

**Wednesday  
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 30 April 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 30 April 2025*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### WALES

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Proposed Visitor Levy

1. **John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Whether she has had discussions with the Welsh Government on the potential impact of the proposed visitor levy on the economy in Wales. [903790]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens):** In 2024, British residents took over 7.5 million overnight trips in Wales, and during these trips they spent a total of £2.24 billion. Wales's tourism sector is thriving, as was clear to see last month during the visit of the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), to Elan Valley Lakes, which will benefit from an £11.8 million investment from both the UK and Welsh Governments. According to the Welsh Government, if a visitor levy were to be introduced by all Welsh authorities, that could potentially raise up to £33 million.

**John Cooper:** With the Welsh bottle deposit scheme going down the same disastrous dead end as the Scottish bottle deposit scheme, and now more costs are being added to Welsh tourism, making staycations more expensive, the Government appear to be creating a hostile environment for business. Add in the review of the UK internal market, which is meant to make doing business across this great land of ours easier. Why are the Government loosening the bonds of our great Union?

**Jo Stevens:** Wales is the second-best recycling nation in the whole world.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Mims Davies** (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Attacking the Welsh hospitality sector with the Welsh Government's disastrous tourism tax is supposedly a good plan, yet their impact assessment warns of a potential loss of over a quarter of a billion pounds of taxpayers' money. Meanwhile, last week Labour pulled the plug on funding for the western gateway, a vital scheme focused on boosting the Welsh economy. Can the Secretary of State now explain to taxpayers what the £205 million will actually do for Cardiff airport, and does she regret both Governments' decisions? Today, the chief executive officer of Bristol airport has openly voiced huge concerns about the Welsh Labour Government's decision to spend the money on Cardiff airport, with no obvious benefit or transparency—a move costing each Welsh household an additional £300.

**Jo Stevens:** Investment in Cardiff airport is a matter for the Welsh Government. I recognise the importance of Cardiff airport to the economy of the South Wales region, with thousands of jobs stemming from the airport and the economic ecosystem supported by it. Airlines such as Tui and Vueling have recently added several new destinations and extra flights from Cardiff airport. In the light of the Welsh Government's sustained support for Welsh tourism, I am delighted to welcome today's news that Tui is expanding its services at Cardiff, with more new routes and an increase in flights to places such as Tenerife and Mallorca.

**Gill German** (Clwyd North) (Lab): Yesterday, Wales lost a musical icon with the passing of Mike Peters from The Alarm. Mike had an extraordinary relationship with his fans, and he brought thousands of visitors from across the world into the area for his annual event, the Gathering. Mike Peters, his warmth and his music put north Wales on the map for visitors from far and wide. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Mike and to the power of music to bring people together like nothing else?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sure that the answer will be about the impact of the levy.

**Jo Stevens:** Music tourism is a huge part of the Welsh visitor economy, and I was very sad to hear about Mike Peters' death. Mike and The Alarm were the sounds of my teenage years when I was growing up in north Wales. He was a proud Welshman, a hugely talented musician and a man of incredible resilience. As well as bringing music tourism to north Wales, he dedicated much of his life to charitable work to support blood cancer patients, and I know he will be missed.

#### Violence against Women and Girls

2. **Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Whether she has had discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of creating a new offence of domestic abuse to help tackle violence against women and girls in Wales. [903792]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dame Nia Griffith):** I know that this is a deeply personal matter for the hon. Member, and I commend him for his committed campaigning on this vital subject. This Labour Government agree that more must be done to tackle violence against women and girls, which is why we have introduced a pilot this week in Wales that will enable victims and their friends, families and support workers to apply for a domestic abuse protection order. We have commissioned David Gauke, a former Justice Secretary, to conduct an independent review to examine how sentencing guidelines can best address crimes of violence against women and girls in the future.

**Josh Babarinde:** I asked the Government via a written parliamentary question how many domestic abusers there are in prison in Wales, and what their reoffending rate is. The response was:

"It is not possible to robustly calculate the number of domestic abusers in prison or their reoffending rate...because these crimes are recorded under the specific offences for which they are prosecuted".

There is no specific offence of domestic abuse in law, which means we are not recording this comprehensively, we are not rehabilitating comprehensively and we are not protecting victims comprehensively. If the Government do not create an offence, as I have proposed, what will they do to protect the victims and survivors and to better identify these abusers?

**Dame Nia Griffith:** I understand that the hon. Member is bringing forward a private Member's Bill on domestic abuse. We recognise that being able to identify domestic abuse offenders is critical, but the Government are not convinced that the Bill provides a solution to that challenge. However, the Ministry of Justice will continue to consider how it can make improvements to how we identify offenders.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee.

**Ruth Jones** (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): Tomorrow I will be visiting the new sexual violence support centre in Rothbury House in my constituency, along with Jane Hutt, the Welsh Government Minister for Social Justice. This great new facility will support many people in my constituency and the surrounding areas for years to come. Will the Minister join me in applauding the vital work of the staff—many of them volunteers—who provide lifesaving support to women in need?

**Dame Nia Griffith:** I pay tribute to that support centre, and indeed to the many organisations the length and breadth of Wales that help women fleeing domestic violence. As my hon. Friend knows, we work very closely with the Welsh Government. Indeed, I spoke to Cabinet Secretary Jane Hutt only yesterday. As my hon. Friend will also know, the Welsh Government launched their own strategy for combating violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence back in 2022, and they are carefully monitoring progress on it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Mims Davies** (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): The House will be as horrified as I was to learn from a shocking report in *The Times* that a Labour-led local authority apparently showed teenagers a PowerPoint in which they were urged to seek consent from their partner before choking them during sex. It is abhorrent to even attempt to normalise strangling in a loving relationship—indeed, in any relationship. It is important to note that the council in question did not categorically deny this at first, but did so after there was, rightly, a backlash. Does the Minister agree that even considering showing such appalling content to pupils in Welsh schools is totally unacceptable, and will she undertake to hold her colleagues to account on this part of the so-called Welsh curriculum?

**Dame Nia Griffith:** It is very distressing to hear what the hon. Member has said, but I would say to her that the independent pornography review was a wide-ranging and thorough piece of work that assessed the effectiveness of pornography legislation, regulation and enforcement. The review's final report was published on 27 February, and its findings continue to be assessed by the Government. It is right that the Government take the time to understand this complex and deeply important topic, and a further

update will be provided in due course. If I may, I would just stress the point that the review recommends making non-fatal strangulation pornography clearly and explicitly illegal to possess, distribute and publish.

**Mims Davies:** I think we can all agree that violence against women and girls is an all-too-frequent occurrence. The Office for National Statistics has published data revealing that, shockingly, 4.3% of women aged between 16 and 59 in England and Wales suffered a sexual assault in 2023-24, up from 3.4% in 2009-10.

Women and girls will only truly be safe if we rid society of the appalling rape gangs, and a Welsh rape gang survivor has publicly called for an inquiry into this. Has the Minister met the safeguarding Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips)—to reflect on this and to deliver for victims in Wales? If not, on behalf of the women and girls who want answers, who want to be heard and who want to see action in Wales and more widely, may I again ask if she will push the Welsh Government to use the Inquiries Act 2005 to ensure that Welsh victims gets justice?

**Dame Nia Griffith:** The previous Government sat on their hands and failed to deliver on the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, whereas this Government have already announced a comprehensive set of plans to implement all the recommendations to prevent the horror of child sexual abuse, including: the introduction of mandatory reporting; the creation of a new child protection authority; and the removal of the three-year statute of limitation period for personal injury claims brought by victims of child sexual abuse. I will just stress that this is a reserved matter and that my Government colleagues have frequent discussions with colleagues in the Welsh Government.

### Family Farms: Impact of Spring Statement

3. **Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the spring statement 2025 on family farms in Wales. [903793]

6. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the spring statement 2025 on family farms in Wales. [903796]

### The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales

**(Dame Nia Griffith):** Just this morning I had the pleasure of visiting the Carmarthenshire Day exhibition in the Jubilee Room, which I strongly recommend as a real display of Welsh farming and food produce. The Government are steadfastly committed to the farming sector. We protected the farm budget at its current level and allocated £337 million to the Welsh Government at the autumn Budget. The Welsh Government, in their budget, have used that to maintain the basic payment scheme, providing much-needed support for farmers across Wales—a budget that, as the hon. Lady knows, Tory and Plaid Cymru Senedd Members tried to block.

**Aphra Brandreth:** I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Not only is Labour's family farm tax threatening the future of farming in Wales; it is also a direct attack on farmers right across the UK. In England, the sustainable farming incentive scheme was closed with no notice. Meanwhile, in Labour's spring statement the Government brought forward: increases in national insurance, hitting all farmers once again; their tax on double cab pick-ups; plus changes to furnished holiday lets, penalising farmers who have actively diversified. Can the Minister explain to the Welsh agricultural sector why the Government are carrying out an all-out assault on its way of life?

**Dame Nia Griffith:** Just picking up on the point about national insurance contributions, as the hon. Lady will know, many farmers employ one or two people, so they will come under the category of some of the smallest businesses. We have made sure that we protect them by doubling the employment allowance to £10,500, meaning that over half of small and microbusinesses will pay less or no national insurance contributions at all. Her Senedd colleagues voted against the budget for Welsh farmers in the Senedd only a few weeks ago.

**John Lamont:** The Minister seems to have no grasp whatsoever of the constant struggle facing our family farms in Wales and across the United Kingdom, because of the lack of support in both Labour's spring statement and Labour's family farm tax. Farming families are not multimillionaires—they are striving to make a profit, with many earning less than the minimum wage. Will the Minister finally accept that farms are crucial to the UK's food security, and that the Government should support them and scrap the vindictive family farm tax?

**Dame Nia Griffith:** We applaud the work that farmers do—they are vital to our food security. As the hon. Gentleman will know, there are many ways in which we have supported farmers, including the £337 million given to them in the Budget this year and passed on by Welsh Government Ministers to our farmers in Wales. He brings up inheritance tax. I remind him that we are maintaining significant levels of relief from inheritance tax beyond what is available to others and compared to the position before 1992. Where inheritance tax is due, those liable for a charge can pay any liability on relevant assets over 10 annual instalments, interest free.

**Carolyn Harris** (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): The Welsh Government's budget contained over £300 million to support Welsh farmers. Is it not the case that Plaid Cymru and the Tories put Welsh farmers' livelihoods at risk by voting against the Welsh Government's recent budget?

**Dame Nia Griffith:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

### Brexit: Economic Impact

4. **Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the UK's departure from the EU on the economy in Wales. [903794]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens):** We are negotiating a new partnership with the EU and believe that securing a broad-based security partnership, bringing closer co-operation on law and order and tackling

barriers to trade will boost our economies, keep us safe and improve families' finances. Since coming into government, I have worked with UK and Welsh Government colleagues to drive more than £1.5 billion in private investment into Wales from the likes of Eren Holding and Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners, creating hundreds of jobs and laying the groundwork for thousands more.

**Dave Doogan:** Only this Government can deliver cold comfort and warm words all in the same sentence. The fact of the matter is that, after the Labour-Tory hard Brexit, the Welsh economy suffered by £4 billion, trade has gone down by £1 billion and Wales has lost £1 billion in European structural and development funding. On top of that, the Labour Budget has kicked Wales even further down the track. When will the Secretary of State stand up to her Westminster masters and finally do something in the interests of the people of Wales?

**Jo Stevens:** Welsh businesses both large and small tell us time and again that they are being held back by red tape. We need to tackle the barriers to trade in order to help drive investment, jobs and growth for both the UK and EU economies. Nationalists can continue their obsession with the constitution, putting up borders instead of breaking down barriers, and raising taxes on working people, as they have done in Scotland.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Closer collaboration between the UK and the EU on defence and defence spending is an important part of strengthening our relationship and will be important for the Welsh economy, including for companies such as EnerSys, which I visited recently, which produce specialist batteries for defence and other applications. Will the Secretary of State say a bit more about how increased defence spending will aid the Welsh economy and companies such as EnerSys, particularly in advanced manufacturing and supply chains?

**Jo Stevens:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the potential for growth. This Government's commitment to increase defence spending means that our strong defence manufacturing base in Wales and the skilled jobs it supports has real potential for growth. The top five suppliers to the Ministry of Defence all have a footprint in Wales, and alongside that is a strong supply chain. The forthcoming industrial strategy will set out more details as to how that advanced manufacturing base will get Government support.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Reports of a new UK-EU strategic partnership to reduce trade barriers will, at last, be a welcome boost to Wales's food and drinks producers, given that 75% of the sector's exports go to the EU. All producers from farm to fork of our wonderful Welsh produce make a vital contribution to Wales's economy. Will the Secretary of State join me in celebrating all Wales's food producers and farmers, especially those at Sioe Nefyn—Nefyn Show—on Monday, and even more so those from Sir Gâr, or Carmarthenshire, here today?

**Jo Stevens:** I am delighted to support the Welsh food and farming industry, and I absolutely concur with the right hon. Lady's comments.



**Liz Saville Roberts:** On another note, Policy in Practice shows that nearly half of the 10 UK local authority areas worst hit by Labour's welfare cuts are in Wales—that is 190,000 people affected in Wales, hitting our post-industrial quarrying and coalmining communities hard. How does the Secretary of State explain to Welsh colleagues why the communities where Labour used to be strongest should now suffer so much because of her Government's cruel welfare cuts?

**Jo Stevens:** As the right hon. Lady might know, none of those reforms has actually gone into effect yet, so nobody has been affected by them. We inherited a Tory welfare system that is the worst of all worlds: it provides the wrong incentives, discouraging people from working, while the people who really need a safety net are still not getting the dignity and support they need and deserve, with the taxpayer funding an ever-spiralling bill. It is unsustainable, indefensible and unfair.

### Strengthening the Union

5. **Andrew Ranger** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to strengthen the Union. [903795]

11. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What steps she is taking to strengthen the Union. [903801]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens):** In Wales, the partnership between our two Labour Governments is delivering on the people's priorities. NHS waiting lists have fallen for three consecutive months. We are creating tens of thousands of jobs in every corner of Wales through our freeports, investment zones, support for steelworkers, inward investments and thriving green industries.

**Andrew Ranger:** Supporting people into work is the right thing to do, not just economically but morally. I therefore welcome the recently announced UK Trailblazer programme in north Wales, which will do away with the one-size-fits-all approach and will instead meet people where they are, giving them a greater chance to secure stable and good employment. Does the Secretary of State agree that this shows the power of the partnership that we now have, and our commitment that no one, on either side of the M4, will be left behind? Also, will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Wrexham football team on their historic back-to-back-to-back promotion this weekend to the English football league championship?

**Jo Stevens:** Many congratulations to Wrexham. I am delighted to see them promoted, and very sad to see Cardiff relegated. My hon. Friend is right: the Government understand that work is crucial not just to our health and wellbeing, but to improving our living standards. That is why we announced last week a £10 million pilot in Blaenau Gwent, Neath Port Talbot and Denbighshire to support people back into work. We will not sit by and let the Tories' broken welfare system continue, which has condemned people to a life without work. These Trailblazer projects will help more people in Wales back into secure, well-paid jobs.

**Ms Minns:** Since this UK Labour Government were elected, more than 2 million extra GP appointments have been delivered in England, and thanks to a record-breaking £21 billion Budget settlement, waiting lists in

Wales have gone down three months in a row. Does the Secretary of State agree that our NHS and our country are safer and stronger when we have two Governments working together to make devolution work, not to tear our Union apart?

**Jo Stevens:** I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Driving down NHS waiting lists is a shared priority for both the UK and the Welsh Labour Governments. As she says, waiting lists have fallen for three consecutive months as a result of our two Governments working together. Meanwhile, the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru voted against an extra £600 million for the Welsh NHS, and Reform would sell off the NHS to the highest bidder.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): Does the Secretary of State think that the imposition from tomorrow of a parcels border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland will strengthen the Union, given that parcels, business to business, from Wales or any other part of the UK to Northern Ireland, will now be subject to EU customs declarations and checks? How does that strengthen the Union?

**Jo Stevens:** I thank the hon. and learned Member for his question. As I said in reply to an earlier question, we want to make sure that trading is made easier and that we remove the red tape and barriers. Those are the discussions that we are having at the moment with the EU.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that what strengthens this Union is the nations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland intertwined with England? It is the Gaelic nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and their cultures and history that bring us together. The Union also brings benefits relating to employment, jobs and opportunity. It is about the constitution and our service in uniform. All those things bring us together in a way that nothing else can, and mean that this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is better as a Union; we can all do better together.

**Jo Stevens:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I definitely believe that the UK is stronger with the four nations working together.

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

**David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): There is no greater threat to our Union than the feeling that workers in one nation matter less than those in another. People in and around Port Talbot feel that they have had a rotten deal. Can the Minister explain why, under the deal that her Government did with Tata, workers who had been at the company for longer than 25 years did not have that service reflected in their redundancy payments, and why workers wishing to access the retraining elements had to forgo their rights to the enhanced redundancy payment? Is it true that, as has been reported, as of February, only three people had applied for that scheme?

**Jo Stevens:** Tata made the decision to close the blast furnaces in January 2024, six months before the general election. It closed the coke ovens in March 2024, when an agreement on the grant for the electric arc furnace

had already been made. The hon. Gentleman might remember that blast furnace 5 closed down on polling day. The timeline was fixed for that electric arc furnace to be delivered. In 10 weeks, we negotiated a better deal, with better terms and protections for the whole workforce at Port Talbot. There were no immediate compulsory redundancies. We saw the best voluntary redundancy package ever offered by Tata to its UK workforce. We saved 5,000 jobs, and 385 acres of land are being released for development, regeneration and future opportunities at the site. All in all, this was £1.3 billion investment deal. That is very different from the situation in Scunthorpe.

### Prime Minister

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

### Engagements

Q1. [903910] **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 30 April.

**The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer):** Yesterday evening, Royal Air Force Typhoons successfully conducted strikes against Houthi military targets in Yemen in a joint operation with our US allies. This action was in line with the long-standing policy of the UK Government to defend freedom of navigation in the Red sea, after Houthi attacks fuelled regional instability and risked economic security for families in the UK. I am pleased to say that all UK aircraft and personnel returned safely, and I pay tribute to the professionalism and bravery of all our servicemen and servicewomen. The Defence Secretary will make a statement about this immediately after Prime Minister's questions.

I congratulate Prime Minister Mark Carney on his election in Canada. Our two countries are the closest of Commonwealth allies, partners and friends. We will work together to deepen our economic relationship to benefit working people here in the UK. May I also congratulate everyone across the House, including Members and those in the Press Gallery, who ran marathons in London and Manchester? In particular, I congratulate the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) on running the fastest time of any female MP. Of course, I also congratulate the shadow Justice Secretary, who I am reliably informed is still running.

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

**Clive Jones:** I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister about the professionalism of our armed forces, and I too congratulate Mark Carney on being elected Prime Minister of Canada. I also congratulate everybody who took part in the London marathon. Both my daughters have done it, but it is sadly something I cannot do any more. Later today, I will introduce a Bill to guarantee that Parliament has the final say on any trade deal, including any agreement with President Trump. This idea is not new; it is exactly what Labour promised to do in an official policy paper put forward in 2001, so I am asking this Government to keep their promise.<sup>1</sup> Currently, Members of Parliament have no vote or voice on trade deals. Will the Prime Minister—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I think the hon. Gentleman is on a marathon himself. I call the Prime Minister.

**The Prime Minister:** I extend my congratulations to the hon. Member's daughters for running the marathon. The Government retain the right to strike trade deals to deliver growth, jobs and opportunities for working people. We clearly set that out in our manifesto, and that is exactly what we are doing. As he knows, Parliament has a well-established role in scrutinising and ratifying trade deals, and as he references, that was strengthened under the last Labour Government.

Q2. [903911] **Dan Tomlinson** (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): Mr Speaker,

“there is going to have to be a coming together of Reform and the Conservative party in some way”—

a deal, a pact or a merger. Those are not my words, but the words of the most senior Tory in elected public office in the country, the Mayor of the Tees Valley. If senior Tories are plotting it, and the Leader of the Opposition will not deny it, is not the only way to stop the plot to vote Labour tomorrow?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. There is no need to answer that, Prime Minister; you have no responsibility for any of that.

**Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (North West Essex) (Con): On Monday, the Prime Minister's safeguarding Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips)—admitted on the Floor of the House that there was a cover-up of the child rape gang scandal. Does the Prime Minister think we should expose this cover-up?

**The Prime Minister:** This is obviously a serious issue. I oversaw the first grooming gang prosecution, which was in Rochdale, more than a decade ago. There is a contrast here, because when the Leader of the Opposition was Minister for children and Minister for Women and Equalities, she never raised this issue in the House in three years. The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), held 352 external meetings during 20 months. How many were on this issue? Not one. Of course, the Conservatives failed to implement a single recommendation from the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse.

My position is absolutely clear: where there is evidence, the police should investigate and there should be appropriate prosecutions. That is route No. 1. Route No. 2 is that we should implement existing recommendations, which did expose what went wrong. Those recommendations were not implemented by the last Government; they are being implemented by this Government. We are providing for local inquiries. We are investing more in delivering truth and justice for victims than the Conservative party did in 14 long years.

**Mrs Badenoch:** In the last year of the Conservative Government, we had a gangs taskforce that found 500 perpetrators, protecting thousands of victims. We launched the inquiry that the Prime Minister is talking about, but more still needs to be done. It is now four months since I asked him for a full national inquiry. Instead, he promised five local inquiries. There will be one in Oldham. Will he now name where the other four will be?

1.[Official Report, 1 May 2025; Vol. 766, c. 3WC.](Correction)

**The Prime Minister:** We are providing for local inquiries—[*Interruption.*] Conservative Members have got so much to say now; why did they not implement a single recommendation in the 14 years they had in office? There are recommendations already in place about the change that needs to be made. They sat on a shelf under the last Government; we are acting on them. We are providing for local inquiries, and we are investing more in delivering truth than the last Government ever did.

**Mrs Badenoch:** The Prime Minister cannot name a single place because nothing is happening. He stood at the Dispatch Box and promised five local inquiries. On the last day of term, he had his Minister come out to water down the promise that they would provide funding. That is not good enough. At least 50 towns are affected by rape gangs—places like Peterborough, Derby, Birmingham, Nottingham, Leicester, Rotherham, Rochdale and Preston. Is he dragging his heels on this because he does not want Labour cover-ups exposed?

**The Prime Minister:** I spent five years prosecuting these cases. I was the prosecutor who brought the first case, and when that file was brought to my attention, I noticed that one of the defendants had not been prosecuted previously. Far from covering up, I asked for that file so I could have a look at it. On the back of that, I changed the entire approach to prosecutions, which was lauded by the then Government—we were doing the right thing—and brought those prosecutions. My record, where I thought something had gone wrong, is of going after it and putting it right. The Leader of the Opposition stayed silent throughout the Conservatives' years in government, and so did their entire Front Bench.

**Mrs Badenoch:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman is not the Director of Public Prosecutions any more—he is the Prime Minister. People want to know what he is going to do now, not have him talk about what he did years ago. We are asking for a full national inquiry. Andy Burnham wants a national inquiry, and he is not Conservative; he is Labour. Harriet Harman wants one. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) wants one. All the victims I have met want a full national inquiry. The Prime Minister keeps talking about local inquiries, yet they have not got going, and they have not got going because local authorities do not want to investigate themselves. Local inquiries cannot force witnesses to appear. Local inquiries cannot force people to give evidence under oath. Why will he not have a national inquiry?

**The Prime Minister:** We have had a national inquiry, and we have had recommendations. [*Interruption.*] Look, hundreds of recommendations have been made in relation to this issue. It is a serious issue. I strongly believe that we should implement the recommendations that have already been made, and that is what we are doing. I strongly believe that we should listen to victims. Labour Members have been listening to victims for decades and working with them in relation to what they want, which is local inquiries, and we have set those local inquiries up.

**Mrs Badenoch:** The Prime Minister says we should listen to victims. The victims want a national inquiry. We have not had a national inquiry. We had the child sex abuse inquiry, which the Conservatives launched. There is still more to be done; it did not cover the scandal in detail. In Manchester, just last year, authorities were still covering up abuse, and the local inquiry chair there has quit. Bradford council, which covers an area with some of the worst abuses, refuses any inquiry, local or national. Whether we are talking about the streets of Birmingham or the town hall of Bradford, it is chaos and cover ups with Labour councils. When will he show leadership and do the right thing?

**The Prime Minister:** The right thing is to implement the recommendations that we have, which is what the Conservatives palpably failed to do in government. The right thing to do is to have the national inquiries that we need, which is what the victims want. The right thing to do is to invest in our criminal justice system, so we can bring people to justice. The Conservatives have absolutely collapsed the criminal justice system. Prosecutions for rape under their watch: did they go up or down? They went down to record lows. Investment in prosecuting these cases went down. Their record was abysmal; they should hang their heads in shame.

**Mrs Badenoch:** These are just distraction tactics. The Prime Minister has not read the recommendations, because if he had, he would know that none of them would tackle this issue. The fact is, if I were standing where he is, we would have had a national inquiry months ago.

This issue is personal for me. I have met many of the victims. This is about the protection of children; nothing else is more important. In the last few days, I have been to Wiltshire, Lincolnshire, Northumberland and Kent. All of them have outstanding children's social care. Do you know why, Mr Speaker? Because they are all run by Conservatives. That is the difference that Conservative councillors make. Is the choice tomorrow not between chaos and cover ups under Labour councils, and better services under the Conservatives?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Lady says that the Conservatives would have a national inquiry; in 14 years, they did not do it. It is so hollow.

