted, member states will then start negotiations to agree the details of how the PABS system will operate, after which it will be up to each member state to decide whether to ratify the pandemic accord.

#### *International health regulations*

I would also like to update the House on the IHR, for which targeted amendments were agreed at the WHA in June 2024. The IHR are an important technical framework that helps to prevent and protect against the international spread of disease. Amendments to the IHR were agreed by countries to reflect lessons learnt from recent global health emergencies, such as the covid-19 pandemic, including by improving information sharing and collaboration for public health emergency response. Member states have until 19 July 2025 to decide whether to recognise the amendments or to reserve or opt out.

The Department of Health and Social Care has been leading work across Government to confirm the implications of the amendments for the UK, working with counterparts in the devolved Governments, and our overseas territories and Crown dependencies to ensure all relevant territories are considered. This analysis will inform the decision about which amendments are in the UK's national interest. No decision has yet been made on which IHR amendments the UK will accept.

Neither the pandemic accord nor the IHR include any proposals that would give the WHO powers to impose domestic decisions on the UK. This Government will only agree to a pandemic accord and IHR amendments that are in the national interest. The sovereign right of states is expressed as one of the guiding principles of the accord. Under the IHR, while the WHO director-general may make recommendations on international responses to public health emergencies, these recommendations are non-binding and it is for member states to determine their domestic response.

I will update the House again following the WHA in May.

[HCWS603]

## **SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY**

### **Personal Liability Consultation**

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** The Government are today publishing their response to the public consultation on establishing personal liability measures on senior executives

of online platforms and marketplaces who fail to remove illegal content relating to knives and offensive weapons from online platforms, search engines and marketplaces. The consultation ran between 13 November and 11 December 2024. This was open to the public and targeted at the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, online platforms and marketplaces, businesses, voluntary sector and community groups, and other organisations with a direct interest in the proposals.

The consultation received a total of 74 completed responses. We are grateful to all those who took the time to respond. The Government response sets out our consideration of these responses.

The Government will introduce legislation to provide the police with the power to issue content removal notices for illegal knife and other offensive weapons related content. If a company ultimately does not comply, the police are able to decide whether to issue a civil penalty notice against the company and a senior executive of that company.

A copy of the consultation response will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS600]

## JUSTICE

### Young Offender Institutions in England: Use of PAVA

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood):** This Government inherited a crisis in our criminal justice system. This extends to the children and young people's secure estate, which has seen increased levels of violence and instability in the past decade, particularly in the public sector young offender institutions HMP and YOI Feltham A, HMYOI Werrington and HMYOI Wetherby. Our hard-working staff manage young people who are in custody for serious crimes, and this situation is putting them both in danger.

*Risk to staff and young people in custody is higher than ever before*

There has been a welcome reduction in the overall number of young people in custody over the last decade (from over 1,000 under 18-year-olds a decade ago, to an average of 430 in latest published statistics, the lowest number on record).

Custody is only ever used as a last resort, with many young people successfully managed in the community or diverted away from a life of crime. But the fact remains that sometimes young people do need to be placed into custody for public protection. This means that those who are in youth custody today are predominantly older teenage boys, aged 16 to 18 years. Over two thirds of these are there for violent offences.

The levels of violence across the children and young people's secure estate are unacceptable. On a weekly basis there are assaults involving young people in custody. Serious assaults can see these young people use homemade weapons, including stabbing implements, against each other and our staff. Today, levels of violence are higher than in the adult prison estate. For the 12 months to Dec 2024, the rate of assaults by children and young

people on staff across the three public YOIs (HMYOI Feltham A, HMYOI Werrington and HMYOI Wetherby) increased by almost 25% compared to the previous year—rates are around 14 times higher than that in the adult estate. In July 2024, HM Inspectorate of Prisons described HMP & YOI Feltham A as the

“most violent prison in the country”.

Officers working in the YOIs are trained to use physical restraint at the lowest possible level that is required. However, we have seen levels of violence that mean staff must place themselves at risk of considerable harm to intervene—for example, when a violent attack involves the use of a homemade weapon, or when a large group of young people in custody are engaged in an assault against one other. This type of situation hampers the ability of staff to quickly intervene to protect those who are being attacked, and their ability to protect themselves from injury.

In recent months, incidents have seen staff members act as human shields to protect victims from attack, where they have been stamped and kicked in the head by numerous assailants. This has seen young people in custody and staff sustain serious injuries, including fractures, dislocations, puncture wounds and lacerations. The nature of this violence presents a high risk of life-changing injury, and trauma for staff and the young people in custody experiencing this violence.

#### *Decision on PAVA*

After considering the evidence carefully and listening closely to a range of views, I have decided to authorise the issuing of PAVA (a synthetic pepper spray) to a specially trained and selected group of staff in the three public sector YOIs (Feltham A, Werrington and Wetherby) for a 12-month period. This is a specific authorisation for use in youth settings, and is different from how this tactic is deployed in the adult estate, where all officers carry it as part of their personal protective equipment.

PAVA will only be authorised for use as a last resort. This means it can be used when use is necessary, proportionate and appropriate to reduce the risk of serious or life-threatening injury to a young person in custody or a member of staff. This will allow staff to respond to these serious incidents more effectively. It will potentially reduce the severity of injury and will help restore control much more quickly.

PAVA can already be used during the most serious incidents in the YOIs, but only by national tactical response officers, who are nationally based, when authorised under the governance of a gold commander. It can typically take over an hour to deploy these officers. As altercations in YOIs arise rapidly, often with little warning, these officers can rarely, if ever, arrive on the scene in time to respond to active violence that is being experienced.

This change in policy will mean PAVA can now be drawn or deployed by local staff to diffuse a situation where it is deemed necessary to reduce the risk of serious physical harm.

#### *Future checks and balances*

Very close scrutiny and oversight will be in place to safeguard the use of this tactic. There will be a suitability assessment and training for the limited number of staff that will be authorised to carry and draw or discharge



PAVA. The authorisation for this policy will only be for a 12-month period, allowing further review of whether to continue, change or stop the use of the tactic.

A live evaluation will be conducted. It will review each and every incident in which PAVA is used; collect data and evidence focused on necessary, appropriate and proportionate use of PAVA and its efficacy; and consider the impact of PAVA. Additionally:

Senior officials will review every incident of PAVA being drawn or deployed when young people in custody are involved, with every use reported to the local authority designated officer. Any unnecessary or inappropriate use will be investigated in line with safeguarding policies.

A weekly report to Ministers on any serious incidents will now include PAVA, and while use is expected to be low, Ministers will review incidents and all data related to the drawing and use of PAVA on a monthly basis. There will be a clear focus on any disproportionality and neurodiversity.

The independent restraint review panel will provide oversight of every PAVA use and will include this in their report to Ministers annually, which is published externally on gov.uk.

There will be a ministerial review of the roll-out after 12 months of operation to consider whether to continue with the policy; if, in doing so, any changes to the policy are necessary; or whether there should be a decision to withdraw the tactic, informed by the live evaluation and wider research.

#### *The need for long-term reform*

This is not a decision I have taken lightly, but I am clear that this vital measure is needed to urgently prioritise safety in these three YOIs at this present time. I believe that failing to act will place young people in custody and staff at risk of serious harm.

This decision will bring greater stability, which is essential to improving YOIs in the short to medium term, notably reducing the highest level of risk and the severity of violence.

However, while this measure is necessary, it is not sufficient alone. For that reason, we commissioned the Youth Custody Service to develop improvement plans for the YOIs, in the form of road maps to effective practice. These plans focus on preventing violence through effective behaviour management and relationships, and improving safety. I expect to see an increased focus on improving access to purposeful activity, including education and skills development, as well as greater time out of room for young people in custody.

We have published an independent review into placements for the small number of girls in custody, who are highly vulnerable, and have accepted the review's recommendation to no longer place girls in YOIs, having not placed them there for several months (PAVA will therefore not be used on girls in the youth estate).