Yes, tomorrow is the country's first opportunity to pass its verdict on the Leader of the Opposition and the Conservative party after the general election. Have they changed? Have they learned? We will see her next week.

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): I wish that the Leader of the Opposition would stop weaponising victims of child sexual abuse to score political points. It is damaging victims, and if she cared about child protection she would not do that. It is a disgrace; you are a disgrace.

New data shows that in March last year, in the Hyson Green and Arboretum ward in my constituency, 64% of children were in poverty, which is the highest proportion in the whole of the east midlands and a damning indictment of the previous Conservative Government. One of the proudest achievements of the last Labour Government was the action they took on child poverty. Will the Prime Minister confirm that this Labour



Government will do everything in their power to eliminate child poverty, and that their taskforce has not ruled out abolishing the two-child benefit limit, which is the single most cost-effective way to pull children out of poverty?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the disgraceful record of the previous Government, who saw an extra 900,000 children in poverty. I am proud of Labour's record in reducing child poverty, which is what we do in government, and the taskforce is exploring every lever to reduce child poverty.

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

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): On behalf of my party, may I send our congratulations to Mark Carney and the Liberal party of Canada on their historic victory? We wish them well, as Canada continues to stand up strongly to President Trump's tariffs and threats. Canada has learned what happens when a trade deal is done with President Trump; he cannot be trusted to stick with it. The Prime Minister did not answer my question last week, nor he did answer my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) just now. Let me ask again. Will the Government give Members a vote on the Floor of the House on any deal he agrees with President Trump—yes or no?

**The Prime Minister:** We are in negotiations on a deal with the US. We will obviously act in the national interest to make sure that if there is a deal, it is the right deal for our country. If it is secured, it will go through the known procedures for this House.

**Ed Davey:** I am very disappointed by that reply, and the lack of a yes or no response. We want a vote, and we will keep pressing the Prime Minister and his Government on that.

Turning to a domestic issue, my hon. Friend the Member for Dorking and Horley (Chris Coghlan) has taken up the cause of Fiona Laskaris, whose autistic adult son Christopher was horrifically exploited and then murdered by a convicted criminal. As "ITV News" has reported, when Fiona tried to get a mental capacity assessment for her son, she was dismissed, so Christopher never got the support that might have saved his life. We are going to try to change the law so that families' concerns over a loved one's mental capacity have to be considered. Will the Prime Minister give his personal backing to that change, to prevent another tragedy like Christopher's?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that terrible case, and I think the thoughts of the whole House will be with Christopher's family and friends affected by this. We will certainly look into what else we can do, and if there are further details that could be given to me of that particular case, I will make sure that we follow it up.

**Q4.** [903913] **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I start by congratulating Truro City football club, who have gone from homelessness to league champions in one season.

In Cornwall, clean energy is a huge opportunity. We are fortunate to have vast natural resources, with onshore and offshore wind, geothermal and tidal. We have a strategically vital port and a workforce ready to step up. I welcome that Falmouth community hospital will be getting new solar panels and benefiting from those first investments made by GB Energy. As we pursue our clean power plan, will the Prime Minister confirm that this is just the beginning of that investment in renewables in Cornwall?

**The Prime Minister:** Can I add my congratulations to Truro? Clean energy investments are powering our plan for change, and that is just the beginning. We will go further: 200 schools and hundreds of NHS sites across the country will benefit from GB Energy's first solar projects, including Falmouth community hospital in my hon. Friend's constituency. Hospitals will save £45,000 a year off their energy bills, with that money going back to the frontline services. That is the better future we are building: good for patients and good for jobs, growth and our energy security.

**Nigel Farage** (Clacton) (Reform): To date so far this year, 10,000 young undocumented males have illegally crossed the English channel into our country—a 40% increase on this time last year—many coming from cultures that are somewhat alien to ours. They are being housed at a cost of many billions of pounds a year in hotels and, increasingly, in private rented homes. The effect on communities is one of a sense of deep unfairness, bordering on resentment. In Runcorn alone, there are 750 of these young men just in one community. Is it not time to admit that "smash the gangs" was nothing more than an election slogan, not a policy, and is it not time to declare a national emergency and to act accordingly?

**The Prime Minister:** We are passing a borders Bill with extensive powers to smash the gangs. These are anti-terrorist-like powers that give powers to the police to intercept where they think the suspects are committing people smuggling, which is a vile trade, and we must take back control of our borders after the last Government lost control. But what did the hon. Gentleman and his party do? Did they support those extra measures to actually smash the gangs? No. They went into the Lobby to vote against them with the Conservatives in their new coalition. And let us be clear what a vote for his party means. It means a vote to charge for the NHS, a pro-Putin foreign policy and a vote against workers' rights. And now we hear that he has recruited Liz Truss as his new top adviser, just as he was cheering on the mini-Budget.

**Q5.** [903914] **Josh Simons** (Makerfield) (Lab): For years, my constituents in Orrell have suffered from a lack of local health provision, but next month that will begin to change, thanks to a new partnership that I have built with our local NHS, Wigan Athletic and Wigan Warriors at a centre for excellence in women's sport. This will be a shining example of shifting healthcare from hospitals into communities. Can I urge the Prime Minister to continue with our plan for change and to ignore the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), who for decades has pushed to dismantle our NHS so that my constituents would have to pay to see their doctor?

**The Prime Minister:** I see the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) complaining, but what did he say? His words were,

“we’re going to have to move to an insurance-based system of healthcare”

and:

“If you can afford it, you pay”

—not under our watch. While he is busy taking Liz Truss’s advice and fawning over Putin, we are driving down waiting lists, with 3 million extra appointments delivered and waiting lists slashed in the most deprived areas. That is six times that the waiting lists have come down, including during the winter period. We are rebuilding our NHS, rebuilding our country’s future and delivering for working people.

**Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): Just before Christmas, thousands of my constituents were left without water after yet another incident involving Southern Water—the latest in a long series of issues, including outages and sewage dumping in our precious chalk stream, the River Itchen. Yet this month, my constituents face water bill hikes of 47%. Does the Prime Minister understand why my constituents are so angry about that, and what reassurances can he give them that Southern Water and Ofwat will be held to account?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Member for raising this, and the Conservatives should apologise to her constituents for allowing record sewage into our waterways. Our water Act will clean up our rivers, lakes and seas. Under new powers that came into effect last week, in fact, water bosses can now face years in jail for concealing sewage spills. We have banned the payment of bonuses and introduced new powers, and of course we are delivering a major review through our water commission. I reassure the hon. Member that we will not hesitate to take further steps.

**Sam Carling** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Listening to residents in North West Cambridgeshire on the doorstep and at local coffee mornings, there is a clear message: people want local police to have the time and resources to get to know crime in their areas and to tackle it at the root. I know our Labour mayoral candidate is committed to that if she is elected tomorrow. Could the Prime Minister update residents across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough on how our plan for change is tackling crime and antisocial behaviour and boosting police ranks by 13,000 officers, who will be visible in all local communities?

**The Prime Minister:** The Conservatives decimated neighbourhood policing, and crimes like shoplifting and antisocial behaviour ran rife. I can tell my hon. Friend what we are doing through the plan for change: extra police officers, extra police community support officers, more special constables, and—on top of that—a named officer for every community, and more teams out in our town centres on Friday and Saturday nights. That is what you get with a Labour mayor working with a Labour Government to deliver change for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Eastbourne war veteran Staff Sergeant Pauline Cole sustained injuries while serving our country. She was awarded military compensation, but because military compensation is

currently considered income by this Government, her pension credit has been cut from £77 a week to just £11 a week. We have met the relevant Minister to try to address this to no avail. With the 80th anniversary of VE Day just next week, will the Prime Minister meet Pauline, who is in the Gallery, and I to address this injustice and ensure that no veteran is penalised for serving our country?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Member for raising this important issue with us. We will always stand up for those who served our country, and I pay tribute to Pauline for her service. I will ensure that she gets the appropriate meeting that she wants and needs to discuss her specific case.

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): This week, thanks to this Labour Government, hundreds of free breakfast clubs have opened across our country. Will the Prime Minister join me in sending good wishes to the staff and pupils at Castle Carrock, Yewdale, Longtown, Inglewood, Brook Street, Blackford, Hallbankgate and Bishop Harvey Goodwin schools in my constituency, which are among the first to benefit from this important scheme? Will he confirm that this is just the start of Labour’s plan for change to deliver for working parents?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me pay tribute to all the staff in her constituency working in the breakfast clubs, which of course deliver free breakfasts and 30 minutes of free childcare, saving working parents £450 a year. We have opened the first 750 across the country, and there will be many more to come. We of course also are saving parents £50 a year by making school uniforms cheaper—something the Leader of the Opposition ordered all her troops to vote against.

Q12. [903921] **Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): The playing of music and loud videos without headphones on public transport is becoming increasingly common. The various byelaws outlawing such antisocial behaviour are clearly not working, and the planned cuts to the British Transport Police are bound to make matters worse. Will the Prime Minister back the Lib Dem plan to introduce effective enforcement and a publicity campaign to persuade people to plug in their headphones? You never know, Mr Speaker; after that, we could perhaps encourage the uncivil minority to take their feet off the seats.

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important question about antisocial behaviour. *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives are laughing about it; that really sums up what they did in the past 14 years. He knows that there are already strict rules in place to prevent antisocial behaviour, including fines of up to £1,000. We are focused on tackling antisocial behaviour. It is not low-level; it affects people, their communities, their sense of safety and what they can do with their own lives. That is why an additional £1.2 billion has been set aside for policing—13,000 new neighbourhood police officers, new respect orders and a named officer in every community. We take this seriously; the Conservatives laugh about it.

Q10. [903919] **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): Rents in my constituency are becoming exceedingly unaffordable. The most recent Office for

National Statistics data estimates that the average rent has risen by 10% in the past year, while the average wage has not risen at the same rate. Several metro mayors are calling for the power to control rents in their region in order to tackle the issue. The steps taken in the Renters' Rights Bill to cap rents at the market rate are positive, but as it is landlords who set the market rate, renters in my constituency fear that those steps will not be enough to protect them from rising rents. What steps are the Government taking to bring down rental prices?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this important issue. Communities across the country face the consequences of the Conservatives' utter failure to build enough homes. Our Renters' Rights Bill improves the system for 11 million private renters, blocking demands for multiple months of rent in advance, and finally abolishing no-fault evictions—something that the Conservatives said over and over again they would do, but, as usual, never got around to doing. That work is backed up by major planning reforms, our new homes accelerator and £600 million to deliver 300,000 homes in London, as part of the 1.5 million homes that we will build across the country, which are desperately needed.<sup>1</sup>

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Does the Prime Minister recall from our history that, even during the blitz, concert pianist Dame Myra Hess continued performing her piano recitals at the National Gallery, including the performance of German music such as JS Bach's "Jesu, Joy Of Man's Desiring"? As a trustee of the Parliament choir and a singer, may I ask him to lend his support to Parliament's own VE Day celebration, which will take place next Wednesday evening in Westminster Hall? We will perform, in the presence of His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent and the Speakers of both Houses, not only that Bach chorale, but the music of our allies and some British music, too. Tickets are still available.

**The Prime Minister:** I wish the hon. Gentleman the very best of luck. It will be a fantastic event—just one of the many important celebrations taking place to commemorate VE Day. I encourage the whole House to buy those remaining tickets and go along to the concert in Westminster Hall, as well as to the many street parties and other events across the country. I look forward to paying my own tributes on VE Day, but I wish him luck.

Q11. [903920] **Sarah Hall** (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Government's action to fix our NHS and deliver 2 million more appointments, which my constituents are already benefiting from. Together with Warrington and Halton NHS trust, I recently submitted a ready-to-go proposal for a new urgent treatment centre and out-patients facility in Warrington, which has over 200,000 residents but no urgent treatment centre. The proposal would reduce A&E waiting times and deliver 100,000 appointments every year. Will the Prime Minister or the Health Secretary agree to meet me and local health partners to discuss that transformational project?

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to ensure that my hon. Friend meets the Health Secretary. We have got waiting lists down for six months in a row now, delivering

3 million extra appointments. The Further Faster 20 programme is doubling the rate at which waiting lists are falling, including in her trust. Of course, earlier this week we froze prescription charges at under £10. A lot has been done and there is a lot more to do, but our plan for change is working to get the NHS back on its feet.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): These are the words of a victim who suffered intolerable sexual misconduct in her workplace:

"The non-disclosure agreement was entirely one-sided—gagging me, but not the men or the execs involved. It covered not just business matters but everything painful I endured. I ended up in hospital."

Does the Prime Minister agree with me and Members across the House that the misuse of NDAs in cases like this are totally unacceptable? If so, will he help us to amend the Employment Rights Bill, currently going through the Lords, to stop this pervasive practice once and for all?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady is right to highlight this issue. I do not think anybody would countenance the misuse of NDAs, particularly in a case as serious as the one she cited, which is why we are looking at whatever we can do to ensure that they are not misused.

Q13. [903922] **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): After 14 years of a Conservative Government who let fly-tipping increase to record levels across the country, my constituents in Ealing Southall will welcome the Prime Minister's announcement today that fly-tippers will now face tough action, new technology for enforcement and up to five years in prison. Will the Prime Minister set out what other steps he is taking to help councils to tackle fly-tipping and the difference that will make to communities like Ealing Southall?

**The Prime Minister:** Under the last Government, we saw 1 million incidents of fly-tipping. Under Conservative councils, we see enforcement down and fly-tipping up: look at Tory-led Northumberland, where instances of fly-tipping are up 76%. We are introducing tough powers to seize and crush the vehicles of commercial fly-tippers, who now face up to five years in prison for operating illegally. That is a Labour Government clearing up the mess left by the Conservatives.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): A week tomorrow, the whole nation will come together to commemorate VE Day. Those who fought in world war two, including my own father, would often attest that no one did more to maintain their morale in adversity than Dame Vera Lynn, the forces' sweetheart. For several years, a doughty band of campaigners has been trying to create a national memorial in her honour. I am pleased to tell the House that they now have a stunning design, that they have a site—appropriately, at Dover—and that they have already raised over three quarters of the funding that they would need. At this very special time, will the Prime Minister lend his support in principle to this noble endeavour, and will he accept a personal briefing on the campaign—in which case I suspect that he and I will meet again?

1.[Official Report, 1 May 2025; Vol. 766, c. 4WC.](Correction)



**The Prime Minister:** It is always a pleasure. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the campaign; it is really important and many people will be delighted to join it. Dame Vera is sewn into our nation's soul as providing the soundtrack for our greatest generation. It is particularly timely, so I will support the campaign that he has done so much to promote.

Q14. [903923] **Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): Whether it is crevasse on the island outside Asda in Long Eaton or the array of tyre poppers on Quarry Hill Road in Ilkeston, every day my inbox is filled with complaints about potholes that Conservative-led Derbyshire county council has failed to fix. Given that the Government have poured £1.6 billion of extra funding into road repairs and that the Derbyshire county council elections are tomorrow, does the Prime Minister agree with me that it is high time that Erewash and wider Derbyshire got themselves a Labour council that will actually repair the roads?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Conservative Derbyshire county council is home to more potholes than anywhere else in the country and drivers are paying the price. Our plan for change has committed enough funding to fix 7 million extra potholes this year. For the first time, councils like Derbyshire must publish how many potholes they have actually repaired in order to get the cash. The Conservative party left Britain's roads crumbling—we are fixing them.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): The blackouts in Spain have caused chaos. There is a realisation among many Back Benchers in the Prime Minister's own party that thousands of jobs are being lost in Scotland in the oil industry. Businesses face energy costs that are making them uncompetitive, and consumers are being plunged into fuel poverty. Does the Prime Minister not recognise that his net-zero policy is not only bad, but mad? Indeed, a former leader of his party now accepts this. Will the Prime Minister accept advice from someone in his own party, if he will not accept advice from those on the Opposition Benches?

**The Prime Minister:** In many years on the Opposition Benches, I learned when asking questions at PMQs not just to read the headline on a Wednesday morning, but to look at some of the detail. What Tony Blair said is that we should have more carbon capture. We have invested in carbon capture—that is many jobs across different parts of the country. He said that AI should be used, and we agree with that: we have invested huge amounts in AI and the jobs of the future. He also said that we need domestic targets so that businesses have certainty. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the detail of what Tony Blair said, he will see that Tony Blair is absolutely aligned with what we are doing here. These are the jobs and the security of the future. I will also say that we should not weaponise the difficult position that people in Spain and other countries find themselves in at a very difficult time.

Q15. [903924] **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): I welcome the Government's decision this month to secure British Steel. At a time when European security is critical, defence manufacturers in the Black Country, like Somers Forge in Halesowen and B.B. Price in Cradley Heath, will be using that steel to make the military equipment that our defence needs. Will the Prime Minister commit to make manufacturing investment in the Black Country a national priority so that we can live up to our industrial heritage and create the high-quality defence jobs that our region so desperately needs?

**The Prime Minister:** I pay tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend for his service to his country. He understands that our national security and economic security go hand in hand. It is vital that defence investment creates more jobs, apprenticeships and opportunities in the Black Country and across the United Kingdom. That is why we have launched a new hub to give up to 12,000 small firms better access to defence contracts. We are raising defence spending, with the highest sustained increase since the cold war—something that the Conservatives failed to do in 14 years in office.



## UK Airstrike: Houthi Military Facility

12.37 pm

### **The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):**

I wish to make a statement to update the House on the action we took last night against a Houthi military target. We did so in collective self-defence and to uphold the freedom of navigation, as Britain has always done.

Yesterday, UK forces conducted a joint operation with US allies against a Houthi military facility in Yemen. Our intelligence analysis identified a cluster of buildings 15 miles south of Sanaa used by the Houthis to manufacture drones of the type used to attack ships in the Red sea and in the gulf of Aden. Royal Air Force Typhoon FGR4s, with air refuelling support from RAF Voyager tankers, struck a number of those buildings with Paveway IV precision bombs last night. This action was limited, targeted and devised to minimise the risk to civilian life. Everyone involved in the UK operation has returned to base safely. On behalf of the House, I thank all members of our armed forces involved in this operation and pay tribute to them for their total professionalism and courage.

Yesterday's operation was carried out alongside the US, our closest security ally. It was conducted in line with both the UN charter and the established UK policy of this Government and the last; you will remember, Mr Speaker, that when Labour was in opposition, it backed the Government when they conducted five separate strikes with the US against Houthi targets.

Yesterday's attack aligns with four broad objectives. The first is to restore freedom of navigation in the Red sea and the gulf of Aden, the second is to degrade Houthi capability and prevent future attacks, the third is to reinforce regional security alongside allies and partners, and the fourth is to protect our economic security at home. First thing this morning, the Government briefed the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge); the Speakers of both Houses; the Liberal Democrats' defence spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire); and the Chair of the House of Commons Defence Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). I can now tell the House that our initial assessment is that the planned targets were all successfully hit, and we have seen no evidence of civilian casualties.

Since November 2023, the Houthis have been waging a campaign of aggression against international shipping in the Red sea. To date, there have been over 320 attacks; those attacks are illegal and deadly, and we totally condemn them. Maritime routes have been disrupted, sailors have been killed, and commercial ships have been hit and sunk. The Houthis have even targeted aid vessels destined for Yemen itself, as well as military vessels of our allies and partners. Both the Royal Navy and the US navy have been forced into action in the Red sea—last September, I met the crew of HMS Diamond, who shot down a ballistic missile and multiple drones in self-defence during their deployment in the Red sea.

Make no mistake: the Houthis act as an agent of instability across the region. They continue to receive both military and financial backing from Iran, and even Russia has attempted to support the Houthi operations. The aggression in the Red sea and the gulf of Aden is yet another example of how our adversaries are increasingly

working together against our interests. As such, I want to be clear that this Government reject any Houthi claims that attacking ships in the Red sea is somehow supporting Gaza. The Houthis were targeting tankers and seizing ships well before the war in Gaza began, and their attacks since have targeted vessels of all nations, so hear me when I say that these attacks do absolutely nothing for the Palestinian people or the push for a lasting peace.

An estimated 12% of global trade and 30% of container traffic passes through the Red sea every year, but the Houthi threat has led to a drastic fall. Levels are down by 55% on what they were in November 2023; the majority of ships now take a 5,000-mile diversion around the Cape of Good Hope, adding a full fortnight to a journey between Asia and Europe and pushing up prices for the goods that British people and others rely on. This cannot continue.

In opposition, I argued that, for what is now 80 years, “the lion's share of the responsibility for protecting international freedom of navigation in the Red sea is being shouldered by the Americans, just as the US has been doing across the world”—[*Official Report*, 24 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 355.]

Since last month, the US has been conducting a sustained campaign, targeting the Houthis in Yemen to restore freedom of navigation. It moved two carriers into the region, and its recent strikes have destroyed multiple command and control centres, air defence systems, advanced weapons manufacturing sites and advanced weapons storage sites. The US military says that its operations have now degraded the effectiveness of the Houthi attack, reporting that ballistic missile launches have dropped by 69% and one-way drone attacks are down by 55%.

The US continues to be the UK's closest security ally. It is stepping up in the Red sea, and we are alongside it. Yesterday's joint operation builds on the broader support that we have provided to the US in the region in recent months. That includes air-to-air refuelling; the use of our important military base, Diego Garcia, for regional security operations; and RAF Typhoons to support the defence of the US carrier strike group, which has been coming under near-daily attack from Houthi missiles and drones.

This Government will always act in the interests of our national and economic security. The UK is stepping up and encouraging allies to do more to protect our common security, just as we are with the eight-month deployment of our carrier strike group to the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific, which started last week. The UK has a long and proud history of taking action to protect freedom of navigation. This illegal Houthi aggression does not just disrupt shipping and destabilise the region; it hits our economy here at home. That is why the Government took this decision. It is why the UK has taken this action to help protect freedom of navigation, reinforce regional stability and strengthen economic security for families across the country. We are determined that we will keep Britain secure at home and strong abroad.

12.45 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement and to the Minister for the Armed Forces for the briefing he extended to me and other parliamentarians

[James Cartledge]

earlier today. As far as His Majesty's Opposition are concerned, the rationale for these actions has not changed since we undertook similar operations in government in the months leading up to the general election, with the support of the then Opposition. We agree that this action is effectively an act of self-defence on behalf of ourselves and our closest allies.

With the main target for RAF Typhoons being a Houthi drone factory, we should remember that drones were used by the Houthis to target our own naval ships, such as the attempted drone attack on HMS Diamond in January last year. While HMS Diamond was able to take effective action in response on that occasion, we know that this capability can be produced in very large numbers and that the threat remains a clear and present danger. Indeed, we understand that the US navy continues to be subject to Houthi aggression, including from drones. In our view, it is therefore entirely legitimate to support the defence of our close ally, the US, and to prevent future potential attacks on our own fleet and international shipping by attacking the Houthi drone threat at source.

The Houthis' actions are not just a threat to ourselves and our allies; as the Secretary of State said, they are illegal and completely counter to international humanitarian priorities, given that their attacks have imperilled aid deliveries to the Yemeni people, while undermining a crucial shipping route for grain en route to some of the poorest people in the world. The Government therefore have our full support for this latest operation, and the Opposition are grateful to the brave and highly skilled personnel of the Royal Air Force who conducted the mission, including the Typhoon crews and those supporting the air-to-air refuelling mission. In particular, we welcome their safe return and the completion of what appears to be a successful operation in degrading Houthi drone capability.

The US has been undertaking its own self-defence against Houthi attacks, and we very much welcome the close working with US allies, as was the case when we were in government working with the previous Administration in the US. That underlines the continuity of our most important strategic military partnership, and it is right that we work as closely as possible with the US to address threats to freedom of navigation.

That being said, freedom of navigation is vital to the ships of many nations, not just the UK and the US. The whole world benefits from action taken to keep international shipping flowing, which supports the wider economy. Can the Secretary of State update us on what talks he has had with other allies, including NATO members, on providing direct military support against the Houthi threat in future? After all, it is not only a threat to many other nations, but involves other hostile states, notably Iran, with its long-running support not just for the Houthis, but for Hezbollah, Hamas and other armed groups in Iraq and elsewhere. How will the UK dock in to the approach being taken by the new US Administration towards Iran?

The Secretary of State referred to Russian involvement. Can he confirm reports that the Houthis have received targeting assistance with potential ballistic missile attacks from Russia? Does that not show why supporting Ukraine against Russia is about a much wider strategic picture

that directly threatens the United Kingdom? He also referred to the use of our military base, Diego Garcia, for regional security operations, but soon it will not be ours. Does this kind of action not show why surrendering its sovereignty is so reckless?

Let me finally turn to the subject of the strategic defence review. It is very concerning that the permanent secretary to the Ministry of Defence told the Public Accounts Committee on Monday:

"it is a strategic defence review that will need to be translated into a set of specific investment decisions in individual capabilities and projects. That will be work for later in the summer and into the autumn."

The Secretary of State knows of the need for urgent procurement decisions relating directly to the Houthi threat in the Red sea, not least on upgrades to the Sea Viper system, which we believe must be accelerated. He also knows that procurement is largely on hold, awaiting the publication of the SDR. He promised to publish it in the spring; can he confirm that it will definitely be published in May—which is the last month of spring—and, most importantly, can he confirm that in May we will see the full details of all major individual procurement choices, so that the MOD can get on with them as a matter of the utmost urgency?

**John Healey:** I welcome the tone and content of the hon. Gentleman's response to my statement. Labour backed the last Government's strikes against the Houthis and, as he pointed out, the rationale then was the same as the rationale now. That was a useful contribution to this discussion. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that the clear and present threat that the Houthis pose to all nations, including ours and our closest allies, is also the same.

When I was shadow Defence Secretary and responded to what was said by the last Government, I did so as the hon. Gentleman has responded today, because this is bigger than politics. It is about freedom of navigation, it is about regional stability, and it is about that most important security relationship that the United Kingdom has with the United States.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about specific capabilities. We are now able to plan to provide the best possible kit for our armed forces, because of the historic commitment that the Prime Minister made to the House in February to raise the level of defence spending to 2.5%—three years earlier than the date that was in the hon. Gentleman's own unfunded plans—and then to raise it to 3% in the next Parliament. He asked about the capabilities on some of our naval ships. When I met the crew of HMS Diamond in the autumn, they demonstrated to me, and described to me in detail, just how exceptional their response to that multiple attack was, and just how effective the weaponry on the ship was at that time. We are upgrading those ships with a number of capabilities, including DragonFire. It was the hon. Gentleman who first talked about that, but we are installing it not on just one ship, as he proposed, but on four; we are installing it sooner than he planned; and we are funding it fully, which he had not done.

The hon. Gentleman asked about discussions with other nations. The importance of regional stability, the Houthi threats and the freedom of navigation in the Red sea were discussed by Foreign Ministers at the G7, and have been discussed by NATO Foreign Ministers in

the last month. The very carrier strike group whose deployment the hon. Gentleman welcomed last week is multinational by design. It is designed to exercise together but also, together, to reassert some of the basic principles that last night's attacks were designed to support, such as the freedom of navigation of our seas.

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

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement and to the Minister for the Armed Forces for his in-person briefing beforehand.

I am glad that our brave service personnel who were involved in yesterday's strike have returned home safely, and that the precision sovereign strike has destroyed the drone factory with no civilian casualties. I agree with the Secretary of State that Houthi attacks since 2023 have tragically killed innocent merchant mariners, led to a shocking 55% drop in shipping through the Red sea costing billions, fuelled regional instability, and exacerbated the cost of living crisis here in the UK and across the globe. However, on the basis of current intelligence, how confident is he that following yesterday's strike there will be freedom of navigation and that there will be no further loss of life because of the Houthis?

**John Healey:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for the action that we took overnight. It was part of a sustained campaign—a US campaign that we are working alongside. There is no overnight solution to this, but according to the evidence reported by the US military about this new sustained, intensive campaign, it seems to be having an effect on the pace, the rate, and the threat that the Houthis pose. Our action last night was designed to reinforce that campaign, to support the push for regional stability, and to protect the domestic economy and protect against the impact of the disruption in international shipping and its effect on prices for ordinary people.

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

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and I thank the Minister for the Armed Forces for his briefing earlier today.

The Houthis' destabilising military campaign in the Red sea has had a chilling effect on trade through that vital waterway, threatening lives while imposing costs on British businesses and consumers. The Houthis cannot be allowed to act with impunity and hold the global economy to ransom by restricting freedom of navigation. It is important that their military capabilities are degraded to ensure that trade can flow freely, which is why the Liberal Democrats support the case for limited strikes. We thank the service personnel involved for their bravery, and we are pleased that they have returned home safely. However, it is vital that we fully understand the operational goals behind the mission, as well as the intelligence planning and co-ordination of the strikes.

Can the Secretary of State explain to the House why the Government have chosen this occasion to join US forces in a joint strike, rather than doing so on previous similar missions? The recent leaks from President Trump's Cabinet, also pertaining to military action in Yemen

against the Houthis, raise concerning questions about how secure US intelligence is and the possible impact on British service personnel. In the light of those leaks, can the Secretary of State reassure us that intelligence-sharing with the US is completely secure, and can he tell us whether the Government have undertaken an assessment of the security of our intelligence-sharing networks with the US? I was reassured to hear from him that the Government have no evidence of any loss of civilian life, but can he update the House on what steps were taken ahead of the mission in an effort to minimise civilian casualties?

**John Healey:** Before I respond to the hon. Lady, may I point out that I neglected to respond to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) on the subject of the SDR? When it is published in the spring, all his questions will be answered.

I welcome the hon. Lady's recognition of the importance of degrading the military capabilities of the Houthis, and I welcome her support for the action that we took last night. I say to her with confidence and reassurance that our own UK intelligence and communications systems remain secure.

The hon. Lady asked, "Why now?" First, the decision and the action that we took were in line with long-established policy, both UK policy and the United Nations charter. Secondly, it was a reflection of the fact that, as I have reported to the House, the US is stepping up and we, as a close ally, are alongside it in this action. Thirdly, our purpose is to protect our economy at home, because most of the shipping in this busiest of international sea routes makes a big detour that pushes up prices and has a direct impact on not just our security interests but our economic interests in Britain. That is why we are acting.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The Houthis say that they are shelling international shipping in order to help the Palestinians, but does my right hon. Friend agree that by not just undermining international trade but causing a devastating decline in the use of the Suez canal and crashing the numbers of cruise ships visiting Aqaba, they are actually attacking Egypt and Jordan—two countries which could not be working harder for a future for the Palestinians, which could not be giving more support, whether it is financial, political or diplomatic, and which provide a refuge for so many? Does he agree that if the Houthis really care about the Palestinians, they should simply stop this?

**John Healey:** I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Jordan and Egypt are doing a lot of the heavy lifting in trying to support the Palestinians, and it is notable that there is no evidence that the Houthis have provided any aid to the Palestinians in Gaza. The action that they are taking, which is causing disruption and the intensification of insecurity in the region, is doing absolutely nothing to help the Palestinians' cause.

**Sir Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): I welcome this action and join the Defence Secretary in paying tribute to our exemplary armed forces. It is essential that we tackle the tentacles of Iran through all its proxies—whether



[Sir Oliver Dowden]

it is the Houthis, Hamas or Hezbollah—which do so much damage to Israel and the wider middle east, and not least to the people of Palestine. One fundamental question, as he will know from our discussions when I was Deputy Prime Minister, is about the long-term strategy to eliminate the threat of the Houthis to Red sea shipping. For the benefit of the House, will the Defence Secretary give some further indication of the new Government's thinking on the long-term strategy to address this threat?

**John Healey:** I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for going out of his way when he was Deputy Prime Minister, as this Government are doing now, to ensure that we were well briefed on such strikes. He is absolutely right to say that military action against the Houthis can take us only so far. The wider strategy must, therefore, involve the UK doing what we can to work with allies, especially in the region: first, to constrain the Houthis, as our action overnight was designed to do; secondly, to bolster the strength, authority and capability of the Yemeni Government, which is why the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), announced support earlier this year; and thirdly, to pursue the importance of a negotiated settlement that gives Yemen a peaceful way forward, while in the meantime not losing sight of our responsibility as a nation to support the Yemeni people, who are suffering greatly.

The right hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary announced in January an extra £5 million-worth of UK aid for Yemen, which brought the total over the previous 12 months to £144 million. The UK remains the third largest donor to the Yemeni humanitarian programme.

**Derek Twigg** (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and echo his words about the courage and professionalism of our service personnel. It is good that everyone has returned safely.

Having a strong and capable military is essential to ensuring our economic security and freedom of trade. Is that not why financial institutions and pension funds should increase their investment in defence industries, and not listen to voices opposed to that?

**John Healey:** Quite right. My hon. Friend will be interested to hear about the work that I and the Chancellor have commissioned together on the barriers in the UK that are holding back private sources of investment in our defence and technology industries. An important part of the defence industrial strategy, which we will be able to publish before too long, will be about how we use the big commitment of this Government and this country to invest in defence and make our armed forces fit for the future, and how we can use that to leverage much more investment from private sector sources so that we can do more, more quickly.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): It is unusual for a terrorist group engaged in a civil war to invite retaliation of this sort by attacking international shipping so comprehensively. Clearly, the Houthis are acting as an agent of Iran. Can the Secretary of State advise us

what the Government know about the ability of Iran to keep fuelling the attacks in the Red sea? Now that the domestic ability to manufacture drones in Yemen has been degraded, how easy will it be for Iran to supply them directly to the Houthis?

**John Healey:** The short answer is that we must do what we can with allies to make it as hard as possible for Iran to maintain both its financial support to the Houthis and its logistical, munitions and military support and supplies. We are working on that with allies and, as I said to the House earlier, the straight military action that we were conducting last night is part of the solution for the long term. It is not the whole solution.

**Michelle Scrogg** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. We have had a long-standing relationship with the US, which is our closest security ally. Does he agree that our continued work on AUKUS will help to deepen and strengthen that for all the nations involved?

**John Healey:** It will indeed. The AUKUS programme is a good example of how big defence commitments provide not just long-term deterrent commitments to our own security and that of our allies but an important economic boost, showing how defence can be a driver of economic growth. My hon. Friend, who has the privilege of representing the town of Barrow and its royal shipyard, will know better than anyone how important that combination is. It is hardwired into the approach that this Government take.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The brutal oppression of the Palestinians in Gaza will not be helped one iota by the bombing of merchant shipping and drone strikes against the merchant marine, so we are supportive of the action that has been taken. It seems to be an operation that has the appearance of something which may endure into a more strategic affair. Does the Secretary of State agree that, notwithstanding the general consensus in the Chamber on the action that was taken, a broader debate in Parliament would be desirable—not to discuss operational imperatives, plans or anything of that nature, but to further reinforce the will of the House? While he celebrates the actions of aircrew, will he further acknowledge that the aircrew would not be able to do their tremendous work if it was not for all the other trades that keep them mobilised?

**John Healey:** Well said. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that standing behind our armed forces and the ultimate professionalism that they display is a large cadre of civilian and military personnel who make operations successful and possible. He would be wrong to say that this is a sustained campaign. This is the first UK strike on Houthi positions since May last year, and Parliament will be kept informed in the event of any future military interventions like this.

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Freedom of navigation in the Red sea and the gulf of Aden is essential to the global economic system, and anything that impinges on it impacts the global economy, increases the cost to the environment and impacts the poorest people in the world. It is for this reason that I am proud



to be the former commander of the expeditionary air wing whose Typhoons and Voyagers were launched last night to carry out these strikes. Does the Defence Secretary agree that this action forms part of the joined-up international strategy to end the attacks and defend freedom of navigation?

**John Healey:** I do indeed. It is part of a longer-term programme to degrade the ability of the Houthis to hit international shipping, to defend and protect freedom of navigation, and to recognise that conflicts in the middle east have a big impact on business and prosperity in this country. The British Chambers of Commerce recently published a survey that said 50% of businesses in Britain report that they have now been impacted by conflicts in the middle east.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and congratulate all involved on a very successful joint operation. Matters like this are likely to attract retaliation from Iran and its proxies. What is being done to support our allies in the region against possible attacks? As Carrier Strike Group 25 prepares to transit and exercise in the region on Operation Highmast, will he assure the House—without going into specifics—that all is being done to protect our men and women?

**John Healey:** The right hon. Gentleman, who I think served as a Defence Minister under two Administrations, will know that Defence Ministers and Secretaries, including me, give the highest priority to our forces' protection. My hon. Friend the Armed Forces Minister and I went over that matter in detail with military planners and chiefs before the carrier group set sail, and I was briefed on that again when the Prime Minister and I visited the carrier last week. In general terms, the operation last night was designed to prevent further escalation. It was designed to prevent further Houthi attacks by taking out the major weapons manufacturing site that we struck last night.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and I pay tribute to the courage and professionalism of all our service personnel who were involved in this successful operation. Does he agree that the whole House should stand together against the Houthi attacks, which challenge freedom of navigation and, if left unaddressed, could lead to a devastating rise in the cost of essential food items not just for my constituents but across the UK and in other countries?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend puts the argument very well. This is a matter of freedom of navigation and a matter of international law, but it is also a matter of economic self-interest for Britain, because the price for the disruption to world shipping on this essential trade route through the Red sea is paid by ordinary people in the food and goods they depend on. That is in part why we took this action last night.

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): I, too, pay tribute to the professionalism of our armed forces, and I am thankful for their safe return. Is the Secretary of State confident about the appropriate security for our military personnel, given that the previous leaks

from the Trump Administration on Signal gave details of such attacks before they happened, and what reassurances has he had from the United States on that?

**John Healey:** I am confident. We handle secure communications in secure ways, and we do that consistently here in the UK.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to the armed forces personnel who took part in last night's action. The fact that it is the UK that is supporting the USA in this action really does emphasise our close relationship. However, this morning's newspapers suggest that our desire to do a trade deal with America has been pushed back to a second tranche of countries, or maybe even a third. Does he share my disappointment at that decision, and would he ask the Trump Administration to return to that issue and to consider our close relationship in defence and intelligence?

**John Healey:** I gently urge my hon. Friend not necessarily to believe everything he reads in the newspapers. He is very experienced and has a very good insight into the political world. Just to reassure him, we are pulling out all the stops behind the scenes to try to settle a trade deal with the US, just as we are to reinforce the special depth of the relationship on security and defence matters between the UK and the US.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I very much welcome the statement and the action, which I fully support, and I am very pleased to hear of the level of engagement by the US. The Secretary of State will recall that the humanitarian situation in Yemen was the subject of frequent debate and discussion during the previous Parliament, but it appears to have fallen off the agenda, partly because of atrocious conflicts elsewhere. I was pleased to hear what he said about the FCDO's approach, but as the FCDO has more constrained resources, will he ensure that the humanitarian situation in Yemen remains a priority?

**John Healey:** I am confident that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has that in mind. He will be conscious, as is the right hon. Gentleman, that the UK acts not just as the third-largest donor to the Yemen humanitarian programme, but as the penholder for Yemen at the United Nations.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and associate myself with his words about our brave military personnel. Does he agree that we must reiterate how the Houthi attacks are illegal, are against the UN charter and target the principle of freedom of navigation, which benefits all nations, including our allies in the region? Does he also agree that our action shows that working in concert with our allies internationally can improve regional stability and security, and indeed our security here at home?

**John Healey:** I do indeed agree with my hon. Friend. This is a matter of reinforcing regional stability and a matter of defending and protecting freedom of navigation, but it is also a matter of protecting our own economic interests back home, and I make no apology for standing up for British interests and those of our allies.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): We in Reform fully endorse the Government's action against the Houthis, and we thank our brave and brilliant military personnel. The Secretary of State referred to the continuing support of the Houthis by Iran, so will he update the House on further sanctions against Iran? Surely now is the time to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation?

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman has been around long enough to know that I will not comment on the process of proscription. Suffice it to say, the Government have sanctioned a number of major Houthi leaders. I welcome his welcome for the action we took last night, and I hope he will take that action as a sign of a determination to do what we can, alongside our US allies, to degrade their ability to continue to threaten freedom of navigation for international shipping.

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): The Houthis are acting freely in the absence of a road map for peace. Yemen is facing the worst humanitarian crisis, with 22 million people needing assistance, of whom 11 million are children, and in desperate need of food, water and medical supplies. To defeat the Houthis permanently, will the Secretary of State give a commitment that this Government, along with allies, will do all that is possible to deliver a road map for peace and ensure that this happens now, because otherwise it will be a lost opportunity?

**John Healey:** As I said earlier, my responsibility as Defence Secretary is for the military components of the wider approach that must be pursued if we are to help play an important role in securing peace and a settlement to end the civil war in Yemen, and to provide relief to the hundreds of thousands of Yemenis who are suffering so severely. Constraining the Houthi threat is part of that, as is reinforcing and bolstering the Yemeni Government, but working with allies, particularly the leading regional allies, in trying to force the pace of a negotiated settlement and a peace in Yemen is absolutely crucial.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I welcome the Defence Secretary's statement, and I add my thanks to, and appreciation for, the Royal Air Force and all those involved in this successful operation. In his statement he said that

"even Russia has attempted to support the Houthi operations."

However, does it not go a little bit deeper than that? *The Wall Street Journal* has reported that targeting data provided by Russia has been utilised by the Houthis for their attacks against western shipping, while Iran has arbitrated secret talks between the terror group and the Kremlin. What steps is he taking to disrupt Russia's deepening ties to Iran and its proxies across the middle east?

**John Healey:** I am really not going to disclose in public, or even to this House, the steps that we are taking to deal with some of that covert Russian activity, which goes well beyond Yemen to the wider middle east. Suffice it to say, the hon. Member has made a contribution to the discussion on this statement by bringing that report from *The Wall Street Journal* to the House.

**Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): I add my words of support for the action the UK took last night. The Houthi group is a terrorist organisation that has been deeply destabilising and it is right that we are playing our role in protecting freedom of navigation. The Halesowen community of Yemenis are really concerned about the desperate humanitarian situation in Yemen. Could the Secretary of State add a few more words on what we are doing to support Yemenis who are so desperate right now, and what we are doing to end the civil war?

**John Healey:** Yes. I mentioned the in-year uplift that the Foreign Secretary gave to our contribution to the Yemeni humanitarian assistance plan, which makes us the third-largest donor. Our focus on aid has been especially on food, of which there is a critical shortage and which is a necessity to hundreds of thousands of Yemenis. We calculate that we will have helped almost 900,000 Yemenis with our food support this year. Our support is also in healthcare, supporting over 700 medical centres across the country with medicines, vaccines and some of the basic equipment needed to provide the healthcare that people also so desperately need in that country.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): I share the recognition of the RAF's role in last night's operation. Given the existing global commitments of our Typhoon squadrons, should the coalition of the willing provide a military contribution to any post-war force in Ukraine, and therefore a combat air patrol or air policing role in Ukraine, in addition to the Baltic and the high north, how will we continue to facilitate direct action, such as the strikes against the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, with no plans to purchase a second tranche of F-35Bs?

**John Healey:** On Ukraine and a potential role in a coalition of the willing on security guarantees—if a negotiated peace settlement, which we all hope President Trump secures, can be put in place—we are planning at the moment. The consequences of any commitments we make will be fully explained to the House if a decision is made, but that is contingent on a ceasefire and a peace agreement, and that is contingent principally upon Putin doing what he says he wants by seeking an end to the fighting.

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I thank the Defence Secretary for his statement and pay tribute to all those involved in the successful strike. Does he agree that this Government will always put personnel at the heart of our defence plans?

**John Healey:** For too long, I believe, the previous Government overlooked that. They certainly failed to meet their recruitment tests. I am proud to be a Defence Secretary in a Labour Government who was able, last year, to give armed forces personnel the largest pay increase for 20 years, and to be the first Defence Secretary who can stand at the Dispatch Box and say that nobody in uniform will be paid less now than the national living wage. I am also proud to have managed to do a deal to buy back and bring into public control 36,000 family military homes, following what was quite the worst privatisation ever, in 1996 under the previous Tory Government.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): In reply to an earlier question, the Secretary of State talked about the devastation in Yemen, with 11 million people in desperate need of help and support, and the civil war conditions that pertain there. On the armed intervention that Britain made yesterday, we all need to know where it will lead, what the end game is, whether we are involved in an internal war in Yemen, and what the long-term implications of our involvement are. Ultimately, there has to be some kind of peace process in Yemen, just as much as there has to be in Gaza and elsewhere in the region. Does this action bring peace nearer, or does it exacerbate the danger of a widening conflict?

**John Healey:** The right hon. Gentleman is right to remind the House of the extreme hardship faced by many Yemenis in what has been a war-torn country for years. The strikes last night were designed to reduce and prevent the risk of further Houthi attacks, and they were done because we were able to take out an important facility where the Houthis had been manufacturing the very weapons used to target international shipping and our own.

**Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): I welcome the Defence Secretary's statement and add my thanks to our service personnel for their action. I would like to talk about what the Houthis have been doing alongside the other terrorist proxies in the middle east, Hamas and Hezbollah, who are controlled by Iran. Therefore, what is this country's policy on disrupting and containing that network, and attacking the heart of it—namely, Iran itself?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is right. Iran is a destabilising influence across the region, not just in its own terms but in particular in the way it has developed, sponsored and supplied proxy groups. The Houthis are clearly supplied and supported by Iran. Part of the long-term ability to see a secure and conflict-free middle east has got to be a reconciliation that Iran has: for it to stop using those proxies to threaten its neighbours in the region and the interests of countries such as ours.

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): US action in recent weeks has considerably degraded ballistic missile and drone attacks, and I welcome these RAF strikes. However, the action will work only if it is sustained. Will the Defence Secretary commit to ongoing UK and RAF direct support to US Operation Rough Rider to strike Houthi terrorists, rather than the ad hoc approach adopted so far, so that we can properly restore freedom of navigation?

**John Healey:** Operation Rough Rider is a US military campaign. We took action last night alongside the US. Any future military interventions such as last night's will be reported to the House.

**Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I pay tribute to all our armed forces personnel involved in the action overnight. Does he agree with me that the USA has always been, and will remain, our strongest and most steadfast security ally?

**John Healey:** I do indeed. The US-UK defence relationship has a special depth that has lasted decades. We do things together as two nations that no other nations do: we train together, we exercise together and at times we have to fight together.

**John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I am relieved to hear that the strategic defence review is coming in the spring—with a great yellow ball in the sky, I assume that will be fairly soon. In all military operations time is the enemy, and I am concerned about reports that the SDR may only be a broadbrush document—an interim document, as it were—and that the important decisions on specific capabilities and weapons systems may not be taken until autumn. Are we marching on to war? If so, should we not be doing so at the double, rather than at a slow march?

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman has managed to broaden his question from this specific statement on the overnight strikes. The strategic defence review is a strategic defence review. It will be published in the spring. It has been an unprecedented and externally led process, which has allowed us to take stock of the threats we face and the capabilities we need, and to do so within the unprecedented increase in defence funding that this Government have now committed to over the next 10 years.

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): In his statement, the Secretary of State referred to Russian attempts to support Houthi operations. Without compromising any information that he is unable to share, how would he rate the effectiveness of those Russian interventions, as well as the UK response? Does he agree that they show that we must continue to support Ukraine in every way we can to undermine the dictator Vladimir Putin?

**John Healey:** It does indeed, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend has been steadfast from the Back Benches as a strong voice for Ukraine, and I welcome his support for the actions the UK Government have offered, and for our leadership. On the effectiveness of Russian action and interventions in Yemen, I am more concerned to ensure that any military action that this Government sanction is effective, and that the outstanding military personnel who are involved return safely. I am happy to report to the House that that was the case last night.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): On 17 March, I asked the Foreign Secretary why the UK had taken a kinetic role in strikes against the Houthis under the previous US Government, but have not taken an active role in those carried out by this US Government. We have since seen those leaked Signal messages in which the US Secretary of Defence, Pete Hegseth, lamented the lack of European involvement in the strikes on 15 March. How much has the involvement of British jets in these strikes come as a response to the allegation by Pete Hegseth of European freeloading?

**John Healey:** The strikes that we conducted last night were a result of the fact that America, our closest ally, has been coming under near daily attack from the Houthis; that shipping has more than halved through that Red sea route; and that 50% of UK businesses now say that they have been impacted by conflict in the middle east. I make no apology for defending Britain's interests, and the interests of our allies.



**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answers, and for giving us the comprehensive information that we need. I congratulate our armed forces and our allies on a successful strike against this facility—long may those targeted and successful operations continue. What further steps will be taken with our NATO allies—quite simply, we cannot do this without them; we need them—to secure the Red sea and the gulf of Aden, and thereby lower shipping costs and consumer costs for all those who are paying the price for the evil actions of the Houthis?

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman is right to say this is bigger and more important than just UK or even US action. I reported to the House earlier that the broader challenges that he sets out were discussed by NATO Foreign Ministers, and have been discussed by Foreign Ministers at the G7 within the last month.

## Energy Grid Resilience

1.32 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the resilience of the UK's energy grid in the context of the widespread power outages experienced across the Iberian peninsula over the past two days. My thoughts are with all those affected by the widespread disruption across that peninsula on Monday. I am glad to hear that power has now been fully restored across the region.

I want to reassure the House that Great Britain has a highly resilient energy network, and that the incident in Iberia has not impacted Great Britain. The Secretary of State has been in regular contact with the National Energy System Operator over the past two days, and it has provided reassurance that there is no increase in risk to our energy supplies or system stability from this incident.

My Department was informed on Monday 28 April by NESO that a power outage had occurred across the Iberian peninsula, affecting mainland Spain, Portugal, Andorra and areas of France. While all power was restored to the impacted areas yesterday, Tuesday 29 April, the disruption had cascading impacts on other sectors across the vast majority of Spain and Portugal. The cause of the outage is yet to be confirmed; it is likely to take some time for the Spanish network operator to carry out a thorough investigation to determine the exact cause of the failure. Various independent reviews have been commissioned by Spain, Portugal and the European Commission to understand the cause.

Although GB is not directly connected to Spain and Portugal's grid, NESO is in close contact with European counterparts, and is offering support where needed. The Government are closely monitoring the situation and are in contact with the Spanish and Portuguese authorities to ensure the safety and wellbeing of any British nationals in the affected regions.

I turn to our grid's resilience, and our preparedness in the context of recent events on the Iberian peninsula. An event similar in impact in Great Britain would be equivalent to a national power outage—a total loss of power across the whole of GB—which is listed on the national risk register as a high-impact but low-likelihood event. In its 75-year history, Great Britain's national electricity transmission system has never experienced a complete shutdown, or anything on the scale of what has happened in Spain over the past few days.

Our electricity system is highly resilient. The National Energy System Operator continuously monitors the condition of the electricity system to ensure there are sufficient inertia and reserves in the system to manage large losses and prevent large-scale power outages. NESO has also introduced innovative new approaches to managing system stability, as well as advanced safety systems to help to prevent such events from happening in GB. The system is built, designed and operated to cope with the loss of key circuits or systems without causing customer impacts. There are multiple redundant alternative routes through which power can flow should a fault occur, minimising the risk of a single fault cascading across the entire system to cause a total or partial electricity system shutdown.