In the longer term, we intend to move away from the current estate, based on the evidence of what works for young people in custody. We will learn from the pilot of the first ever secure school and the operation of secure children's homes.

Our work in the children and young people's estate is part of our commitment to reforming the justice system so that it tackles the cycle of violence, ensures public safety, and safeguards vulnerable young people.

[HCWS599]

## SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

### Online Safety Act Implementation: Protecting Children

**The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle):** Today, I am laying in Parliament Ofcom's draft codes of practice for child safety duties under the Online Safety Act, setting out the statutory duties providers face and the measures they must take to fulfil them.

We are in the midst of an epidemic in online harm. Young people are exposed to a slew of horrific content on the sites that many of them use every day. The consequences can be devastating, from pornography that cruelly warps their expectations of healthy relationships to content which encourages, promotes or provides instructions for self-harm, suicide or eating disorders. Parents trying to protect their children may not understand what is going on behind their bedroom doors or find themselves powerless to stop it.

Today, that changes. Building on the illegal codes which came into force last month, the draft codes of practice are some of the most far-reaching protections in the world. For the first time, platforms will have to prioritise children's safety by law, protecting children in the UK from seeing content including pornography, violent content, or that which promotes self-harm, suicide or eating disorders.

We know that harm is happening to children right now. If we are to safeguard healthier, happier childhoods for our young people, we cannot afford to hesitate in protecting them. From today, services will have three months to assess the risk of harm their services pose to children. Once the codes have gone through the parliamentary process, Ofcom must issue them. The relevant duties will come into force 21 calendar days later, and Ofcom will be able to enforce against non-compliance. By summer, the child online safety regime will be fully in force.

I know that Ofcom is prepared to make full use of its powers under the Act. After the illegal codes of practice came into force last month, Ofcom swiftly opened several enforcement programmes to assess industry compliance. In the months to come, I expect them to build on the strong precedent they have set. When the lives of our children are at stake, we must be relentless in our efforts to protect them.

Once in force, the codes will change young people's lives for the better, protecting happy, healthy childhoods from the kind of horrific content that too often cuts them short. This is a landmark moment, but it is not the end point of our efforts to protect children online. The rapid change that has characterised the last decade of the digital age shows no signs of slowing down, bringing with it extraordinary opportunities and grave new risks. In this context, we will act swiftly if our laws continue to fall short. These codes are the foundation for child safety, not the limit, and Ofcom has already announced plans to launch a consultation in spring 2025 on additional measures.

For now, though, the message to industry is clear. You must act now to protect children using your services. If you fail to do so, Ofcom will not hesitate to enforce the law.

[HCWS598]



## Written Correction

*Thursday 24 April 2025*

### Ministerial Correction

#### WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

##### “For Women Scotland” Supreme Court Ruling

*The following extract is from the statement on the “For Women Scotland” Supreme Court Ruling on 22 April 2025.*

**Bridget Phillipson:**... But this is a judgment long in the making. It began in 2018 when Scottish Ministers issued guidance on the definition of a woman in the eyes of the Gender Representation on Public Boards

(Scotland) Act 2018. That guidance stated that a woman in that Act bears the same meaning as a woman in the Equality Act 2010, and included trans women with a gender recognition certificate.

[*Official Report*, 22 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 945.]

*Written correction submitted by the Minister for Women and Equalities, the right hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson):*

**Bridget Phillipson:**... But this is a judgment long in the making. It began in 2018, when the **Scottish Parliament passed** the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018. **The definition of woman in that Act was overturned by the Scottish courts.** Scottish Ministers issued **revised guidance** on the definition of a woman, which stated that a woman in that Act bears the same meaning as a woman in the Equality Act 2010, and included trans women with a gender recognition certificate.





# ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than  
Thursday 1 May 2025**

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**Written Statements [Col. 45WS]**

**Written Correction [Col. 11WC]**  
*Ministerial correction*

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