However, as a responsible Government, we prepare for all eventualities, no matter how unlikely. I would like to reassure the House that the Government work closely with industry to continually improve and maintain the resilience of energy infrastructure, networks and assets to reduce vulnerabilities. This work includes having robust emergency plans, summarised in the national emergency plan for downstream gas and electricity, and regularly exercising emergency plans with the energy industry and Ofgem. That includes an exercise carried out by the previous Government; we have been taking forward the recommendations from that exercise. This work is ongoing across Government to ensure we are as resilient as possible as a nation in all eventualities.

We have also empowered the independent National Energy System Operator to carry out resilience functions across the electricity and gas systems, and will continue to work with industry and regulators to improve and maintain the resilience of old, new and future energy infrastructure. Switching fossil-fuelled generation for home-grown clean energy from renewables, nuclear and other clean technologies is the route to long-term energy security. I will speak more broadly about the UK's energy resilience in a debate in Westminster Hall on Tuesday.

To conclude, Great Britain has a resilient energy network, and we will ensure that that continues to be the case. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.37 pm

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, and echo his comments; of course, the Conservatives' thoughts are with all those affected by the blackouts in Spain, Portugal and more widely.

The Minister rightly addresses concerns about the security of our grid in the context of the shutdown witnessed on the Iberian peninsula, and I am glad that he can confirm that he is carrying on implementing the recommendations from Exercise Mighty Oak, in which I was involved, on the action that would be required if such an event took place in GB. The primary responsibility of the Minister's Department is to keep the lights on in this country. The images from Spain and Portugal are a sombre reminder of what happens when the grid fails. Extended blackouts are devastating, and it is a relief that power was restored to 99% of customers by 6 o'clock yesterday morning. The grid collapse in Iberia has demonstrated the fragility of the complex, interconnected systems that support modern life, and the very real impacts on human life of such a collapse.

It is the Minister's responsibility to ensure that the same thing does not happen in Great Britain, as the price for our economy and for communities across this country would be catastrophic. We cannot get away from the fact that this Government's plans to rush ahead to build a grid that is entirely dependent on the wind and the sun in just five years' time will make our electricity grid significantly less reliable.

The stability of our electricity grid depends on what is called inertia, which is the ability for the system to resist destabilising fluctuations in frequency. It is the reason our grid has been so secure and resilient over the

decades the Minister references. This inertia is provided by turbines, like those found in nuclear, hydro or, crucially, gas power stations, but it is not provided by solar or wind farms. If the grid does not have enough inertia to resist sudden changes in frequency, it can become destabilised, and cascading grid failure can occur. That means blackouts. As the Spanish NESO said in its latest annual report, the closure of conventional generation plants, such as coal, gas and nuclear, has reduced the firm power and balancing capacities of its grid, as well as its strength and inertia. This has also happened here in Great Britain. Data from NESO shows that the inertia in our grid has been steadily decreasing over time, as gas and coal have come off the system, to be replaced by wind and solar. This comes with a hefty price tag, which is the problem with so much of the Labour Government's approach to energy security. Their imposed targets are saddling the British people with mountains of extra costs, as the Government rush ahead towards a power system that depends on the weather, rather than on firm, reliable baseload.

Tens of billions of pounds are spent subsidising wind farms, expanding the grid, and providing back-up from reliable gas plants. The Government set their 2030 target, and now they are trying to work out how they can achieve it, but they refuse to be honest with the British people. They refuse to do an open and honest assessment of the costs and risks that come with this approach. It is no wonder that even Tony Blair has said that the present policy solutions are inadequate and doomed to fail.

The Conservatives believe in a system that delivers secure, affordable and clean energy for the UK. A cyber-attack has been ruled out by the Spanish Government as a cause of their grid collapse, but we know that the threat of interference from hostile states is constant. Will the Minister update the House on the action he is taking to protect the grid from hostile activity? When will he finally tell us which single Minister is responsible for the safety and security of our offshore energy infrastructure?

The lessons from the incident on the Iberian Peninsula are abundantly clear. We must retain inertia in our grid to keep it stable and resilient. Nuclear power provides vital baseload power generation, along with inertia, which would have helped to mitigate a cascading failure like the one earlier this week. Will the Minister give the nuclear industry the certainty that it is asking for, and commit to 24 GW of nuclear power, as the previous Government did? Will he ask NESO to provide this House with a full, transparent update on the role of inertia in our power system, on the consequences of declining inertia, on the impact that has on grid stability, and on the costs associated with it?

Finally, the Minister has said that Great Britain has never experienced a complete shutdown such as that seen on the continent. What assurances can he offer this House that work is being undertaken, so that NESO and the National Grid are prepared for a black start, if ever that is needed?

**Michael Shanks:** I shall start with the more serious of the hon. Gentleman's questions, and then, in reply to some of his other questions, I might gently remind him who was in office not that long ago. On a serious note, I agree entirely with him on his opening point: the first

[Michael Shanks]

priority of my Department and the Government is to ensure our energy security. The past few days in Spain and Portugal have brought to light just how much of our day-to-day lives are dependent on a functioning electricity system, so he is right to make that point, and we are very aware of it.

I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman did not recognise the work that the previous Government did on building the renewable system, and on introducing inertia into the system, because that all started a number of years ago. We have a resilient grid in this country, and it is important to continue to have that. That means building new grid infrastructure, which he and a number of his colleagues quite often oppose. It is important to build that grid infrastructure and to invest in it. We will continue to work with NESO and others to understand the full causes of this outage. I will not be drawn into speculation on what may have caused it, because clearly the first priority of the Spanish and Portuguese Governments has been restoring power, but they will carry out investigations to find out the cause, and we will implement any lessons from that.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman was right to reflect on Operation Mighty Oak, which was carried out under the previous Government. We have been taking forward those recommendations right across government. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is looking at resilience across Government. These are all important points. However, I say gently that energy security is an absolute priority for this Government, which means building the energy infrastructure that this country needs, and not opposing it at every turn.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): There are some inconvenient truths for those on the Opposition Benches who wish to blame low-carbon energy for what happened in Spain and Portugal. As the Minister has said, the cause of the outage is unknown at this stage. In 2003, when there was a blackout in Switzerland and Italy, and in 2006, when the same happened in Germany, affecting the whole of the continent, there were no renewables in the system. That goes to show that it is far too early to speculate.

Gas sets the price for our electricity 98% of the time in this country. Those who oppose the transition to low-carbon energy generation are opposing energy security for this country. They are opposing lower prices for our constituents and good, well-paid jobs. That is what this agenda is really about.

**Michael Shanks:** I thank the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee for his question. Let me reiterate the point that he made and that I will, I suspect, make a number of times during this statement. I will not be drawn on unfounded claims and speculation about what the causes might be. It is rightly for the authorities in Spain and Portugal to carry out the investigations, exactly as it would be if any incident happened here, and for them to share that information. Of course we will be in close contact with them about that,

but it is far too early to make any hasty conclusions, particularly when they are based on unfounded claims.

The broader point that my hon. Friend makes is right: constituents right across the country continue to pay too much for their electricity. That is because of the role of gas in setting the price in our system. The more renewables that we build, the more that we push gas off as the marginal price setter, the more that we bring those bills down, and also the more that we make sure that they are not subject to the volatility of the fossil fuel markets as they are at the moment. My hon. Friend is right: this is the right journey for us to be on; it is right for the British economy; and it is right for energy security. The Opposition parties should support that.

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

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Our thoughts are with all those affected by these power outages, which are a stark reminder of how key our energy security is to our national security. That is why it is vital that the Government learn from this latest incident by acting now to boost our home-grown energy by supporting community-owned projects and increasing supply chain capacity.

Our constituents will be concerned to know about preparations in this country. What conversations has the Minister had across Government to ensure that the UK has robust plans in place in the event of similar situations occurring here? In particular, can he outline what contingency plans are in place to protect our transport network, our hospitals and urgent healthcare settings and our emergency communication capacity? The latter currently relies heavily on the mobile network for our emergency alert system, as well as being the primary way that most people stay up to date.

**Michael Shanks:** Let me repeat the point that I made to the shadow Minister. It is absolutely right to point out the widespread cascading impacts of power failure and just the sheer amount of our lives that is now driven by electricity. The hon. Lady also made the same point as the shadow Minister, which I did not respond to at the time, around preparations across Government. I am Minister in the Department responsible for energy resilience and security. The Secretary of State takes a very serious interest in this area. Right across Government, we have a number of meetings that are chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who has responsibility for resilience, which includes looking at specific impacts. Most recently, we discussed some of the communications impacts of power cuts caused by storms, to make sure that people can still communicate, particularly via the mobile phone network. These are important points that we are taking forward.

Clearly, the energy system in this country is resilient, but the job of Government is to prepare for all eventualities, however low the chances. We take very seriously not just the preparations in place, but making sure that Government are ready to try out some of these processes and to learn from experiences such as this. There will be things that we can learn from the Spanish and Portuguese Governments, and we stand ready to do that.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): SAE Renewables is establishing a new battery storage facility, repurposing an old coal-fired power station in Newport, which, when complete, will have the capacity to be one of the biggest in the UK. As we scale up our renewable energy prediction, battery storage facilities such as this are vital. Will the Minister come and see this for himself and say a bit more about what he is doing with battery energy storage companies to support their work?

**Michael Shanks:** Storage will be crucial in the clean-power system that we are building. Batteries will play a critical role in making sure that we can store the clean, cheap energy that we are generating for times when we need it most. We have also announced the first long-duration energy storage in 40 years, building the assets that will allow us to store eight hours of power for when it is needed most. Therefore, storage is key in a system such as this. And finally, I am always happy to visit my hon. Friend's constituency.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Harriet Cross—and congratulations on your remarkable London marathon time.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I think we can all stop that now.

Centrica operates the Rough gas storage site, which provides about half of the UK's current gas storage capacity. Centrica stands ready to invest £2 billion of its own capital to redevelop Rough into the largest long-duration energy storage facility in Europe, capable of storing both natural gas and hydrogen, which would improve resilience and protect customers from price spikes. To unlock this £2 billion, the company needs assurances and clarity from the Government, not least over regulatory support and a workable cap and floor mechanism. Will the Minister set out what progress has been made in discussions with Centrica to develop this cap and floor mechanism? Given that the Government can make decisions quickly when they choose to, as we saw with British Steel, why has a decision on this mechanism been allowed to drag on for months?

**Michael Shanks:** I congratulated the hon. Lady yesterday on her remarkable marathon; I think she ran it two hours faster than I did, which leaves considerable room for improvement on my part, but congratulations to her again. She is right to raise this point, and I have answered questions on it before. I have met Centrica on several occasions to discuss various things, including that proposal, but it is a commercial matter for Centrica to bring the proposal to us. The Rough storage facility, which we last talked about in this House a few months ago, was mothballed for a number of years under the previous Government. We are looking in the round at the role it could play in energy security and at the value-for-money arguments. We want to ensure that value for money for the public is protected alongside the security of energy.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): My issue with the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) is that she has knocked me off my place as the second-fastest woman MP marathon runner—but I will be back.

While thousands of airline passengers were impacted by Monday's outage across Spain and Portugal, only 500 flights were grounded out of a possible 6,000, the rest managing to fly. That is because there were no airport closures. Is there a lesson here for UK airports?

**Michael Shanks:** My hon. Friend is perhaps referring to the most recent situation at Heathrow. The Secretary of State commissioned a report after that incident to find out what the causes were, and that report is due. Airports in this country are private businesses, but given that they are clearly critical national infrastructure, the Government have a role in ensuring that they function. If there are any lessons we can learn, it will be invaluable for us to learn them, but I do not want to be drawn on the conclusions of a report that the Government have not yet seen.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Just before the Spanish blackouts we had two unexpected outages—one in Lincolnshire and one at the other end of the Viking Link. The NESO was not going to tell us about it, but thanks to a whistleblower we now know. It seems to me that with the ever-increasing reliance on renewables, many are concerned about fluctuations from the voltage and about that becoming a serious risk. While the Minister is confident about the situation, will he confirm to the House that the NESO will tell us and be completely transparent about all future unexpected outages?

**Michael Shanks:** While Great Britain's energy network is incredibly resilient and robust, there are outages for a whole range of reasons. The system continues to function, as it did entirely, without any concern at all, in the instance he raises. While it is not a regular occurrence, outages do happen in any system, particularly in the energy system across the whole of the UK. I will take away the point about whether there can be more transparency, but I suspect that the answer will be that this is the day-to-day operational running of the electricity system, and it is not something to be alarmed about at all.

**Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and the measured way in which he has approached the situation. As he and other Members have said, these kinds of blackouts happen, whether systems are dominated by fossil fuels or renewables. I particularly welcome the Minister's rejection of the approach of some Opposition Members, including the honourable Inspector Clouseau, the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), who has already jumped to blaming renewables. Is it not the case that some on the Opposition Benches want to weaponise this situation because of their ideological obsession against clean energy, which will leave my constituents colder and poorer while they enjoy the warm embrace of Vladimir Putin?

**Michael Shanks:** My hon. Friend always makes his point in his particular style—perhaps a more political style than I will use from this Dispatch Box, but Inspector Clouseau is a new one that I will certainly add to my list.

My hon. Friend raises an important point. The broader point here is that we do not know the causes of the outages, and any sensible Member of this House will,



[*Michael Shanks*]

I am sure, await the full response of any investigation that will be carried out by the relevant authorities in this case, rather than just jumping to speculation. As my hon. Friend says, the rush to conclusions betrays the truth of the matter, which is that many hon. Members in this place have an ideological, extreme and damaging opposition to clean energy. That includes Members in the party of the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) and other parties, including the Conservatives, who defended this for such a long time and now seem to be working together against it. They want to leave us colder, poorer and in the pocket of Putin. We will not accept that.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Can the Minister please explain what exactly the Government disagree with in the considered written foreword by Sir Tony Blair to his think-tank report?

**Michael Shanks:** I have to apologise to the former Prime Minister, but I have been a little busy over the last few days and have not read all of his report.

**Andrew Bowie:** Not even the foreword!

**Michael Shanks:** Indeed. I apologise and will prioritise it for my weekend reading. What I did see is that the Tony Blair Institute outlined very clearly its support for clean power as an important transition for this country. The shadow Minister earlier said that this was all about wind and solar, but that has never been the position for this transition. Nuclear will play a critical role, as will carbon capture, usage and storage as well as hydrogen. All of that was outlined in Tony Blair's report.

**Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement, particularly his comments on the importance of batteries. He is right that energy security is national security. Technology owned by, run by and based in foreign states is being added to the grid. This technology is smart and, very worryingly, can be operated by third parties. Can the Minister set out what we are doing to protect the grid from the influence of those who wish to do harm to our people and our way of life in Newcastle-under-Lyme and up and down the United Kingdom?

**Michael Shanks:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. The issue of cyber-security across our critical national infrastructure becomes more and more important day by day. As our energy system becomes more complex and as smart systems become part of how we all interact with our daily lives, there are increased risks. That is why the Government take cyber-security very seriously and are looking across Government at how we can have processes in place that are as robust as possible.

We do not for a second think that any of the actions we have taken will always be enough. We are constantly looking at how cyber-security develops and changes and how we can do more. But our energy system is resilient. Ofgem has a role to play in making sure that suppliers and individual electricity companies, as well as Government, take this issue very seriously, and it is an issue that I will continue to spend time focusing on.

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that Peterhead gas station is Scotland's only high-power, high-inertia facility and that it has an independent black-start facility. Key to the future of that site is the Acorn project, another thing he will be very familiar with. Can he confirm his Government's intention to fully fund and license that project as a track 2 project as part of the comprehensive spending review in June?

**Michael Shanks:** The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) made a point yesterday about black start, and it is one that the Secretary of State will take away, particularly around black-start capabilities across the whole UK. On the Acorn point, we have said on a number of occasions that it is a really important project. My Department and the Government support the project, but it is a question for the spending review, which will come in June.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): Energy resilience comes from a secure supply of clean and cheap energy. The major cause of the financial crises that the world has experienced over the last 40 years is the insecurity of supply of the fossil fuel markets, with Ukraine being just the latest case. As for cheap, the last Government in answer to a parliamentary question admitted that the levelised cost of gas was £114 per megawatt-hour, whereas offshore wind was £44 per megawatt-hour. As for clean, the House may be aware that wind and solar are not known as great emitters of greenhouse gases. So renewables are clean, cheap and secure. Renewables and resilience go together.

**Michael Shanks:** My hon. Friend has been a champion of these issues for a long time, and it will not surprise him or the House to hear that I entirely agree with him; clean, cheap and secure is absolutely right. We know that because when we invited many countries around the world to the energy security summit last week, it was clear that it is not just the UK that is on the transition. The rest of the world is also moving at pace to divest from fossil fuels and invest in the renewables that deliver the secure energy system and remove the volatility that all our constituents continue to pay the price for. It is the only way forward, and the Government are determined to continue with it.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The Minister is fully aware of my total opposition to the construction of a 90-foot-high converter station on the Minster marshes in east Kent. National Grid's sea link project is very vulnerable to physical attack and cyber-attack, and it is largely based on the provision of power from weather-related sources. Is it not time that we revisited all this and looked seriously at speeding up the process of acquiring small nuclear reactors?

**Michael Shanks:** I am happy to agree with the right hon. Member on his final point. Small modular reactors will play a really important part and are an exciting proposition that the UK can be at the forefront of. The technology competition will conclude shortly.

On the broader point, we get to the heart of the contradiction. The Conservative party wants to talk about resilience of the network but does not want to



build any new network infrastructure. I am afraid that the two go hand in hand. If we want to have power and a resilient network, we cannot stay in the same place we were 60 years ago. We actually have to build some stuff.

**Pamela Nash** (Motherwell, Wishaw and Carluke) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving the statement and congratulate him on the Floor of the House for completing the London marathon on Sunday. Does he share not just my utter disappointment but my concern that Conservative Members have wasted no time at all using the unfortunate events affecting our friends in Spain and Portugal to further their dated opposition to clean power, which risks panic and misinformation at a time when we need patience and clear heads?

**Michael Shanks:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question and for drawing attention to my appalling time in the marathon. [*Interruption.*] That is kind of the shadow Secretary of State.

My hon. Friend made an important point. The serious response to an unprecedented incident like this is to take stock of what happened, to introduce some facts into the debate—some people do not like to see facts in these debates—to allow a proper investigation to find out what caused it and, yes, to learn lessons from it. There will be lessons to learn, but I will not rush headlong into an ideological argument that damages our energy security by suggesting that somehow we should go back to the past and then everything will be fine. The clean energy transition is right for climate, right for jobs in the supply chains, right for bringing down bills and right for this country.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome what the Minister has outlined and his reassurances about resilience, particularly to a cyber-attack. However, there is also the danger that if we hand over the on/off switch for vital energy supplies to a foreign country, they can be switched off without our control. What mitigations are the Government considering for projects like the vast wind farm in the North sea for which the Chinese company Mingyang wants to provide the hardware?

**Michael Shanks:** I will not be drawn on an individual commercial arrangement that a project may or may not have. As I have outlined, in any investment case the Government will carry out a number of checks, one of which will always be a national security check, so these questions will be looked at. I reject the suggestion that there would somehow be an on/off switch—that is not the position that the Government would take—but we look at all these investment decisions individually, and that is not for me to do on the Floor of the House.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): The role of businesses regarding the grid is important. GE Vernova in my constituency makes rotating stabilisers, from which my hon. Friend the Minister and I probably could have benefited on Sunday while we were running the London marathon. The shadow Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) clearly did not need them; I congratulate them on their superb, very fast times—much quicker than my hon. Friend and I.

Rotating stabilisers are enormous electrical motors that are being deployed around the UK, as part of National Grid's pathfinder programme, to strengthen vulnerable areas of the grid. GE Vernova tells me that one is operating in Scotland now and has proven that it can prevent more serious grid disturbance, and the company has other projects to deliver the stabilisers across the UK. The Government are investing more than ever in grid upgrades and infrastructure, which is good for the country and good for the economy, and it affects places like Rugby, where we build vital parts, with a knock-on effect on the local supply chain, on skills development and so on. This is a really good thing that should be celebrated.

**Michael Shanks:** I thank my hon. Friend for the question. He raises what we are doing to deploy technologies in the clean power system to make it more resilient, and rotating stabilisers in particular. Those technologies were introduced in some cases by the previous Government, so there was recognition of their importance and we will continue to build on that.

My hon. Friend also raised the wider point that the transition to building a clean power system is about not just the generation we get out, but the good, well-paid jobs in the supply chains that deliver it and investing in industry right across the country, including in his constituency. We have committed to driving that forward. That is why the Prime Minister announced £300 million of supply chain investment at the energy security conference last week, and why we will continue to fight for this transition while the Conservative party turns against it.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I did not run the London marathon and I never will, but I am hugely admiring of all colleagues who did, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) and her incredible time.

The Minister referenced the point I made yesterday about the grid in Scotland and previously expressed concerns about the amount of time it would take to reboot that grid if there was an outage. As we have seen in Spain and Portugal, there is significant disruption if the grid is off for hours, but if it were off for days, that would be very significant and much harder to manage. Will he confirm again that the Department will look specifically at that issue?

**Michael Shanks:** I say to the right hon. Gentleman: never say never. I am sure he has it in him.

I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. In the news we saw the impact on day-to-day life of what happened in Spain and Portugal, and he is absolutely right that if that was to go on for longer than a few days, there would be quite significant impacts. We look closely at the cascading effects and at what parts of the system we reboot faster than others to deliver priority services, such as in the NHS. We will continue to do that. The point he raised yesterday and again today about how quickly different parts of the UK and Scotland would be rebooted is an important one that I will take away.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): With all these marathon runners in the House today, I wonder whether we might be able to generate some kinetic energy rather

[Chris Vince]

than the usual hot air. [Interruption.] I apologise; I did not expect a pylon for that—sorry, another energy joke. My genuine congratulations to all those who did run.

The major concern of residents in my constituency is the ageing grid infrastructure. What work has the Minister done to ensure that we have the infrastructure we need to ensure that constituencies like mine have the power to shine?

**Michael Shanks:** Madam Deputy Speaker, I think you need to make a ruling on drawing marathon-related puns in the House to an end, but the subject is a really important one. Of course, that is why we are in this sprint towards building more network infrastructure—[Interruption.] Thank you.

There are two really important things to recognise with our network. First, it cannot stay in the state that it is in forever; it needs upgrading. Secondly, the demand that we fully expect to see—potentially a doubling by 2050, and maybe even more than that—means that we will have to build more grid to bring the power to where it is necessary to deliver economic growth. It is right that we move forward with that, but everyone will need to recognise that, to deliver that system—whether we are delivering clean power or not—the network is necessary, and stuff does have to get built somewhere. The Government are committed to building it and the Conservative party is committed to opposing it.

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): Will the Minister expand a little on a question put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young)? The PSTN, or public switched telephone network, switch-off means that by the end of 2027 all landlines will require an electricity supply. This means that the mobile network becomes ever more vital for people who require their mobile phones for medical care or even to make a 999 call in the event of an emergency. What assessment has been made of the resilience of the mobile network in the event of power outages? What more needs to be done to make sure we are ready for that kind of situation?

**Michael Shanks:** I thank the hon. Lady for that important question. I was here after Storm Éowyn, when we discussed that a number of people who no longer had a copper wire line were not able to contact emergency services. It was a really important point.

There is resilience built into the mobile phone network to ensure that masts should be able to operate in circumstances when even the power to them is cut off. It is a question for Ofcom to look at and I have spoken to my colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to make sure that that is happening. There is more that we can do. We are engaging with the Energy Networks Association, which works with distribution network operators, to make sure that all the resilience plans join up and that the practical impact that the hon. Lady rightly raises is taken into account. I will write to her with updates.

**Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) has already highlighted, synthetic inertia technologies are used to simulate the benefits that traditional turbine

technologies provided to an electricity grid now increasingly supplied by renewables. Is the Minister satisfied that we have sufficiently invested in those technologies to provide resilience across the grid? Is there an argument that surge protection devices, which wiring regulations mandate for nearly all new domestic and commercial installations, should be installed in all homes and businesses?

**Michael Shanks:** I will take that interesting point on surge protection away and speak to my colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

On the wider point around inertia, as the system changes, there is a constant balancing job for the National Energy System Operator to make sure that we design a system that is resilient. We are deploying technologies to ensure that the system is resilient and there is sufficient inertia by procuring the alternative technologies that my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) referenced, but we will keep it under constant review.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): May I assure the House that, not wishing to inflict a by-election on the citizens of East Antrim, I will not be running any marathons—not now or at any other time in future?

The Minister has rightly said that the cause of the outage in Spain is yet to be identified, but the fact is that it is linked to 53% of electricity on that day being generated from renewable sources. That should be a sobering warning to all in this House who have been championing the decarbonisation of electricity and the net zero policy.

I am glad that there is inertia built into the system, but the Minister has already accepted that that increases the cost of electricity every week because we have to build a new network to deal with the spikes in electricity; build battery storage, which increases the cost of electricity; and keep gas generators idling over expensively, the cost of which is added to consumer bills, in order to bring them on grid when the wind drops.

I know that the Minister has to defend the policy of his boss that we will get cheaper electricity, even though there is no evidence of that, but will he accept that building inertia into the system will add considerably to consumers' bills?

**Michael Shanks:** I am afraid that I do not accept anything that the right hon. Gentleman has just said. He said in his first breath that it was right to wait for the outcomes of an investigation and then prejudged that investigation with his own conclusions. I want to wait for some evidence from the authorities on that.

The right hon. Gentleman is also wrong about the cost. People often forget that gas in our electricity system does not just appear out of thin air; it comes with a cost. It comes with the cost of building new gas power stations in the first place, which we would have to do if we did not move gas off the system. It also comes with the volatility of being an internationally traded commodity—all our constituents are still paying the price of the energy crisis of a number of years ago. We will have to build infrastructure. If we were not building clean power infrastructure, the grid would still be critical because we have to get electricity to people's houses. It is important to say that there are no zero-cost options here. We are investing now in a clean power system that delivers considerably cheaper power in the long term.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I commend what the Minister said at the outset on the need to insure against high-impact, low-probability events. In a non-dogmatic spirit, may I appeal to him to reconsider the way in which the Government are dealing with the question of the two shale gas wells, which they have decided, under normal circumstances, they do not wish to see exploited? Surely those wells should not be sealed so permanently that if we were in a wartime conflict situation they could not be reactivated?

**Michael Shanks:** I am not aware of the specific circumstances mentioned at the end of the right hon. Gentleman's question, but I am happy to look into that particular case. The broader point is that we do not see licensing for new oil and gas and fracking as part of our future, and there is a presumption against fracking in other parts of the UK as well. We have a resilient energy system that does not require that. I will, however, take away the point he raises and write to him.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The Minister has left himself exposed to the climate deniers in this Chamber because he has come of his own volition to make a statement in the absence of any understanding of what has actually happened in Spain and Portugal, thereby denying Parliament an ability to discuss any kind of strategic comparative assessment between the resilience of the GB grid and that of the Iberian grid. If he had delayed until he had the answer, we might be having a more valuable discussion.

The Minister has been forced to say that his Department is ready for all eventualities; well, tell that to the tens of thousands of radio teleswitch service customers who will be left high and dry by his Department. He says that he has every confidence in the National Energy System Operator. I did not have a lot of confidence in it on 7 January when, but for the reinstatement of the Viking interconnector, we would have had a very difficult situation on the GB link. I know that that is distribution and not transmission. There is also the matter of trying to instil confidence in GB among electricity consumers after an episode on 21 March at Heathrow, which saw global consequences for a relatively localised disaster in the UK energy market. How does the Minister have confidence after those two events?

**Michael Shanks:** The hon. Gentleman brings his customary sunny demeanour to his questions and I am grateful for that on this of all days.

First, I am giving this statement because a number of hon. Members across the House asked questions of the Government on this issue, and it is right that the Government respond to such questions. In fact, I would be criticised if the Government did not offer a statement when questions are being asked. This statement is therefore in response to hon. Members across the House and from different parties.

On the capacity questions in January, I am afraid the hon. Gentleman is quite wrong. The repetition of those quite wrong statistics on social media and in this House reduces confidence, and they are not based on truth. To be clear to the House, the standard operating reserves held by NESO at all times is for the largest power generator in the system, which, according to NESO, was 1.4 GW on Wednesday 8 January and not 580 MW, which is the figure in the public domain. The overall

headroom on that day was never lower than 3.7 GW. It is simply not true to repeat the idea that we had 580 MW of capacity left in the system; it was never lower than 3.7 GW.

**David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Recent events in Spain and Portugal highlight the wide range of challenges facing power grids, and we have heard many in previous questions. Those incidents show the complexity of effective reporting and the ability to respond rapidly, and the skills required span multiple Departments, including the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, DSIT, the National Cyber Security Centre and the Met Office, which is based in my constituency. This raises an important question: who is responsible for co-ordinating reporting for similar incidents in the UK? More importantly, does the Minister's Department have the right skillsets to respond?

**Michael Shanks:** May I thank the hon. Gentleman, because that is a really important question and one that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has been wrestling with? Under all Governments there are individual Departments that take a responsibility and there are Departments that lead on parts of this, and the covid inquiry has raised a number of questions about how some of these resilience questions are answered, so it is a really important point.

My Department has a number of civil servants with expertise in how the energy system works. I pay tribute to the team, who are often there out of hours when storms and other incidents occur. They do a remarkable job. The question about reporting, however, is important. Partly what the Government seek to do with our mission approach and with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's work is to bring together the whole of Government so that everyone who has a responsibility is at the table, feeding in their views. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): There are over 100 battery energy storage system—BESS—facilities operating in the UK, and another one is planned for Hawkchurch in East Devon. Residents there are very worried about fire risk. South Korea is a global leader in BESS, yet the safety issues are plain. There were 38 fire incidents linked to BESS in South Korea up to 2022. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the safety of BESS technology and exploring energy storage solutions that are less subject to fire risk?

**Michael Shanks:** I would first say that fire is a risk in a whole range of scenarios, and I do not think we should jump to the view that because there have been some incidents in one particular piece of infrastructure it is somehow inherent in the infrastructure. It is important to say that batteries will play a critical role in our future energy system, but we obviously take issues of safety very seriously and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise them. The Health and Safety Executive has a role in this and the planning system also has a role in considering some of the fire risks, but we will keep this under review, particularly as the number of battery schemes increases.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): When the sun does not shine and the wind does not blow, electrons do not flow, and that happens dreadfully



[Dr Andrew Murrison]

predictably in northern Europe, particularly in the cold, dark winter months. As the Minister plans to increase the resilience of the UK grid, will he look at a place where the wind does reliably blow and the sun does shine—namely, south-west Morocco—and support the UK-Morocco power project, which could potentially deliver 8% of the UK's grid needs reliably and resiliently?

**Michael Shanks:** I anticipated the right hon. Gentleman's question after his first few words. I think the Secretary of State gave him an answer yesterday. This is a private proposal that has come to Government for consideration. It has not been driven forward by Government. We are considering it at the moment and, as I think the Secretary of State said yesterday, we are happy to brief the right hon. Gentleman on the details of where we are at with it. We will make a decision in due course.

## Point of Order

2.22 pm

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I seek your guidance? My constituent, Ms Safiya Ismail is without an income because her pension credit application, which was made in July 2024, remains outstanding. I seek your guidance as to what further steps I can take to secure a response from the Department for Work and Pensions for my constituent. My diligent caseworker, Fatema Karim, has chased the matter on numerous occasions. We have been advised that it has been escalated to management, but as yet, no response has been received. Can you suggest any further steps I can take to place my concerns on behalf of my constituent on the record?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I am grateful for advance warning of the hon. Member's point of order. Ministerial correspondence is not a matter for the Chair, but all hon. Members should be entitled to expect a timely reply, especially when they are contacting Government Departments on behalf of their constituents. I am sure that those on the Treasury Front Bench will have noted the hon. Member's comments, and no doubt he will receive a response in due course.

## BILL PRESENTED

### PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY OF TRADE AGREEMENTS BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Clive Jones, supported by Mr Alistair Carmichael, Daisy Cooper, Sarah Gibson, Mr Joshua Reynolds, Tom Morrison, Andrew George and Sarah Olney, presented a Bill to provide for parliamentary approval of international trade agreements; to require the Secretary of State to publish a proposed negotiating mandate in draft before entering into negotiations in respect of an international trade agreement; to require parliamentary approval of that draft before negotiations begin; to make provision for the amendment of draft negotiating mandates by Parliament; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May, and to be printed (Bill 227).*

## UK-USA Trade Agreements (Parliamentary Scrutiny)

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

2.23 pm

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament any trade agreement between the UK and the USA which the Government proposes to implement; to prohibit the implementation of such an agreement without the approval by resolution of each House; to make provision for the amendment of such agreements by Parliament; and for connected purposes.

Let us cast our minds back four years to the spring of 2021. Liz Truss was the Secretary of State for International Trade. Boris Johnson was Prime Minister. The export of British goods to the EU had fallen sharply in January of that year, and the end of the Brexit transition period was nigh. The Government were in a hurry. Boris Johnson sat down for dinner with the Australian Prime Minister here in Westminster. After three hours of small talk, a little negotiation and plenty of Australian red wine, Johnson agreed to remove tariffs on over 99% of Australian products entering the UK, including beef. The Government knew that such a deal would harm the UK agriculture and food industries. The Government's own analysis predicted that the deal could leave the UK agriculture and food sectors £278 million worse off.

The Australian high commissioner, who had been sitting at the table, moved quickly. Scribbling down Johnson's generous pledge, he excused himself to go to the toilet and handed a note to an aide as he did so. Within minutes it was scanned, turned into a formal trade document, printed and slipped into an official-looking folder. The high commissioner then casually walked back into the dinner carrying the so-called deal. That was all it took to sell out the UK's farmers: a wine-soaked dinner, a hastily scribbled note and a signature from a Prime Minister prepared to ignore the good advice of his own trade negotiators.

Without proper parliamentary scrutiny and a vote on any deal with the United States, we risk adding to the pressure on our already struggling farmers, stripping away safeguards on British citizens' data and sidelining democratic scrutiny itself. Currently, parliamentary scrutiny of international treaties in the UK is woefully inadequate. The Government can negotiate and sign a treaty with another country—even one as significant as the US—using prerogative powers, without having to put it to a vote in Parliament. Under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, known as CRAg, signed treaties must be laid before Parliament for 21 sitting days. Parliament can raise objections but it cannot propose amendments and there is no requirement for a vote. Recommendations born of scrutiny are advisory, and not in the least bit binding.

Evidence was provided to the International Agreements Committee in the other place last year. It showed just how outdated the UK's treaty scrutiny system is, set against how trade arrangements have evolved and become more complicated. Modern trade deals now reach deep into domestic policy: they shape our food standards,

our data rights and even the regulation of artificial intelligence. If Back-Bench MPs are shut out of the process, so too are the people we represent.

Parliamentary scrutiny was demonstrably weak in the wake of the UK's trade deals with Australia and New Zealand. The International Trade Committee condemned the Government's approach, saying that it had "undermined" scrutiny. The Johnson Government did this by triggering the 21-sitting-day statutory period before Committees had received evidence or completed reports on the trade deal. This meant that Parliament had little information with which to assess the agreements. When the Australia deal was signed, Labour—then in opposition—rightly demanded a parliamentary vote. Now in government, it would do well to heed its own previous calls for proper scrutiny.

In east and mid-Devon, farmers who I represent have been hit hard by the poorly negotiated trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, which come on top of the planned changes to inheritance tax and the peremptory closure of the sustainable farming incentive. Even if a future UK-US trade deal upholds our food standards, west country farmers and others could still be undermined. The Government offer assurances about shutting out hormone-treated beef and chlorinated chicken, but concerns remain that the US could still flood the UK market with beef that is not hormone treated. The Government have assured us that there will be no compromise on environmental and animal welfare standards in the UK, but again, these assurances count for little if imports from overseas are not produced to the same environmental standards or with the same requirements for high animal welfare standards.

The UK is already too reliant on imported food. Imports made up around 40% of the UK's food supply in 2023. UK food self-sufficiency has already fallen sharply, from 78% in 1984 to just 60% today. There are those who say that some sectors will always fall victim to trade negotiations, because the Government must balance the demands of various industries, but some of the factors currently being discussed by our trade negotiators are cross-cutting, and that includes matters of digital trade and data.

The US wants a digital-first deal. That would mean locking in rules that protect the interests of silicon valley, not the British public. It has already been speculated that the Government are considering reducing or scrapping the digital services tax, which would cut taxes for some of the wealthiest and most powerful American companies in the world at the expense of public service users in the UK. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecasted that the tax raised £700 million in 2024-25—revenue that the Treasury can ill afford to forfeit at this time.

Vice President J. D. Vance alleged in a speech at the Munich security conference that

"old, entrenched interests"

are

"hiding behind ugly, Soviet-era words like 'misinformation' and 'disinformation'".

That brand of free speech pays little heed to facts. Vance may be representing some not altogether transparent interests himself. The US is pushing to overcome data localisation. That could allow US-based tech firms to centralise their data operations in the United States and rule out data storage in the UK. If that came about, it would weaken the protection for British citizens' data, making it difficult to enforce UK privacy laws.

[Richard Foord]

Take as an example the contract that Palantir agreed with the NHS in 2023 to install its federated data system. If a US-UK trade deal restricted data localisation, it could allow NHS medical records to be exported to the US, handing Palantir the power to exploit the enormous commercial value of British citizens' data. Although Palantir claims that it will only act as a processor of data, its business model is rooted in extracting value from data for commercial ends. With access to one of the world's richest health datasets, Palantir could package insights and sell predictive analytic services to private healthcare providers, insurers and pharmaceutical companies. Palantir's co-founder Peter Thiel has called the NHS a system that "makes people sick". He claims that freedom and democracy are no longer compatible. Parliament should have the means to ensure that Thiel's understanding of freedom cannot bypass British democracy.

This is not just about trade; it is about trust. The Leader of the Opposition should know: the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) was the Secretary of State for International Trade in 2023 when the Australia and New Zealand trade deals came into effect. Farming paid the price last time, and it could happen again—our digital freedoms could pay the price, too.

My Bill is simple: it does not block a US deal or tie the Government's hands; it requires that Parliament has a greater say. That is what democracy demands, and that is what the public expects.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered.*

That Tim Farron, Calum Miller, Helen Morgan, Sarah Olney, Edward Morello and Richard Foord present the Bill.

Richard Foord accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May, and to be printed (Bill 228).*

**David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Today's *Daily Telegraph* says that it has been reprimanded by the Independent Press Standards Organisation for reporting on remarks made in this Chamber by the then Communities Secretary Michael Gove. IPSO asserted that the *Telegraph* should not have reported without having first given a right of reply to the group that the remarks related to.

Press freedom is a cornerstone of democracy, and for centuries the right to freely report on the proceedings of this House have been protected in British law. Those freedoms allowing the press to report without any hindrance or conditionality were secured as long ago as 1771 by John Wilkes. While IPSO may think it is being responsible, its reprimanding of the *Telegraph* undermines those fundamental rights. Will you, Madam Deputy Speaker, ask the House authorities to speak with the Independent Press Standards Organisation to remind it that the British press has an absolute right to report on what is said here in this Chamber without any hindrance or conditionality?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes)**: I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order and for notice of it. He has put his point on the record. Without commenting specifically on the IPSO ruling, because I understand that the issue was not straightforwardly about the reporting of what was said in this House, I do of course support the principle that being able to report on what is said here is extremely important.



## Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill

*Considered in Committee*

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes):** I remind Members that in Committee they should not address the Chair as Madam Deputy Speaker. Please use our names when addressing the Chair. Madam Chair, Chair and Madam Chairman are also acceptable.

### Clause 1

#### SENTENCING GUIDELINES ABOUT PRE-SENTENCE REPORTS

2.36 pm

**Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con):** I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 6, leave out “different personal characteristics of an offender” and insert “an offender’s membership of a particular demographic cohort.”

**The Second Deputy Chairman:** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 3, page 1, line 7, at end insert—

“(2A) After subsection (7) insert—

- “(7A) In the case of guidelines within subsection (4) about pre-sentence reports, the Council must, after making any amendments of the guidelines which it considers appropriate, obtain the consent of the Secretary of State before issuing sentencing guidelines as definitive guidelines.
- (7B) In any case to which subsection (7A) applies, the Secretary of State may—
  - (a) consent to the issuing of guideline as definitive guidelines,
  - (b) refuse consent for the issuing of guidelines as definitive guidelines, or
  - (c) direct the Council to issue the guidelines in an amended form as definitive guidelines.
- (7C) Where the Secretary of State has consented to the issuing of guidelines under subsection (7B)(a) or has directed the Council to issue guidelines in an amended form under subsection (7B)(c), the Council must issue the guidelines as definitive guidelines in the appropriate form.”

*This amendment stops sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports coming into force unless approved by the Lord Chancellor.*

Amendment 2, page 1, leave out line 10 and insert—

““a particular demographic cohort” may include those related to—”.

Amendment 4, page 1, line 13, at end insert—

- “(d) status as part of a group that may have experienced trauma from experiences of racism or discrimination—
  - (i) inter-generationally and relayed to the defendant, or
  - (ii) as a result of important historical events which may have had a greater impact on those from specific groups and cultures.”

*This amendment would ensure that sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports cannot include a defendant’s status as part of a group, particularly not if this involves considering events that may not have impacted the defendant personally.*

Clauses 1 and 2 stand part.

New clause 1—*Independent review*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must arrange for an independent review to be carried out of—

- (a) the effects of the changes made to section 120 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 by section 1, and
- (b) sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports.

(2) The Secretary of State must, after consultation with the Sentencing Council, appoint a person with professional experience relating to pre-sentence reports to conduct the review.

(3) The review must be completed within two years of the passing of this Act.

(4) As soon as practicable after a person has carried out the review, the person must—

- (a) produce a report of the outcome of the review, and
- (b) send a copy of the report to the Secretary of State.

(5) The Secretary of State must lay before each House of Parliament a copy of the report sent under subsection (4)(b) within one month of receiving the report.”

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** It is worthwhile at the outset of all debates on this Bill to restate that it is about pre-sentence reports that give information to sentencers that may be used in sentencing decisions, not about the passing of sentences themselves. Specifically, the Bill is about the guidelines issued by the Sentencing Council to sentencers about the circumstances in which a pre-sentence report should normally be asked for, and about the sort of information about an offender which such a report may provide and which may be appropriate to consider and take into account before deciding on an appropriate sentence in that offender’s case.

There has been broad agreement—I see the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), in her place, so I will not say unanimity—that an offender’s ethnicity, race, culture or faith are on their own not that sort of information and that the Sentencing Council was wrong to suggest that pre-sentence reports should be awarded on that basis. I would argue that is because, even if there may be points to make about the treatment or experience of members of the ethnic, faith or cultural group to which the offender in question happens to belong, what is relevant to the sentencing of that offender can only be the treatment or experience to which the particular offender has themselves been subject, not whether they have arisen in the cases of other members of the same group who are not before the court. That is effectively the impact of amendment 4 in the name of the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan). That is why the Government are right to seek to exclude even from the process of asking for a pre-sentence report—let alone from passing sentence itself—the making of decisions based only on membership of such a group. That is after all what the Government have said this Bill is for.

These groups are described in the explanatory notes to the Bill as “particular demographic cohorts”. Paragraph 8 says,

“The Bill is intended to ensure that Sentencing Guidelines are drafted in such a way as to prevent differential treatment and maintain equality before the law. It does this by preventing the creation of a presumption regarding whether a pre-sentence report should be obtained based on an offender’s membership of a particular demographic cohort, rather than the particular circumstances of that individual.”

[Sir Jeremy Wright]

Despite that explanation in the explanatory notes, the Bill goes further than that by prohibiting the Sentencing Council from including in a sentencing guideline any

“provision framed by reference to different personal characteristics of an offender.”

That is what clause 1(2) says in inserting language into the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. I think that language is significantly wider in impact than reference to membership of particular demographic cohorts—undesirably so, in my view. That is why I have tabled amendment 1, which would adopt the language used in the explanatory notes.

Let me explain why I think that would be preferable. My starting point is that I do not believe all personal characteristics are inappropriate to consider in a sentencing decision. There is, of course, much more to be considered in a sentencing decision than simply information about the offender, particularly the seriousness of the offence and its consequences, but relevant information about the offender is needed as part of the process. It surely cannot be right, then, to prohibit the Sentencing Council from encouraging sentencers to find out more about some of the personal characteristics that are relevant in reaching a more informed and therefore better sentencing decision—for example, a physical or learning difficulty, or a brain injury from which an offender will not recover.

The relevance of that information is not just in forming a fuller picture of the offender to be sentenced, but in assisting a sentencer to know whether that offender is capable of carrying out aspects of a community order, including work in the community, which the sentencer may want to consider as a potential sentencing option. It is worth underlining of course that the ordering of a pre-sentence report—whatever it says when it is produced—does not bind the hands of a sentencer to do as it recommends, but in reality, without one a sentencer's options are often more limited. That is why guidance on when to ask for a pre-sentence report matters.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I defer to my right hon. and learned Friend's experience, but is there not an argument for every case to have a pre-sentence report in order to truly understand what an individual has faced and whether there are any mitigating factors? I appreciate that that could create a backlog for these services, but is it not one possible solution to the problem that the Sentencing Council was worried about—namely, that different cohorts might have different sentencing outcomes?

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** My hon. Friend makes a fair point in relation to offenders who hover on the border between community sentences and custodial sentences, but he will know that, in the Crown court at least, the majority of such offenders already have a pre-sentence report. Of course, there are also offenders who come before the courts for sentencing and it is blindingly obvious either that a custodial sentence will follow, or that neither a community sentence nor a custodial sentence is realistically in prospect, so I do not think it right to say that we should have a pre-sentence report in every case, but there is already in law a presumption that pre-sentence reports should be ordered unless it is unnecessary to do so. What we are seeking to do here is respond to a very specific set of circumstances that have

arisen as a result of a Sentencing Council decision. As he may have heard me say on Second Reading, I do not think that the Sentencing Council handled this well, and as a result we are having to do something that we would otherwise not have to do.

Sentencing offenders is, in all circumstances, a difficult business. The fact that different offenders receive different sentences, even for the same offence, is not necessarily evidence of a defect in sentencing practice as a result of guidelines or otherwise, but is more likely a reflection of the reality that every case and every offender is different. We should not, I suggest, try to stop judges reaching the appropriate conclusion, assisted by Sentencing Council guidelines, in each case before them.

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Nobody is trying to stop judges sentencing in individual cases. All the Sentencing Council was seeking to do was ensure that judges and magistrates had the maximum amount of information before coming to a decision on the sentence.

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** Yes, I think the right hon. Lady is right that that is what the sentencing guidelines were aiming at, but I am afraid that the way in which they were phrased rather missed the mark, in my view. It is perfectly true to say that it is a good thing in most sentencing cases to get as much information as possible, but the sentencing guidelines have, as she will appreciate, particular influence on sentencers, who are obliged to follow them unless doing so is not in the interests of justice. The tone that is set by the Sentencing Council in the guidelines that it drafts gives a good indication to sentencers about the sorts of things that they ought to take into account in sentencing. As she heard me say—I think this is an important point to make—we are talking about the ordering of pre-sentence reports and not about sentencing itself.

2.45 pm

None the less, as I said, without a pre-sentence report, the number of options that can be imposed are limited, and with a pre-sentence report, sentencers have more options, so whether sentencers are encouraged to order pre-sentence reports is not irrelevant. My concern is that the way in which the Sentencing Council has gone about this is unhelpful. However—the right hon. Lady will hear me expand on this—it would be wrong to throw the baby out with the bathwater, and it is also important to recognise that some of the Sentencing Council guidelines are profoundly helpful to sentencers; they indicate that we should, in many cases, get relevant information when considering individual sentencing decisions. For all those reasons, we should fetter the sentencing process only as much as we need to in order to meet legitimate policy objectives, where genuine questions of policy arise. That is, after all, what the Government said they were trying to do here.

Amendment 1 would allow us to stop the Sentencing Council recommending pre-sentence reports for those who simply belong to a demographic group, but not exclude them for those who have other personal characteristics that are clearly more relevant to the sentencing decision and do not, I suggest, give rise in any way to so-called two-tier justice. The Bill will still allow the Sentencing Council to issue guidelines recommending pre-sentence reports to explore the personal

circumstances of an offender who is to be sentenced, even though it will prohibit that in relation to the offender's personal characteristics, so the question arises of whether all the information about an offender that sentencers should properly take into account in sentencing can be justifiably described as the offenders "personal circumstances".

I will concede that there is a danger of getting into fairly fine semantic distinctions here, but to me at least, "characteristics" are things that are intrinsic to the offender, while "circumstances" are the situations in which offenders find themselves. The two are not the same. For example, being pregnant, addicted, a primary carer, or a victim of abuse, grooming or modern slavery could all be sensibly described as personal circumstances, but disabilities or life-altering permanent injuries feel more like characteristics.

We do not need to get into all this in order to do the job that the Government want to do. Ministers have made it clear that they are seeking to target this legislation carefully to avoid trespassing on the separation of powers, and because they are not seeking to undermine the independence of the Sentencing Council any more than is necessary to wrest back control of what are properly matters of policy. I suggest to the Minister that the more precise wording in amendment 1—it is, of course, also Government drafting, because it appears in the explanatory notes—better meets the Government's own aims than the language in the Bill. If he does not agree, I hope that he will explain clearly in this debate why the Government have taken a more expansive approach.

Finally, let me address amendment 3 in the name of the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), and other right hon. and hon. Friends. As my hon. Friend the shadow Minister knows, I also have concerns about the breadth of the language in that amendment. I recognise that some people would like to abolish or radically reform the Sentencing Council, but the Bill does neither of those things, meaning that its scope does not allow for a wider debate about the council's wider purpose and value—of course, you would not allow that debate either, Madam Chairman.

As and when the Bill passes, the Sentencing Council will continue to operate, so when we consider amending the Bill further, we must have regard to the council's ability to operate effectively and convincingly. It can play its role in the criminal justice system effectively only if the guidelines that it produces are authoritative. Sentencers are likely to see them as such only if the Sentencing Council is clearly independent, and is seen to make its judgments from a legal, not a political, perspective.

Amendment 3 states that all Sentencing Council guidelines involving pre-sentence reports must be agreed by the Secretary of State, and that the Secretary of State may, if she so chooses, rewrite those guidelines. There are two problems with that. First, the Lord Chancellor has made clear and sensible distinctions between guidelines that relate to matters of policy and those that relate to matters of judicial discretion in specific sentencing cases, with the latter being matters for the judiciary alone. I am not convinced that all conceivable guidelines relating to pre-sentence reports will qualify as matters of policy, so taking political control of all such guidelines would not be appropriate.

Secondly, the Secretary of State's approval of guidelines and, even more so, the capacity for her to rewrite the guidelines are incompatible with the independence of the Sentencing Council. The Sentencing Council could be obliged to publish in its name a guideline with which it fundamentally disapproved. In the law as it stands, the Sentencing Council must consult the Lord Chancellor and the Justice Committee—I see the Chairman, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), in his place—but that is not the same as the Sentencing Council requiring ministerial approval to publish the guidelines. It is, of course, ministerial approval that is proposed in the amendment, not parliamentary approval—those are very different things. We are discussing a parliamentary decision about the guidelines, not allowing a Minister to make that decision for himself or herself.

As I said on Second Reading, by its handling of this issue, the Sentencing Council has brought on itself both this legislation and, probably, a wider discussion about its future. However, we are not having that discussion today; we are discussing legislation that is intended to allow the Sentencing Council to continue to operate and to fulfil what I believe is an important task.

There is a big gap between legislation and individual sentencing decisions. The Sentencing Council fills that gap, offering help to sentencers in their role. I suspect that if the Sentencing Council were not fulfilling that function, someone or something else would have to do so. In that gap between legislation and individual cases, the closer we are to legislation, the more legitimate parliamentary and ministerial involvement is likely to be; and the closer we are to individual cases, the more danger there is of trespassing on judicial independence and the separation of powers, so we should tread carefully.

If we are to compromise the independence of the Sentencing Council in substantial ways, we should do it only having considered all the implications of doing so, but that is not what this Bill allows for. It is designed to do a specific job, and I think it could do it even more specifically, hence my amendments.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in the Committee stage of this short Bill. On Second Reading, only a few days ago, I set out my views on the merits or otherwise of the Bill; how it affects the role of the Sentencing Council; the council's consultation on this guideline; and the response to that consultation by the then Government, through their sentencing Minister, and by the Justice Committee, through my predecessor as Chair, Sir Bob Neill KC.

I also regretted the way that the Bill has been used to undermine judicial independence, and to allow ad hominem attacks on judges under the guise of belated objections to the guideline. I am not the only person to raise these concerns, and I agree entirely with the article on this matter by Sir Bob in *The Times* last Thursday. I do not propose repeating any of his arguments; nor do I need to spend a long time on the amendments tabled for debate. Those proposed by the official Opposition do no more than continue on another front the culture war that is the obsession of the shadow Lord Chancellor in his quest for higher office.

I am more sympathetic to the new clause in the name of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), who is an important member of the Justice Committee. Given the fractured



[*Andy Slaughter*]

nature of the debate around the Bill, and the testy relationship between the Sentencing Council and the Ministry of Justice, it may be sensible to review the effect of the Bill, but I am not sure we need to put that into legislation. Indeed, the sentencing landscape is about to shift fundamentally with the imminent publication of the independent sentencing review, which is swiftly to be followed by a sentencing Bill. I suspect that issues raised by this Bill will get swallowed up in that process, and the Lord Chancellor has indicated that it may include a review of the role of the Sentencing Council.

I do not want to stir the pot further, but I observe that had the Sentencing Council been prepared, without the threat of legislation, to postpone implementation of the guideline, all these matters might have been dealt with in one Bill, and in the light of David Gauke's recommendations. The parliamentary and ministerial time that has been spent debating a relatively narrow point could, in my view, have been better spent on other matters requiring urgent attention in our courts and prisons.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the reason why we are here today is an error of judgment by the Sentencing Council, on which it refused to back down until threatened with legislation? Does the amendment proposed by the shadow Justice Secretary not offer greater protection to the public from future errors of judgment by the Sentencing Council?

**Andy Slaughter:** As I say, I do not want to repeat everything I said on Second Reading. I made a case then for why the Sentencing Council had behaved quite properly. It was complimented by many people—including the Justice Committee, on which the hon. Gentleman serves—for the way it conducted its consultation. I have a great deal of sympathy with the council and its chair, who were somewhat surprised by the reaction at that stage, the guideline having been approved by pretty much everyone who considered it at that time.

On the views of the hon. Gentleman and other members of the Justice Committee, whose opinions I have a great deal of time for, the Sentencing Council was a little stubborn when confronted with the Lord Chancellor's view, as well as those of other Members of the House, and it could have acted to prevent us all needing to discuss this today; as I say, there are many other matters that need our attention.

On the amendments in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), as I would expect from a distinguished former Attorney General, his amendments go to the central issue in the Bill, which is whether it does what the Government intend it to do. I hope the Minister will address the issue of what a "personal characteristic" is, as opposed to a particular demographic cohort, and the question of what characteristics are caught by clause 1.

I will take a few minutes, if I may, to add some related questions on which I am seeking the Minister's guidance. First, I turn to the effect of the Bill on the sentencing guidelines already in force. The effect of the Bill goes beyond the imposition of the community and custodial sentences guideline and future guidelines; it would also render unlawful the inclusion of provision framed by

reference to different characteristics of an offender in all definitive sentencing guidelines by the Sentencing Council that have already been issued and are in force. The potential retrospective effect of the Bill on guidelines already in force could create legal uncertainty as to their lawfulness.

There are two main examples of overarching guidelines in force that could be caught by the Bill: the guideline on sentencing children and young people, and the guideline on sentencing offenders with mental disorders, developmental disorders or neurological impairments.

In relation to offence-specific guidelines, a significant number contain mitigating factors framed by personal characteristics that have expanded explanations referring to the need to order a pre-sentence report—for example, an explanation for the mitigating factor of "age and/or lack of maturity" in the aggravated burglary guideline. By way of another example, the explanation of the mitigating factor of pregnancy, childbirth and post-natal care in the same guideline states:

"When considering a custodial or community sentence for a pregnant or postnatal offender...the Probation Service should be asked to address the issues below in a pre-sentence report. If a suitable pre-sentence report is not available, sentencing should normally be adjourned until one is available."

3 pm

In a letter to the chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights on 24 April, the Minister wrote:

"Once the Bill is in force, any provision in sentencing guidelines that is of the description in the new subsection (4A) will cease to be lawful and so cease to have effect. I can therefore confirm that the Bill will, as a matter of law, affect both new and existing guidelines. In practice, this means that some existing guidelines will be affected by the Bill, including offence-specific guidelines related to mitigating and aggravating factors, which set out guidance about PSRs for specific cohorts."

To my mind, that prompts several questions. First, have the Government determined which existing guidelines will be rendered unlawful by the Bill? Secondly, why did the Government decide to make the provision in the Bill apply to all guidelines, rather than just the imposition of the community and custodial sentences guideline, which was issued by the Sentencing Council as a definitive guideline on 5 March 2025? Thirdly, are the Government willing to limit the effect of the Bill so that it does not affect the legality of any guidelines currently in force? All those matters are in the interest of clarity.

There is also the matter of the definition of personal characteristics, which was touched on by the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam. The Bill states that guidelines produced by the Sentencing Council cannot include provision framed by reference to "personal characteristics". The Bill then specifies that personal characteristics include "in particular" race, religion or belief and cultural background. The list is non-exhaustive and therefore covers other personal characteristics, such as age, disability, sex and sexual orientation. Clause 1 will therefore render unlawful the following cohorts, which were included in the imposition of the community and custodial sentence guideline:

"a young adult...female...an ethnic minority",

which we have discussed,

"pregnant or post-natal...has disclosed they are transgender...has or may have a serious chronic medical condition or physical disability."

There are others.

Neither the Bill nor its explanatory notes provide any further guidance on the intended meaning of “personal characteristics”. The use of the term “characteristics” means that each of the protected characteristics, as defined by the Equality Act 2010—age, disability, gender assignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation—may be caught by the provision. The Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights wrote to the Lord Chancellor on 8 April and asked the following question:

“Is the term ‘personal characteristics’ in the Bill intended to exclude pregnancy, motherhood...and age...to ensure guidelines that are consistent with...case law?”

The reply from the Minister on 24 April, which I have referred to, said:

“The Bill specifies that personal characteristics includes race, religion or belief or cultural background. However, this is a non-exhaustive list and personal characteristics is also intended to cover a wider range of characteristics, including sex, gender identity, age, physical disabilities and pregnancy status. Pregnancy, motherhood and age are therefore not excluded from the definition of ‘personal characteristics’”.

The explanatory notes state that the Bill does not affect Court of Appeal case law in circumstances where a pre-sentencing report is “necessary or desirable”. They then cite three cases, which are *Thompson*, on

“a woman who is pregnant or has recently given birth”;

*Meanley*, which involved young defendants; and *Kurmekaj*, where

“the defendant’s traumatic upbringing, vulnerability and the fact they had been a victim of modern slavery”

meant that a pre-sentence report should have been required. The explanatory notes make it clear that the Government do not intend to prevent the Court of Appeal or any other body from issuing guidance relating to pre-sentence reports from being framed by personal characteristics, other than ethnic, cultural and faith or minority community. That appears to indicate that they do not object in principle to such an approach.

The Minister’s letter makes it clear that the Government’s objection lies with the Sentencing Council taking such an approach. Why does the Bill take a non-exhaustive approach to the definition of personal characteristics? Are the Government willing to narrow the effect of the Bill so that only references to

“ethnic minority, cultural minority, and/or faith minority community”

will be deemed unlawful? Will the Government explain why they wish to make it unlawful for the Sentencing Council to produce guidance to require a pre-sentence report for a defendant with a physical or mental disability? Why are the Government willing to accept that the Court of Appeal can provide guidance on when a pre-sentence report is needed by reference to personal characteristics but not willing to accept the Sentencing Council doing the same thing?

I have one final question. The effect of clause 1 is to prevent the inclusion of guidance that is “framed by reference to” personal characteristics. Will the Bill prevent the Sentencing Council from making an indirect reference to personal characteristics through reference to either Court of Appeal case law or mitigating factors in a guideline relating to pre-sentence reports? Those are the only matters I wish to raise in relation to the amendments today.

I am concerned that there are ramifications to proposals in the Bill that have not been covered. It may be that those can be corrected in the other place, or it may be that matters have to wait until we have a sentencing Bill in the autumn. While I entirely understand the Government’s frustration with the Sentencing Council, I do not feel that this Bill is the solution to the problems that they have identified, whereas its consequences have been exaggerated in many respects. If we want a system that is not only fair and robust, but clear in dealing with when pre-sentence reports are needed, we need to return to this issue on a future occasion.

**Sir Ashley Fox:** I have already recorded my support for the principle of this Bill, which is unfortunately necessary to uphold the principle of equal justice. I speak in support of amendments 3 and 4, which would further strengthen this legislation.

Amendment 3 would give the Justice Secretary the power to prevent future errors of judgment by the Sentencing Council. It would require the council to secure ministerial consent before issuing any sentencing guidelines concerning pre-sentence reports. We should be clear that that is not a measure aimed at politicising justice. However, we must ensure democratic oversight of a body that has shown itself to be capable of committing a serious error of judgment, which led to the situation today. The reason why we are legislating is that the Sentencing Council’s guidance proposed treating offenders differently based on their ethnic, cultural or religious identities. That is wrong.

**Ms Diane Abbott:** The Sentencing Council has at no point suggested treating defendants differently according to their ethnicity or religion. All it has tried to do is ensure that judges and magistrates have the maximum information.

**Sir Ashley Fox:** The Sentencing Council says that if, for example, someone is a white, Christian male, they are less likely to benefit from a pre-sentence report than if they were a member of a religious or ethnic minority. I believe that that is wrong.

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Does the hon. Member know that any defendant before the courts who has no previous convictions, despite the seriousness of the offence, is entitled to a pre-sentence report?

**Sir Ashley Fox:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention. As a former solicitor, I am familiar with that provision, and I agree that any defendant who has not yet received a custodial sentence should have the benefit of a pre-sentence report. However, imagine two criminals who both have a criminal record, but one is a member of a religious or ethnic minority and one is not. The guidelines propose treating them differently, and that is not justice.

**Dr Evans:** Is the fact not that the sentencing guidance said that a pre-sentence report would normally be considered necessary, and then went on to talk about race and religion? Making those distinctions immediately apparent in sentencing guidance, which could mean that a white Christian male would be treated differently if they committed the same offence as someone of a different ethnicity, is the fundamental problem.

**Sir Ashley Fox:** Indeed. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point; the point I wish to make to the Committee is that all defendants should be treated equally. It should not be a matter of whether or not they are a member of an ethnic or religious minority.

The Sentencing Council did not withdraw the guidance on principle, and it did not acknowledge its error. It was forced to backtrack only after public and political pressure, largely from the shadow Justice Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). Even then, the council continued to defend the policy's rationale in private communications to the judiciary. That is not accountability—it is evasion. That is precisely why amendment 3 is so vital. We cannot allow this to happen again, and Parliament must have a say when guidance threatens the impartiality of our legal system.

Amendment 4, which addresses the content of sentencing guidance itself, is equally important. The amendment would make it illegal for sentencing decisions to consider a defendant's group identity, particularly in reference to historical discrimination that has no bearing on their individual case. Current bail guidance from the Ministry of Justice already advises courts to consider the trauma suffered by individuals whose relatives experienced racism or cultural discrimination. It even refers to "important historical events" and their supposed differential impact on specific ethnic or cultural groups. That approach undermines the principle that people should be judged as individuals, not as members of a group. Amendment 4 would draw a clear legal line: mitigating factors in sentencing must relate directly to an individual's actions and circumstances. Inherited identity or injustices not experienced by a particular convicted criminal should not be relevant to the sentence passed by the court.

Race, religion or cultural background should not determine whether someone is sent to prison, and it should not determine whether or not someone should benefit from a pre-sentence report. The Lord Chancellor has argued that the current Bill allows her to "move at pace" to reverse the worst aspects of the Sentencing Council's proposals, but this is not just about moving fast; it is also about ensuring that we never face this situation again. Amendments 3 and 4 are essential if we are serious about protecting the most basic principle of a free society, which is equality before the law. Without them, the Bill addresses the symptoms, but not the cause. As such, I urge the Committee to support those amendments and reaffirm our commitment to equality before the law.

**Ms Abbott:** I entirely agree with Members who are making the case that we should all be equal before the law. The problem is that the figures show that that is not the case, and it has not been the case for decades. If we look at the statistics for the numbers of people in prison, black people make up 12% of the prison population, yet we only make up 4% of the general population. That tends to raise the concern that we are not equal before the law across the whole custodial and criminal justice system. I remember that years ago, before some Members were in the House, you could not say anything about institutional racism in the police force and how black people were treated by the police. It took Stephen Lawrence and the Macpherson inquiry to get politicians and people who speak for the state to even acknowledge that there was such an issue as institutional racism in the police force.

3.15 pm

My concern about the debate we have had about these guidelines is that, for short-term political advantage, we are putting forward a hurried Bill that carries the risk of undermining the Sentencing Council and indirectly undermining the judiciary. I do not believe that that is in the interests of our legal system. I remind the Committee that the guidelines were put out to consultation and there were 150 respondents, only four of which made any reference to the guidelines on ethnic minorities that are so upsetting Members on both sides of the House. Since then, 20 organisations, including the Centre for Women's Justice, Amnesty International and the End Violence Against Women Coalition, have written to the Lord Chancellor to say that the consequences of ditching the guidelines could be dire. Among other things, they contain detailed advice on sentencing pregnant women and the parents of very young children. I repeat that the guidelines do not dictate the sentence. They only say that there are instances—where the defendant is young, or where they are a pregnant woman—in which we want the maximum information.

What is problematic about this debate and this legislation is that it has been framed as if the real conflict is between politics and the role of our criminal justice system. I would say that the real issue underlying this legislation—I know this is not a view that is shared—is how seriously this House, and Ministers in particular, are prepared to take the proven history of racial discrimination in our criminal justice system, and not just pay lip service to it but do something about it. The poor Sentencing Council is scarcely made up of radicals; it is a group of very senior judges. However, like anybody with any connection to the criminal justice system, those judges know that there is an issue of institutional racism in the courts. In the mildest possible way, they were trying to make a suggestion through their guidelines that might help to ensure that everybody is treated the same.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, I believe everybody is not treated the same, and people outside this Chamber will not understand how so many Members, including so many Ministers, are trying to claim that we are all treated the same. If we want to hold our criminal justice system up to the light—if we want to show people that we as a House are concerned with making sure that the system is fair and is seen to be fair—we should accept the guidelines that have been put forward by the Sentencing Council.

**Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I associate myself with every single thing that the Mother of the House has just said, because I could not possibly live up to it. I genuinely believe that this Bill will undermine efforts to ensure that equality before the law is a reality for everyone. It flies in the face of expertise and of the painstaking, authoritative work of the Sentencing Council—a rightly independent body run by, and for, the judiciary. This is a strange and populist Bill that is undermining and delaying good, well-evidenced independent guidelines for effective sentencing that would have made our justice system more fair, rather than less.

I will start my objections to clauses 1 and 2 standing part of the Bill—I am essentially opposing the Bill as a whole—by commenting on the process. We have before us a single-page Bill that in its specificity and intent



cannot but bring to my mind how the current President of the United States is using executive orders to interfere intrusively and intricately in the rightly independent decision making of other bodies. This is a micro Bill that micromanages. I worry what else we might see from this Government if such an example is set today. On Second Reading, the shadow Justice Secretary was not shy of telling us about his next targets, which include the long-standing “Equal Treatment Bench Book”. The hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) has outlined other guidelines that might be immediately affected if we pass this Bill today.

My second objection is about the substance of the Bill, which is primarily contained in clause 1. I cannot believe that Ministers and shadow Ministers are unaware that achieving fair and equal outcomes does not mean treating everyone exactly the same. That principle is so fundamental that I think I learned it through the round window. I cannot believe they are unaware that systemic racism and unconscious bias are real things that still affect people at every stage of the criminal justice system in the United Kingdom in 2025. They must be aware that the good practice that we put together must mitigate those things, or else it will compound them.

I do not believe that the Government as a whole think that the findings of the independent Lammy review of 2017 are untrue, or that they and a wealth of other evidence did not demonstrate the need for guidelines of this sort to provide information to help mitigate the impact of systemic racism and prejudice. Yet here we are, being asked to vote for legislation that essentially bans this evidence and these principles from being part of independent judicial guidelines.

**Dr Luke Evans:** My concern and that of Opposition Members is that the guidance gave examples where pre-sentence reports would “normally be considered necessary” and picked out an identity of a religion or a minority, thereby entrenching racism back into the system. That is the very aim that the hon. Member purports to not want to see. That is the fundamental argument that the Government and the Opposition are putting forward. We do not want to see this situation made worse.

**Siân Berry:** This is—

**Ms Abbott:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Siân Berry:** Yes, of course.

**Ms Abbott:** Just to respond to the point that the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) has just raised, the guidelines did not pick out race and ethnicity. In fact, they listed a number of circumstances in which a pre-sentence report might be considered appropriate, such as someone facing their first custodial sentence, someone who is under 25, someone who is a woman, pregnant, a primary carer or a dependent relative, someone who has said they are transgender or someone who may have addiction issues. Far from the Sentencing Council picking out race and ethnicity, that was only one in a long list of circumstances in which it suggested a pre-sentence report might be appropriate.

**Siân Berry:** To return to the intervention from the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), it is difficult for some to realise that with these guidelines, the definition of “normal” has flipped away from the

male, the white, the Christian and the majority to shine more of a light on people who are parts of minorities and might have experienced systemic problems leading up to the sentencing decision. That is the point of the guidelines. That is how we act in an anti-racist way. It is how we put together policy that mitigates the great problems that the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), has outlined and we know well.

In contrast to this rushed Bill, the process that led to the now suspended new Sentencing Council guidelines was excellent: the document was consulted on widely; the Justice Committee looked at it; and it was given the green light by a Conservative Government, of which the shadow Justice Secretary was a member. Before I am intervened on, I am aware that a small change was made, but in essence the same document has come forward and the same principles were enshrined in the document that was proposed and approved. There was basically consensus that more use of pre-sentence reports should be made for people suffering from systemic injustices, that particular groups might be in greater need of them, and that judges should be permitted and encouraged to ask for such reports for those groups in more circumstances.

I want to talk about another group who will suffer from the delay caused by the Bill suspending the guidelines. I do not know when we will get new guidelines, but there will be more harm to women, families and children, who were all given more specific focus in the new—now suspended—guidelines. I have worked for some years on the problems and injustices facing women in the criminal justice system. I am concerned about the serious consequences that will come from any delay to these long overdue changes to further widen the use of pre-sentence reports and to make those reports easier for these groups. There will be serious consequences not only for too many people with these characteristics or circumstances—however we define it—but for wider society too. Will Ministers tell us about the impact of this delay on women, families, pregnant people and other groups named? When will we get new guidelines that include them? How many people will be harmed in the meantime? This delay has already taken some weeks.

Some Members will be familiar with the seminal 2007 Corston report about women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system. Incidentally, that document reminds us in its introduction:

“Equality does not mean treating everyone the same.”

The Sentencing Council guidelines were about to help plug a gap that still remained in terms of addressing the recommendations and themes of the Corston report. Indeed, in its commentary, the Sentencing Council rightly points to deeply concerning evidence of this problem. I am aware of difficulties judges have had in justifying delays and adjournments to go and get pre-sentence reports. The old guidance pushed for often impossible same-day reporting back from the Probation Service and cautioned against adjournments. With this delay to the new guidelines, will it be 2027—20 years after Corston—before the old guidelines are fully removed? How many women might be harmed in the meantime?

As far as I can see, the shadow Justice Secretary has scored a major win today, seizing this issue to stage another culture war ambush against another minority. Instead of standing by judges and by important principles

[Siân Berry]

we have all known for a long time—instead of simply allowing these guidelines to be trialled while the concerns being raised were addressed calmly—this Government have essentially put an executive order-style Bill before us now for its remaining stages. There was not even time on Second Reading for opponents like me to point that out.

I am sorry, but I believe that this Bill represents nothing less than a rushed and extraordinary capitulation by this Government to hard-right propaganda. People will suffer injustice as a result. It is profoundly worrying to see the Government legislating in this manner, micromanaging justice in ways that are led by—let's face it—dog whistles, rhyming slogans and disingenuous propaganda. I will support new clause 1, but I sincerely hope that other Members will join me in voting against this Trumpian Bill and showing our respect for the independence of judges and magistrates on these matters. It is vital that we do something today to stand up for evidence-led policy, judicial independence and genuine equality before the law.

**Ayoub Khan:** Let me begin by drawing Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I am a member of the Bar.

I will align my comments with those of the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), and the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry). The Bill, and the amendments, do not in reality tackle two-tier justice in this country; in fact, they risk entrenching it. Our justice system is founded on a principle that we all claim to uphold—fairness and equality before the law—but today we are being asked to support legislation that fundamentally undermines that principle.

Let me be absolutely clear. This is not a matter of opinion. Lord Justice William Davis, the chair of the Sentencing Council, has written candidly about the issue. He has said, for example, that defendants from minority ethnic backgrounds are statistically more likely to receive harsher sentences than their white counterparts for a similar offence. That is not the opinion of politicians or pressure groups, but a warning from within the senior judiciary itself. The Bill ignores that reality. Worse still, it undermines one of the very tools designed to correct it: the pre-sentence report.

3.30 pm

Let us remind ourselves what a pre-sentence report is, and what it is not. It is not the sentence itself. Sentencing decisions are rightly governed by separate judicial guidance, based on culpability, harm caused and established sentencing ranges. Those guidelines remain in place. What the pre-sentence report does is help the court to understand the background and circumstances of the offender—information that is needed to establish effective pathways to rehabilitation, particularly when the offender has experienced issues such as mental health challenges, learning difficulties or lifelong trauma.

The current guidelines for pre-sentence reports were very carefully revised with the input of not just senior judges but leading academics and practitioners—experts in criminal justice who understand the complexities and systemic disadvantages that many offenders face. In the

House, we routinely rely on expert testimony to shape our policy, whether it concerns the NHS, education or the environment, and rightly so. In this case, however, we are doing the precise opposite: rejecting expert opinion, dismissing data, and ignoring lived experience.

Let me offer an analogy, or a parallel, with health disparities. According to Public Health England and the Stroke Association, black African and Caribbean men over the age of 55 are almost twice as likely to suffer a stroke as white men of the same age. That is not speculation; it is a clinical fact. If the NHS were to implement a targeted programme to deliver early stroke prevention for that group, not a single person in this Chamber would call it a two-tier health system. We would call it evidence-based care. We would call it a fair and proportionate response to a known disparity. So why, when it comes to justice, are we so afraid to apply the same logic?

**Dr Luke Evans:** From a medical perspective, there would be a genetic predisposition. Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that people would, on a genetic basis, find themselves affected by the law purely because they were black? The comparison he has just made is exactly that, from a medical standpoint. I do not think he would really make such a suggestion, and I would certainly be against that position.

**Ayoub Khan:** The hon. Gentleman has made his point, but as a criminal practitioner who has frequented courts over the last 20 years, I have seen disparities. I have seen sentencing which, in my view, was not fair. Lived experiences among certain communities are just as important as those of other minorities, whatever their backgrounds. Ultimately, who has decided that this is an important element that needs to be taken into account in the sentencing guidelines? This went through all the consultation under the last Government. People had seen it, and agreed to it. It did not raise a concern back then, so why should it now?

Addressing inequality is not the same as creating inequality. It is, in fact, the only way in which to ensure real equality—to ensure that justice is not just blind in theory, but fair in practice. I know some will argue that we need to understand the root causes of disparity, and they are right: that longer-term work is essential. However, while it is going on we must act in the present. We must allow the experts to do their jobs and support the guidance that they, not we, have developed through years of experience, research and consultation.

This Bill is not just misguided; it is regressive. I cannot and will not support legislation that sidelines expert insight, ignores data and compromises the principles of fairness that we all claim to defend in the name of political convenience. Justice must not only be done but be seen to be done, and right now the communities that face this disparity will no doubt be concerned about the Government's approach.

**Dan Tomlinson** (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): First, I acknowledge that disparities in outcomes in our judicial system are a real issue and merit serious attention. I recognise the work of the Lammy review in 2017, as well as the conclusions of the Ministry of Justice's 2020 report, "Tackling Racial Disparity in the Criminal Justice System", which found disparities in how people

from minority ethnic groups are treated in the judicial system. It is important that these issues continue to have the focus that they merit.

However, I am glad that the Bill has passed its Second Reading and that we are progressing through its remaining stages today. I am firmly of the view that it is not for the Sentencing Council to make policy decisions on this matter, for those are the domain of politicians and must remain so. The Government should be able to make political decisions and implement them, and the ballot box is the right place for us to be held to account.

What I find refreshing about the continued passage of this Bill is that we are showing that politicians do not have to be jelly-like in the face of blockages to their desire to make political decisions. At the same time, I support the unamended passage of the Bill, because it finds a way to thread the needle with a targeted intervention. Amendment 3, tabled by the shadow Secretary of State for Justice, goes too far and would undermine the independence of the Sentencing Council.

**Ms Diane Abbott:** My hon. Friend refers to blockages. How can he describe Members of this House, and people in the community who are trying to stand up for a fair and just criminal justice system, as blockages?

**Dan Tomlinson:** I do not think that anyone in this House is a blockage—far from it. The point I am making is that I believe that this House should be the place where political decisions are made, and that politicians should make decisions about important things that matter to people in this country.

It is my view that the Sentencing Council is an important body. Crucially, however, it is not political, and I think that if the guidelines had gone through, it would have undermined the important principle of equality before the law. That is a political decision, and Members of this House hold different opinions, but it is for us to contest them in this place. I am glad the Government are making sure that we can make progress on the things that we believe need to be pushed forward for the British people, and I hope that the Bill will pass unamended today, because the precise changes that it proposes would prevent sentencing guidelines from being changed in ways that undermine equality before the law. I do not think that the amendments tabled by the Opposition are necessary, because they take things too far.

With this Bill and much else besides, it is time for us to show that moderate politics, which is the politics of this Government, does not have to be like soup—weak and watery, and impossible to hold on to—but can instead be the politics of action and delivery. I welcome the continued passage of this Bill and urge Members to vote for it today.

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

**Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD):** I made the Liberal Democrat position on this very short Bill, and on this issue more widely, abundantly clear in the last debate that we had on this matter: we believe in equality before the law, we believe in the rule of law, and we believe that no one is above the law. That is why we believe that anyone facing the prospect of a custodial sentence should be the subject of a pre-sentence report. We believe that the state has that duty before dispensing its power to deprive someone of their liberty.

There is no world in which judges and magistrates having more information about an offender, whoever they are, and their circumstances is a bad thing. That is why it is an injustice that the use of pre-sentence reports had fallen from 160,000 in 2015 to just 90,000 by 2023, which is a cut of 42%. That has left judges and magistrates with fewer resources and insights than ever with which to go about their work. Less informed sentencing means less satisfactory sentencing outcomes. It means more reoffending, more victims and more turmoil, and that is unacceptable. That is not justice.

This is a product of the under-investment in our Probation Service—it compiles the reports—which was gutted under the Conservative Government. I therefore welcome the fact that the Minister, in his closing speech on Second Reading, agreed with me that

“the debate should be about how we move to universality of pre-sentence reports, not about rationing.”—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 1019.]

I will come to new clause 1 shortly.

**Sir Ashley Fox:** The hon. Member will be aware that any sentencing magistrate or judge can request a pre-sentence report, so I would say that his use of the word “rationing” is inappropriate.

**Josh Babarinde:** I do not know whether the hon. Member has read the Sentencing Council’s summary of the responses to the draft guidance that was in consultation under the Conservative Government, but it paraphrased magistrates and judges as saying that driving the universality of pre-sentence reports would be challenging in the light of the limited resource for the Probation Service and of the court backlogs. I would suggest that he consult that document to see the phrases used by those legal professionals.

**Dr Luke Evans:** How much would universality cost? Have the Lib Dems calculated how much it would cost?

**Josh Babarinde:** If the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) was making the point that these reports should exist come what may, the cash should be ringfenced and earmarked for the use of judges and magistrates to request them, but he and the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) cannot have it both ways. We know that if we best tailor a sentence to whether it will result in somebody not reoffending—if we best match the sentence to an offender—we can spend to save. If we can reduce reoffending by ensuring that people get the appropriate sentence, we will keep people out of our crumbling prisons who do not need to be there because they will not reoffend in the first place. We can spend to save.

I regret that this issue has become a political football and one that is sowing the seeds of division. Plainly and simply, this is about the shadow Justice Secretary attempting to hijack our criminal justice system for his own political ends. So desperate is he to score political points that he uses his platform in this House to undermine judges by name, in the full knowledge that they cannot respond and that there is a formal process by which judicial complaints can be investigated and addressed. So desperate are the Conservatives to score political points that they paint judges as activist villains and are working to undermine public confidence in them just because the shadow Justice Secretary does not agree with their rulings.



**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I would expect the Liberal Democrat spokesperson to at least acknowledge that such references are to judges in their capacity as leaders of the Sentencing Council, not to judges sitting in individual cases. That is an important distinction to make when parliamentarians comment on their conduct.

**Josh Babarinde**: I refer the hon. Member to the comments the shadow Justice Secretary made at the last Justice questions—I think the hon. Member was not in attendance for that—when he named a specific judge and made a critique of or complaint about them outside the formal processes.

**Ayoub Khan**: Judges have been vilified, as have others sitting on the Sentencing Council, by Members of this House. Does the hon. Member agree that, if there is to be any vilification, it should be of the Conservative Members who formed the previous Government, who held the consultation and agreed to the guidance?

**Josh Babarinde**: I do not agree that vilification is the right approach from any side of the argument. This debate should be conducted with respect and courtesy, and I feel that that was missing from some of the comments I just referred to. Absolutely, there must be accountability. Indeed, the previous Government were held accountable in huge respect at the general election, where they suffered the biggest defeat in their history. So desperate is the shadow Justice Secretary to rise to the top of our democracy that he is prepared, in the ways I have described, to undermine our democracy itself.

3.45 pm

Turning to specifics, as other hon. Members have referred to, the Bill and its amendments are rushed, knee-jerk and not the way to make policy about people's liberty or our constitution. Why not negotiate with the Sentencing Council, now that the immediate emergency has subsided? To my knowledge, based on my engagement with the Ministry of Justice, Ministers and officials, the question of how long they would be prepared to pause before the implementation of the guidelines has not been asked. Why not wait for the Gauke review to report and ensure that the issue is explored comprehensively and that wider consultation takes place? Why not comprehensively address what is already a two-tier justice system, as hon. Members on the Benches behind me and the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), have referred to? As the Lammy review found, people from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to serve longer sentences for the same crimes than those who are not from ethnic minority backgrounds. It is disappointing that there is no provision in the Bill to consider that. If the Government insist on passing the Bill, we urge them to embrace our calls for an independent review of pre-sentence reports to be conducted within two years, as per new clause 1.

**Siân Berry**: I hope the hon. Member was listening to my speech when I talked about the harm that might be caused by the delay in bringing in the really excellent parts of the new guidelines that might help women and families. Are the Liberal Democrats asking for a delay, or would they like to support bringing in the parts of the guidance that are agreed as soon as possible?

**Josh Babarinde**: One problem with the proposals is that consultation has been minimal. They come from a rushed place. They come from a place of responding to a culture war. We are voting on people's liberties and we need to consider the issues in great detail before responding, not in a knee-jerk way. What I can say, and what I have discussed with Members, including the Lord Chancellor, is that, for example, in the guidance on pre-sentence reports, the circumstances of victims of domestic violence, modern slavery and so on should be considered. As I said at the very beginning of my speech, on pre-sentence reports we should lean toward a presumption of universality rather than one of rationing, so that for all the groups and individuals that have just been mentioned, and more, judges can access a pre-sentence report.

We make the call I have just made not only because we have grave concerns about the impact of the proposed changes, but because we remain steadfastly committed to evidence-based policy making. Against the backdrop of cynical culture wars and leadership manoeuvres, it is more important than ever for the Government to assess the outcomes of this policy, with assessments based on statistics, data and evidence as opposed to dogma and ideology.

To conclude, we must not dance to the tune of the populists or the culture war fanatics, or undermine our legal institutions. As such, our position has not changed since last time and we will act accordingly. We will defend our judicial system and its independence, but we reject short-term reforms that fail to address the wider issues of disproportionality at play.

**The First Deputy Chairman**: I call the shadow Minister.

**Dr Mullan**: I rise to speak in support of amendments 3 and 4 in my name and in the name of the shadow Secretary of State for Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), and of Conservative colleagues.

As MPs from across the House have made clear, the draft guidelines produced by the Sentencing Council would have led to an unacceptable two-tier justice system in which defendants were treated differently on the basis not of their crimes, but of their racial, cultural or religious identity. In fact, the record will show that two-tier justice did exist for several hours, because this issue was managed so shambolically that the guidance came into effect ahead of its formal withdrawal. That is not justice—it is a betrayal of the fundamental principle of equality before the law. It would have happened under the watch of this Labour Government and this Lord Chancellor but for the intervention of the Opposition, and in particular the shadow Secretary of State for Justice.

This Bill is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Instead of acting decisively to restore public confidence, after the Labour Government have been dragged to this Chamber to act at all, they now bring forward a half measure—a meagre response that falls short of what it should be. That is why the Opposition have tabled two important amendments.

Amendment 3 would ensure that in future, sentencing guidelines on pre-sentence reports cannot simply be issued by the Sentencing Council without democratic oversight, and would instead require the consent of the Secretary of State before coming into force. Why is that

now necessary? The Sentencing Council has proven itself not just in the initial measures it proposed, but in its attitude and response towards parliamentary and public scrutiny, to be unable to sustain public confidence in its work in this area. It is one thing for a public body to possess operational independence and to seek to exercise that independence on a day-to-day basis; it is quite something else for a public body to choose not to exercise good judgment and make use of that independence to act with restraint in the face of widespread Government, Opposition, parliamentary and public concern. While they do, of course, have their merits, the actions of the Sentencing Council have brought to life the potential pitfalls of unelected quangos that are deaf to the concerns of the people who pay their wages and the politicians who represent them.

While this whole affair has no doubt been humiliating for the Lord Chancellor and the Government, the damage to public confidence in the leadership of the Sentencing Council is just as great. Despite what the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) said in his remarks on Second Reading, the Sentencing Council did not agree to pause the implementation of the guidelines to allow for a period of reflection—it outright refused to do so. He has misunderstood the sequence of events. The council paused only because we would have otherwise entered into a constitutionally unsustainable situation where people were being sentenced in the courts, with guidelines being legislated against in Parliament through emergency legislation. It was that direct threat alone that caused the council to pause and demonstrated its lack of judgment.

I am afraid that we must therefore act more broadly to constrain the Sentencing Council in future, pending any wholesale changes that may be forthcoming. That is why the shadow Secretary of State put forward a Bill that would have taken the necessary steps to return accountability of the body through the Lord Chancellor while wholesale reform could be undertaken. Labour chose to oppose that Bill. Today, it is out of scope for the Opposition to seek to introduce a similarly wide amendment, and we are therefore restricted to seeking to at least restore accountability where we can in this field.

The amendment would require that guidelines on pre-sentence reports drafted by the council must be expressly approved by the Secretary of State before they come into force as definitive guidelines—a basic safeguard of democratic accountability, ensuring ministerial oversight on sensitive sentencing matters. Without our amendment, history may repeat itself: the same council will be free to bring forward ideological frameworks that Ministers will be powerless to stop before the damage is done. Had these guidelines gone unchallenged, we would have tilted sentencing based on identity politics, undermining public confidence in the entire system.

Our amendment would create a crucial safeguard, ensuring that no future set of guidelines in this field, at least, could bypass ministerial accountability. I encourage those on the Government Benches who have made clear that they wish to see accountability restored across the work of the Sentencing Council to vote in support of amendment 3; doing otherwise would make clear that they are unwilling to follow through on their concerns with action.

Amendment 4 would make clear that sentencing guidelines on pre-sentence reports must not include consideration of a defendant's status as part of a group that has experienced historical or intergenerational trauma. Why is this necessary? It would be deeply wrong to allow collective historical grievances to influence the sentencing of an individual today. This area is the latest frontier of identity politics, with the public being told that what should be given disproportionate focus in all sorts of domains—that what matters more than what is happening today, with the whole variety of challenges facing people of all creeds and colours—is, in fact, the past. Sentencing must focus on the actions, culpability and direct personal circumstances of the defendant before the court, not on sweeping assumptions based on historical events.

We are not able in this Bill to legislate across all the workings of the criminal justice system as much as we might like to. The events of the past few months have shown that what has happened with these guidelines was not a one-off. There is a creeping, systemic attempt to inject identity politics into our judicial processes, bail decisions, probation, and even training materials. If we do not confront this now, it will embed itself deeper and deeper into the foundations of our system. It is fundamental to the rule of law that justice looks to the individual, not to the group. It is fundamental that we deal in evidence, not in ideology.

Taken together, our amendments are designed to strengthen this Bill, to ensure that it is not merely a reactive measure, but, in this narrow area at least, provides lasting protection of the principle that justice must be blind, and must be seen to be blind. The public expect justice to be equal, not preferential. Our amendments will go further in helping to secure that.

We are in this Chamber today because the Lord Chancellor was not paying attention, and was then humiliated by the recalcitrant leadership of an unelected body turning its face against parliamentary and public concern. The Government should have acted decisively and immediately and we provided them with an opportunity to do so, but they failed to take it. Even now, we are faced with a Bill that does not do the full job. Our amendments are closing the gap between what the Lord Chancellor is offering and what is necessary—decisiveness in place of timidity. I urge the whole House and the Government to support them.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin):** It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I wish to thank hon and right hon. Members for the points that have been made and the amendments that have been discussed, which I shall respond to in turn. I shall speak briefly to each clause and then remind us of why we are here debating this Bill.

In the last Parliament, the Sentencing Council consulted on a revised imposition guideline, which was due to come into effect on 1 April. The revised guideline includes additional guidance on when courts should request pre-sentence reports. It notes that pre-sentence reports will “normally be considered necessary” for certain offenders, including those from an ethnic, cultural or faith minority. The “normally be considered necessary” is replaced with “may be particularly important”, which the previous Government very much welcomed.

[Sir Nicholas Dakin]

This Government note that a pre-sentence report is necessary. They agree that disparities exist in the criminal justice system. The reasons for that are unclear, but this is a matter for the Government, accountable to Parliament and to the ballot box, to address.

In effect, the revised guideline could have led to judges deciding whether to request a pre-sentence report based on an offender's faith or the colour of their skin. The Lord Chancellor has been clear that this would be unacceptable, as it risks differential treatment. Singling out one group over another undermines the idea that we all stand equal before the law—a principle that has been in the foundations of our justice system for centuries, and that is why she acted immediately and quickly. By preventing the Sentencing Council making guidance on pre-sentence reports with reference to personal characteristics, this Bill helps to ensure equality before the law.

Clause 1 amends section 120 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. It provides that sentencing guidelines may not include provision framed by reference to different personal characteristics, including race, religion, belief or cultural background. Therefore, any existing guidelines that make reference to different personal characteristics will cease to have effect and the Sentencing Council is prevented from making such provisions in guidelines in the future.

The changes made by this clause prevent the Sentencing Council making policy about when pre-sentence reports should be obtained that risks differential treatment before the law, and which could undermine public confidence in the criminal justice system.

The sentencing code is clear that courts should obtain pre-sentence reports unless, in the circumstances of the case, it is unnecessary. The clause does not affect the independent judiciary's ability to make decisions based on the personal circumstances of an individual offender, or determine where pre-sentence reports are necessary or desirable. Nor does it stop the Sentencing Council from advising, in general terms, that pre-sentence reports are sought in cases where the court would benefit from an assessment of an offender's personal circumstances.

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): Pre-sentence reports, as the Minister has set out, are important in considering punishments that can address offending behaviour and help reduce the likelihood of reoffending. But, very often, probation is stretched so thin that officers do not have time to complete them. What will the Minister do to ensure that, where a pre-sentence report is required, probation has the capacity to do that important work?

4 pm

**Sir Nicholas Dakin:** My hon. Friend echoes much of what the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) picked up on earlier. Probation is a significant part of the landscape. That is why we are onboarding 1,300 more probation officers over the next year.

The Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), raised issues about the impact of the guidelines on existing guidelines. We expect that other guidelines will be affected by the Bill, including offence-specific

guidelines related to mitigating and aggravating factors, which set out guidance about pre-sentence reports for specific cohorts. We will continue working with the Sentencing Council on the implementation of the Bill. We have had constructive discussions and will continue to do so.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick referenced, the Bill's explanatory notes point out, existing precedent is not changed where the courts have determined that pre-sentence reports are necessary or desirable. Such cases include: Thompson, where the Court of Appeal recently emphasised the importance of reports in sentencing pregnant women or women who have recently given birth; Meanley, in which the court referenced the value of pre-sentence reports for young defendants; and Kurmekaj, where the defendant had a traumatic upbringing, a vulnerability and was a victim of modern slavery. The Bill narrowly focuses on the issue at hand, putting beyond doubt the principle that we all stand equal before the law of the land.

Clause 2 is concerned with details about how the Bill will be enacted. The Bill will apply to England and Wales only, and its measures will come into force on the day after it passes. The Bill may be cited as the Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Act 2025 once enacted.

I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) for tabling his amendments and for the very thoughtful and comprehensive way in which he dealt with them. Amendments 1 and 2 would replace the term "personal characteristics" with "demographic cohort" to describe the type of provision about pre-sentence reports in sentencing guidelines that the Bill will prohibit. The Government have considered the proposed change to the wording very carefully and would like to take the opportunity to briefly explain the Government's approach.

The Government's objective is to help ensure equality before the law so that offenders are treated according to their own particular circumstances and not by virtue of their membership of a particular group. To ensure that the Bill prevents sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports including provision framed by reference to any specific personal characteristics of an offender, we have used the term "personal characteristics". The Bill sets out that personal characteristics include race, religion or belief, or cultural background. However, this is not an exhaustive list. We accept that personal characteristics and personal circumstances have, over the years, been elided in different court judgments, and we are clear that it is intended to cover a wider range of characteristics including sex, gender identity, physical disabilities and pregnancy status.

The right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam has rightly noted that the term "demographic cohort" is used in the Bill's explanatory notes. However, the use of the term was not intended to narrow the definition of personal characteristics, and I believe it does not, though I note that he believes that it might do. Rather, it is a different term used to describe individuals who share certain personal characteristics.

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** I accept that the Minister is trying to give us clarity, so for the purposes of clarity is it the Government's view that all personal characteristics can also be described as personal circumstances?



**Sir Nicholas Dakin:** No, that is not the Government's view. "Personal characteristics" is a term that is understood and applied in other contexts, whereas "demographic cohort" is a term that, on balance, the Government feel is more imprecise and would ultimately need to be defined with reference to a group with shared personal characteristics. Therefore, I understand where the right hon. and learned Gentleman is coming from, but from the Government's point of view, the amendments do not add anything to the drafting of the Bill and risk causing further confusion. As he pointed out in his helpful contribution, there is a danger of getting into detailed semantics, which probably does not help any of us.

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** I take on board the Minister's warning, and I am not sure whether this will make it any better. I think he is saying that the term demographic cohort is a subset of personal characteristics, but personal characteristics are not the same as personal circumstances. Is that right?

**Sir Nicholas Dakin:** If we had used the phrase demographic cohort, we would have to define what that means, whereas personal characteristics is a phrase that already has a level of definition and is therefore preferred by the Government.

I turn to the similar issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick. We carefully considered whether the Bill should be narrower than referring to personal characteristics—for example, an offender being from a cultural minority—but in the end we felt that was not helpful.

As such, while I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam for suggesting alternative wording, the Government remain of the view that, having considered it carefully, the term personal characteristics is the most appropriate way of capturing the issues raised by the guideline.

**Andy Slaughter:** Will the Minister clarify the point in relation to pregnancy? He said—it is in the explanatory notes—that it would be right for a sentencer to follow Thompson and order a pre-sentence report where a woman is pregnant or has recently given birth, but that, following the passage of the Bill, it will be incorrect for the Sentencing Council to make recommendations along those lines for sentencers to follow. I do not quite see the difference.

**Sir Nicholas Dakin:** The Court of Appeal has made it clear, and, as my hon. Friend said, it is right to follow Thompson in those circumstances.

While I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam for raising and rightly exploring this issue in Committee, I hope that he will not press the amendment to a vote.

Amendment 3, tabled by the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) on behalf of the official Opposition, would require the Sentencing Council to obtain the Secretary of State's approval before issuing any sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports. Again, I referenced the helpful words of the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam, who said we should tread carefully in this territory and that the separation of powers needs to be very much respected. Therefore, while carefully considering the

case for mandating that the Sentencing Council obtain the Secretary of State's approval, I am not persuaded that that is appropriate at this particular time.

As the Lord Chancellor has set out, this case has highlighted that a potential democratic deficit. That is why we are currently assessing the Sentencing Council's wider role and powers for developing sentencing guidelines, with recent developments and imposition guidelines in mind.

**Dr Mullan:** I gently suggest to the Minister that if there is a risk of a democratic deficit, surely the thing to do is to act now in the short term and unpick it later if he feels he has overreached.

**Sir Nicholas Dakin:** We certainly do not feel that we have overreached. We are acting in a timely and effective way. As the debate has demonstrated, there are issues of detail that need to be properly explored. The Lord Chancellor has done the right thing in announcing a review that will have a look at things in proper time; that will take place.

Given the special role of the Sentencing Council and the significant policy and constitutional issues involved, it is right that we take the time to consider whether more fundamental reform is needed, alongside considering wider recommendations that come out of the independent sentencing review. I am not convinced that it will be proper to deal with the issue now through this fast-tracked legislation, nor am I convinced that legislating in a piecemeal way would be helpful, noting that the amendment of the right hon. Member for Newark applies just to sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports when there may be other things that we need to look at. To be clear, we are keeping all options on the table and are willing to legislate further in a more comprehensive way if necessary. I therefore urge the Opposition not to press this amendment.

Amendment 4, also tabled in the right hon. Member's name, would prevent the Sentencing Council from framing sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports with reference to groups that may have experienced trauma from historical racism or discrimination. While we have carefully considered the case for adding this restriction to the Bill, we are not persuaded that it is necessary. We have taken a general approach in the Bill to preventing sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports from being framed by reference to any personal characteristic of an offender. The Bill specifies that personal characteristics include race, religion or cultural background, but that is not an exhaustive list.

More widely, I appreciate that the right hon. Member for Newark has taken a keen interest in wider guidance across prisons and probation that touches on different experiences, including those specified in the amendment. The Government are absolutely clear on the need to ensure equality before the law. Wider work is going on to review relevant policy and guidance, and we will update practices where necessary. I therefore urge the Opposition not to press the amendment.

New clause 1 would require the Secretary of State to arrange an independent review into the restrictions the Bill places on the Sentencing Council's ability regarding pre-sentence reports, which are framed by reference to offenders' different personal characteristics. I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne for tabling the new clause.

[Sir Nicholas Dakin]

Although we have carefully considered the case for such a review and I agree that it is important to carefully think through what the Bill's effects, I am not persuaded that a review is necessary because the direct changes made by the Bill are very limited in nature.

To recap, the Bill helps protect equality before the law by ensuring no offender receives differential treatment regarding pre-sentence reports based on their personal characteristics. That reflects a fundamental principle that does not need to be reviewed. The Bill does that by restricting the powers of the Sentencing Council to issue sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports. It will prevent guidelines from, for example, creating a presumption around whether a pre-sentence report should be obtained based on an offender's personal characteristics, rather than all the circumstances of the offender before the court.

For the avoidance of doubt, this Government support the use of pre-sentence reports and we have publicly committed to creating more capacity in the probation service to ensure it is able to do the valuable work that includes preparing pre-sentence reports. We are also happy to continue to work with the hon. Member for Eastbourne on disparities in the criminal justice system and the use of pre-sentence reports more generally.

We fully support the increased use of PSRs in our courts. PSRs include an assessment of the offender's behaviour and the risk they pose, and the recommendations for sentencing options. It is a valuable tool, as many Members have said, in helping to ensure a sentence is tailored to an individual offender and their circumstances.

Equality before the law is a fundamental principle of our criminal justice system. It is the Government's policy and belief that that should be protected. I again welcome the contribution from the Mother of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), supported by the hon. Members for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) and for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), to keep our feet to the fire on tackling disproportionality. I confirm again that this Government take very seriously tackling disproportionality in the criminal justice system. That is why the Lord Chancellor has commissioned a review of the data on disparities in the justice system to better understand the drivers of the problem. I know that my right hon. Friend does not need my encouragement to keep going on this one, so I look forward to her continuing to hold us to account as we move forward.

I will also be clear on what the Bill does not do, to underscore its limited changes. Nothing in the Bill restricts the court's pre-existing ability to request pre-sentence reports, nor the Sentencing Council from advising in general terms that a pre-sentence report should be sought where a further assessment of the offender's personal circumstances would be beneficial to the court. The Bill does not affect Court of Appeal case law about the types of cases where pre-sentence reports are necessary or desirable, as we have covered previously. There is recent relevant case law covering vulnerable defendants, pregnant women and women who have recently given birth, and young defendants. Furthermore, the Bill will not prevent judges from requesting pre-sentence reports in cases where they ordinarily would, including in appropriate cases involving, for example, pregnant women,

as well as those involving young people or domestic abuse. I welcome the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson) on those issues.

With such considerations in mind, the Government do not consider the proposed review to be necessary. However, as the Lord Chancellor has set out, she is carrying out a review into the wider role and powers of the Sentencing Council, so I can reassure the hon. Member for Eastbourne that there will be further opportunities to discuss issues surrounding the Sentencing Council in the House. I therefore hope that he will withdraw the new clause.

**The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Judith Cummins):** I call Sir Jeremy Wright to wind up.

**Sir Jeremy Wright:** I think—in gratitude to all those who have spoken—that we have got to a place where the Minister has told the House that there is some territory, which at the moment is being described as “personal characteristics”, into which the sentencing guidelines may not trespass. That is not the same as specifically referring to someone's personal circumstances, and is a broader area than the question of whether they are a member of a particular demographic group.

4.15 pm

I simply say to the Minister that, before this Bill complete its progress, he and his departmental colleagues may want to clarify what specific territory the Sentencing Council cannot now construct guidelines about, so that we all—including the Sentencing Council—understand where we stand. I am grateful to him for the explanation he has been able to give today, and in consequence I am content to withdraw the amendment; I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

*Amendment proposed:* 3, page 1, line 7, at end insert—

“(2A) After subsection (7) insert—

‘(7A) In the case of guidelines within subsection (4) about pre-sentence reports, the Council must, after making any amendments of the guidelines which it considers appropriate, obtain the consent of the Secretary of State before issuing sentencing guidelines as definitive guidelines.

(7B) In any case to which subsection (7A) applies, the Secretary of State may—

- (a) consent to the issuing of guideline as definitive guidelines,
- (b) refuse consent for the issuing of guidelines as definitive guidelines, or
- (c) direct the Council to issue the guidelines in an amended form as definitive guidelines.

(7C) Where the Secretary of State has consented to the issuing of guidelines under subsection (7B)(a) or has directed the Council to issue guidelines in an amended form under subsection (7B)(c), the Council must issue the guidelines as definitive guidelines in the appropriate form.’”  
—(Dr Mullan.)

*Question put,* That the amendment be made.

*The House divided: Ayes 86, Noes 222.*

# Division No. 184]

[4.16 pm

## AYES

Allister, Jim	Kearns, Alicia ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i> )
Anderson, Stuart ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i> )	Kruger, Danny
Argar, rh Edward	Lam, Katie
Bacon, Gareth	Lamont, John
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Bhatti, Saqib	Lopez, Julia
Blackman, Bob	Mak, Alan
Bool, Sarah	Malthouse, rh Kit
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	McVey, rh Esther
Brandreth, Aphra	Moore, Robbie
Braverman, rh Suella	Morrissey, Joy
Burghart, Alex	Morton, rh Wendy
Cartlidge, James	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Mundell, rh David
Cooper, John	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Costa, Alberto	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Coutinho, rh Claire ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i> )	O'Brien, Neil
Cross, Harriet	Paul, Rebecca
Davies, Gareth	Philp, rh Chris
Davies, Mims	Raja, Shivani ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i> )
Davis, rh David	Rankin, Jack
Dewhurst, Charlie	Reed, David
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Rosindell, Andrew
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Shannon, Jim
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Evans, Dr Luke	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Fortune, Peter	Smith, Greg
Fox, Sir Ashley	Smith, rh Sir Julian
French, Mr Louie	Stafford, Gregory
Fuller, Richard	Stephenson, Blake
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Garnier, Mark	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Glen, rh John	Thomas, Bradley
Griffith, Andrew	Timothy, Nick
Griffiths, Alison	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Harris, Rebecca	Vickers, Martin
Hayes, rh Sir John	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian	Wild, James
Hoare, Simon	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Holmes, Paul	Wilson, rh Sammy
Hudson, Dr Neil	Wood, Mike
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	
Jenrick, rh Robert	
Johnson, Dr Caroline	

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Rebecca Smith and  
Jerome Mayhew

## NOES

Abbott, Jack	Beales, Danny
Abrahams, Debbie	Begum, Apsana ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana</i> )
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Benn, rh Hilary
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Berry, Siân
Ali, Tahir	Betts, Mr Clive
Anderson, Callum	Blake, Rachel
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Asato, Jess	Bonavia, Kevin
Asser, James	Botterill, Jade
Athwal, Jas	Brickell, Phil
Atkinson, Catherine	Buckley, Julia
Atkinson, Lewis	Burgon, Richard
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Burke, Maureen
Baker, Alex	Burton-Sampson, David
Baker, Richard	Byrne, rh Liam
Ballinger, Alex	Cadbury, Ruth
Barker, Paula	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Baxter, Johanna	

Carden, Dan	Jones, Gerald
Champion, Sarah	Jones, Lillian
Charalambous, Bambos	Jones, Ruth
Charters, Mr Luke	Josan, Gurinder Singh
Chowns, Ellie	Joseph, Sojan
Collins, Tom	Juss, Warinder
Conlon, Liam	Kane, Chris
Coombes, Sarah	Kaur, Satvir ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i> )
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Khan, Afzal
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Khan, Ayoub
Costigan, Deirdre	Kinnock, Stephen
Cox, Pam	Kumar, Sonia
Coyle, Neil	Kumaran, Uma
Craft, Jen	Lake, Ben
Creasy, Ms Stella	Lamb, Peter
Crichton, Torcuil	Leadbeater, Kim
Curtis, Chris	Leishman, Brian
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Lewell, Emma
Darlington, Emily	MacAlister, Josh
Davies, Ann	Macdonald, Alice
Davies, Paul	Madders, Justin
De Cordova, Marsha	Mahmood, rh Shabana
Dean, Josh	Malhotra, Seema
Denyer, Carla	Martin, Amanda
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Maskell, Rachael
Dickson, Jim	Mather, Keir
Dixon, Anna	Mayer, Alex
Dodds, rh Anneliese	McAllister, Douglas
Dollimore, Helena	McDonald, Chris
Doughty, Stephen	McDonnell, rh John
Downie, Graeme	McEvoy, Lola
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	McKenna, Kevin
Eccles, Cat	McKinnell, Catherine
Edwards, Lauren	McMahon, Jim
Edwards, Sarah	McNally, Frank
Efford, Clive	Medi, Llinos
Elmore, Chris	Midgley, Anneliese
Entwistle, Kirth	Minns, Ms Julie
Eshalomi, Florence	Mohamed, Abtissam
Esterson, Bill	Morden, Jessica
Evans, Chris	Morgan, Stephen
Ferguson, Mark	Mullane, Margaret
Ferguson, Patricia	Murphy, Luke
Fookes, Catherine	Murray, rh Ian ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i> )
Foster, Mr Paul	Murray, James
Foxcroft, Vicky	Murray, Katrina
Francis, Daniel	Myer, Luke
Frith, Mr James	Narayan, Kanishka
Furniss, Gill	Nash, Pamela
Gardiner, Barry	Norris, Alex
Gardner, Dr Allison	Onn, Melanie
German, Gill	Onwurah, Chi
Gilbert, Tracy	Opher, Dr Simon
Gill, Preet Kaur	Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Goldsborough, Ben	Osamor, Kate
Grady, John	Pennycook, Matthew
Greenwood, Lillian	Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Griffith, Dame Nia	Platt, Jo
Gwynne, Andrew ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i> )	Pollard, Luke
Hack, Amanda	Powell, Joe
Hamilton, Fabian	Powell, rh Lucy
Harris, Carolyn	Poynton, Gregor
Hillier, Dame Meg	Prinsley, Peter
Hinchliff, Chris	Quigley, Mr Richard
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Ranger, Andrew
Hopkins, Rachel	Reid, Joani
Hughes, Claire	Rhodes, Martin
Hume, Alison	Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Irons, Natasha	Roca, Tim
Jogee, Adam	Rutland, Tom
Johnson, rh Dame Diana	



Ryan, Oliver  
Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
Scroggham, Michelle  
Sewards, Mark  
Shah, Naz  
Shanker, Baggy  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Simons, Josh  
Slaughter, Andy  
Slinger, John  
Smith, Cat  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Stainbank, Euan  
Stevens, rh Jo  
Stone, Will  
Stringer, Graham  
Sullivan, Kirsteen  
Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
Sultana, Zarah  
Swallow, Peter  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thompson, Adam  
Tomlinson, Dan

Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)  
Turley, Anna  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Twist, Liz  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaughan, Tony  
Ward, Chris  
Waugh, Paul  
West, Catherine  
Western, Andrew  
Western, Matt  
Wheeler, Michael  
White, Katie  
Whittome, Nadia  
Witherden, Steve  
Woodcock, Sean  
Yang, Yuan  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Yemm, Steve

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Anna McMorris and  
Taiwo Owatemi

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Amendment proposed:* 4, page 1, line 13, at end insert—

“(d) status as part of a group that may have experienced trauma from experiences of racism or discrimination—

- (i) inter-generationally and relayed to the defendant, or
- (ii) as a result of important historical events which may have had a greater impact on those from specific groups and cultures.”—(*Dr Mullan.*)

*This amendment would ensure that sentencing guidelines about pre-sentence reports cannot include a defendant's status as part of a group, particularly not if this involves considering events that may not have impacted the defendant personally.*

*Question put,* That the amendment be made.

*The Committee divided:* Ayes 88, Noes 226.

**Division No. 185]****[4.30 pm****AYES**

Allister, Jim  
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
Argar, rh Edward  
Bacon, Gareth  
Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
Bhatti, Saqib  
Blackman, Bob  
Bool, Sarah  
Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
Brandreth, Aphra  
Braverman, rh Suella  
Burghart, Alex  
Cartledge, James  
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
Cooper, John  
Costa, Alberto  
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
Cross, Harriet  
Davies, Gareth  
Davies, Mims  
Davis, rh David  
Dewhurst, Charlie  
Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
Evans, Dr Luke  
Fortune, Peter  
Fox, Sir Ashley  
French, Mr Louie  
Fuller, Richard  
Gale, rh Sir Roger  
Garnier, Mark  
Glen, rh John  
Griffith, Andrew  
Griffiths, Alison  
Harris, Rebecca  
Hayes, rh Sir John  
Hinds, rh Damian  
Hoare, Simon  
Holmes, Paul  
Hudson, Dr Neil  
Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
Jenrick, rh Robert  
Johnson, Dr Caroline  
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
Lam, Katie  
Lamont, John  
Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
Lopez, Julia

Mak, Alan  
Malthouse, rh Kit  
McVey, rh Esther  
Moore, Robbie  
Morrissey, Joy  
Morton, rh Wendy  
Mullan, Dr Kieran  
Mundell, rh David  
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
Obese-Jecty, Ben  
O'Brien, Neil  
Paul, Rebecca  
Philp, rh Chris  
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
Rankin, Jack  
Reed, David  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Shannon, Jim  
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil

Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
Smith, Greg  
Smith, rh Sir Julian  
Spencer, Dr Ben  
Stafford, Gregory  
Stephenson, Blake  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Thomas, Bradley  
Timothy, Nick  
Tugendhat, rh Tom  
Vickers, Martin  
Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
Wild, James  
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
Wilson, rh Sammy  
Wood, Mike  
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Jerome Mayhew and  
Rebecca Smith

**NOES**

Abbott, Jack  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
Al-Hassan, Sadik  
Ali, Rushanara  
Ali, Tahir  
Anderson, Callum  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Asato, Jess  
Asser, James  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Catherine  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Baker, Alex  
Baker, Richard  
Ballinger, Alex  
Barker, Paula  
Baxter, Johanna  
Beales, Danny  
Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berry, Siân  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blake, Rachel  
Blundell, Mrs Elsie  
Bonavia, Kevin  
Botterill, Jade  
Brickell, Phil  
Buckley, Julia  
Burgon, Richard  
Burke, Maureen  
Burton-Sampson, David  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell-Savours, Markus  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Charters, Mr Luke  
Chowns, Ellie  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam  
Coombes, Sarah  
Cooper, Dr Beccy  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Costigan, Deirdre  
Cox, Pam  
Coyle, Neil  
Craft, Jen  
Creasy, Ms Stella  
Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
Darlington, Emily  
Davies, Ann  
Davies, Paul  
De Cordova, Marsha  
Dean, Josh  
Denyer, Carla  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Anna  
Dodds, rh Anneliese  
Dollimore, Helena  
Doughty, Stephen  
Downie, Graeme  
Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
Eccles, Cat  
Edwards, Lauren  
Edwards, Sarah  
Efford, Clive  
Elmore, Chris  
Entwistle, Kirith  
Eshalomi, Florence  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Ferguson, Mark  
Ferguson, Patricia  
Fookes, Catherine  
Foster, Mr Paul  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Francis, Daniel  
Frith, Mr James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
Gardner, Dr Allison  
German, Gill  
Gilbert, Tracy  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Goldsborough, Ben  
Grady, John  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Griffith, Dame Nia  
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Hack, Amanda

Hamilton, Fabian  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hillier, Dame Meg  
Hinchliff, Chris  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire  
Hume, Alison  
Irons, Natasha  
Jogee, Adam  
Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Lillian  
Jones, Ruth  
Josan, Gurinder Singh  
Joseph, Sojan  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Chris  
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Khan, Afzal  
Khan, Ayoub  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kumar, Sonia  
Kumaran, Uma  
Lake, Ben  
Lamb, Peter  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Leishman, Brian  
Lewell, Emma  
MacAlister, Josh  
Macdonald, Alice  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, rh Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Martin, Amanda  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mather, Keir  
Mayer, Alex  
McAllister, Douglas  
McDonald, Chris  
McDonnell, rh John  
McEvoy, Lola  
McKenna, Kevin  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McNally, Frank  
Medi, Llinos  
Midgley, Anneliese  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Mohamed, Abtisam  
Mohamed, Iqbal  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Mullane, Margaret  
Murphy, Luke  
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Murray, James  
Murray, Katrina  
Myer, Luke  
Narayan, Kanishka  
Nash, Pamela  
Norris, Alex  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Opher, Dr Simon  
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
Osamor, Kate

Pennycook, Matthew  
Phillipson, rh Bridget  
Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
Platt, Jo  
Pollard, Luke  
Powell, Joe  
Powell, rh Lucy  
Poynton, Gregor  
Prinsley, Peter  
Quigley, Mr Richard  
Ranger, Andrew  
Reid, Joani  
Rhodes, Martin  
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
Roca, Tim  
Rutland, Tom  
Ryan, Oliver  
Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
Scrogham, Michelle  
Sewards, Mark  
Shah, Naz  
Shanker, Baggy  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Simons, Josh  
Slaughter, Andy  
Slinger, John  
Smith, Cat  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Stainbank, Euan  
Stevens, rh Jo  
Stone, Will  
Stringer, Graham  
Sullivan, Kirsteen  
Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
Sultana, Zarah  
Swallow, Peter  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thompson, Adam  
Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
Tomlinson, Dan  
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)  
Turley, Anna  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Twist, Liz  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaughan, Tony  
Ward, Chris  
Waugh, Paul  
West, Catherine  
Western, Andrew  
Western, Matt  
Wheeler, Michael  
White, Katie  
Whittome, Nadia  
Witherden, Steve  
Woodcock, Sean  
Yang, Yuan  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Yemm, Steve

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
Taiwo Owatemi and  
Anna McMorrin

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Clauses 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.*

*Bill reported, without amendment.*

*Third Reading*

4.45 pm

**Sir Nicholas Dakin:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Let me first take this opportunity to thank all Members of this House who have spoken in support of this important Bill. I am particularly grateful for the support expressed on Second Reading, as well as to all the hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed to this afternoon's Committee proceedings. It is not yet a month since the Sentencing Council's imposition guideline was due to come into effect. The Lord Chancellor followed up her concerns immediately with action. As Members from all parts of the House have acknowledged, had the Government not acted quickly to introduce this Bill, the guideline would have risked differential treatment before the law in this country.

I put on record my thanks to the Sentencing Council and in particular its chair, Lord Justice William Davis, for the constructive conversations on this issue and for pausing the guideline while Parliament had its say, as it is doing today. I also thank officials who have worked on this Bill, including Andrew Waldren, Stephen Toal, Jack Hickey, James Metter, Clare Taylor, as well as the Bill manager, Katherine Ridley, and my excellent private secretary, Emily Brougham. This Government strongly support the use of pre-sentence reports, which judges are required by law to obtain except in circumstances where they consider such a report unnecessary. We also acknowledge that there are disparities within the criminal justice system that must be addressed. However, those are matters of policy, and it is right for the Government to seek a policy response to these issues. That is why we brought this Bill forward, and I commend it to the House.

4.47 pm

**Dr Mullan:** It is a pleasure to speak on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition on Third Reading, following on directly from the Committee of the whole House, where Government Members rejected our amendments to strengthen the Bill. We now know the strength of the appetite on the Labour Benches to tackle this challenge properly and comprehensively here and now: there is not one. In truth, we knew that already.

The Government had an opportunity weeks ago to restore democratic accountability to the Sentencing Council through the private Member's Bill of the shadow Secretary of State for Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). They rejected that opportunity, and earlier today they rejected even the more modest strengthening we proposed. That should not be a surprise. Labour has a Prime Minister who is first and foremost a lawyer, not a leader. He is a lawyer steeped in the philosophy of securing political change through legal activism. That is the very approach that the Lord Chancellor has been forced to bring in emergency legislation to curtail. That approach is why the appetite for proper action is so limited. The legislation before the House is a fig leaf to hide the truth that a Labour party led by

[Dr Mullan]

Keir Starmer will always have to be dragged kicking and screaming to tackle the judicial activism that he has long championed—[*Interruption.*]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. The shadow Minister must be heard.

**Dr Mullan:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; they do not want to hear it.

The root cause of the issue is that the Prime Minister appointed an Attorney General—the Government’s own Law Officer—who is steeped in judicial activism. The Prime Minister himself practised in a chambers that relished it and wholeheartedly supported its expansion case by case.

For anyone interested in a treatise on the risk of this approach—from someone much more qualified than me, as I am sure the House will agree—I encourage them to listen to Lord Sumption’s Reith lecture. His analysis on the divide between matters that should properly be the domain of politics and matters for law could not be more pertinent. He said:

“It is a vice of some lawyers that they talk about law as if it was a self-contained subject, something to be examined like a laboratory specimen in a test tube, but law does not occupy a world of its own. It is part of a larger system of public decision making. The rest is politics. The politics of ministers and legislators of political parties, of media and pressure groups, and of the wider electorate.”

Lord Sumption went on to say:

“The Courts have developed a broader concept of the...law which greatly enlarges their own constitutional role. They have claimed a wider supervisory authority over other organs of the State. They have inched their way towards a notion of fundamental law overriding the ordinary processes of political decision-making, and these things have inevitably carried them into the realms of legislative and ministerial policy. To adopt the famous dictum of the German military theorist Clausewitz about war, law is now the continuation of politics by other means.”

Be in no doubt: this whole sorry episode has been an exquisite further example of that mentality, this time from the Sentencing Council and its members as part of the wider judiciary establishment. The Lord Chancellor has failed to act decisively today. If she continues to refrain from taking decisive action, we will be here again and again, with the Opposition making sure, on each and every step of the way, that voters know where the sympathies of the Labour party and its leader lie: not with the ordinary, law-abiding citizen who expects equal treatment under the law and the democratically elected politicians of this country deciding on policy, but with activists and campaigning lawyers who want to wrestle control from them.

The Bill is barely adequate—barely. We will not oppose it, because it is better than nothing—and at least it tells the public everything that they need to know about those who sit on the Government Benches, and about the mentality of the man leading them.

*Question put,* That the Bill be now read the Third time.

*The House divided:* Ayes 214, Noes 3.

**Division No. 186]**

**[4.50 pm**

**AYES**

Abbott, Jack  
Abrahams, Debbie

Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
Al-Hassan, Sadik

Ali, Rushanara  
Ali, Tahir  
Anderson, Callum  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Asato, Jess  
Asser, James  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Catherine  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Baker, Alex  
Baker, Richard  
Ballinger, Alex  
Barker, Paula  
Baxter, Johanna  
Beales, Danny  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blake, Rachel  
Blundell, Mrs Elsie  
Bonavia, Kevin  
Botterill, Jade  
Brickell, Phil  
Buckley, Julia  
Burgon, Richard  
Burke, Maureen  
Burton-Sampson, David  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Campbell-Savours, Markus  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Charters, Mr Luke  
Clark, Feryal  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam  
Coombes, Sarah  
Cooper, Dr Beccy  
Costigan, Deirdre  
Cox, Pam  
Coyle, Neil  
Craft, Jen  
Creasy, Ms Stella  
Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
Darlington, Emily  
Davies, Paul  
De Cordova, Marsha  
Dean, Josh  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Anna  
Dodds, rh Anneliese  
Dollimore, Helena  
Doughty, Stephen  
Downie, Graeme  
Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
Eccles, Cat  
Edwards, Lauren  
Edwards, Sarah  
Efford, Clive  
Elmore, Chris  
Entwistle, Kirith  
Eshalomi, Florence  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Ferguson, Mark  
Ferguson, Patricia  
Fookes, Catherine  
Foster, Mr Paul

Foxcroft, Vicky  
Francis, Daniel  
Frith, Mr James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardiner, Barry  
Gardner, Dr Allison  
German, Gill  
Gilbert, Tracy  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Goldsborough, Ben  
Grady, John  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Griffith, Dame Nia  
Gwynne, Andrew (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Hack, Amanda  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hillier, Dame Meg  
Hinchliff, Chris  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire  
Hume, Alison  
Irons, Natasha  
Jogee, Adam  
Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Lillian  
Jones, Ruth  
Jones, Sarah  
Josan, Gurinder Singh  
Joseph, Sojan  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Chris  
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Khan, Afzal  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kumar, Sonia  
Kumaran, Uma  
Lamb, Peter  
Leishman, Brian  
Lewell, Emma  
MacAlister, Josh  
Macdonald, Alice  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, rh Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Martin, Amanda  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mather, Keir  
Mayer, Alex  
McAllister, Douglas  
McDonald, Chris  
McDonnell, rh John  
McEvoy, Lola  
McKenna, Kevin  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McNally, Frank  
Midgley, Anneliese  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Mohamed, Abtisam  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Mullane, Margaret  
Murphy, Luke  
Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Murray, James  
Murray, Katrina



Myer, Luke  
Narayan, Kanishka  
Nash, Pamela  
Norris, Alex  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Opher, Dr Simon  
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
Osamor, Kate  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Phillipson, rh Bridget  
Platt, Jo  
Pollard, Luke  
Powell, Joe  
Powell, rh Lucy  
Poynton, Gregor  
Prinsley, Peter  
Quigley, Mr Richard  
Ranger, Andrew  
Rhodes, Martin  
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
Roca, Tim  
Rutland, Tom  
Ryan, Oliver  
Sackman, Sarah  
Scrogham, Michelle  
Sewards, Mark  
Shah, Naz  
Shanker, Baggy  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Simons, Josh  
Slaughter, Andy  
Slinger, John  
Smith, Cat  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth

Sobel, Alex  
Stainbank, Euan  
Stevens, rh Jo  
Stone, Will  
Stringer, Graham  
Sullivan, Kirsteen  
Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
Swallow, Peter  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thompson, Adam  
Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
Tomlinson, Dan  
Tufnell, Henry (*Proxy vote cast by Adam Jogee*)  
Turley, Anna  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Twist, Liz  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaughan, Tony  
Ward, Chris  
Waugh, Paul  
West, Catherine  
Western, Andrew  
Western, Matt  
Wheeler, Michael  
White, Katie  
Witherden, Steve  
Woodcock, Sean  
Yang, Yuan  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Yemm, Steve

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Anna McMorrin and  
Taiwo Owatemi

**NOES**

Berry, Siân  
Denyer, Carla  
Mohamed, Iqbal

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Ayoub Khan and  
Ellie Chowns

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Bill read the Third time and passed.*

**Licences and Licensing**

5.2 pm

**The Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention  
(Dame Diana Johnson):** I beg to move,

That the draft Licensing Act 2003 (Victory in Europe Day Licensing Hours) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 23 April, be approved.

Next week marks the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day, which was of course a hugely significant and consequential moment in our country's history. After more than five long years, during the first of which we stood alone, on 8 May 1945 Prime Minister Churchill proclaimed to cheering crowds in Whitehall, just a few hundred yards from this Chamber:

“This is your victory. It is the victory of the cause of freedom in every land.”

As the 75th anniversary commemorations involving public gatherings were, sadly, cancelled in 2020 due to the covid outbreak, the upcoming milestone is a precious chance to pay tribute to that greatest generation and hear the stories of those who lived through the war. At this point, I want to refer to my father, Eric Johnson, who served in the Royal Navy in the second world war, and my mother, Ruth Johnson, who worked in munitions factories.

Many people will want to come together with friends and family to mark the occasion, and to raise a glass to those who fought for our freedoms—the soldiers, sailors and airmen from the United Kingdom and across the Commonwealth, as well as our allies in Europe, and also those who contributed to the war effort at home, including civilians working in the emergency services, transport, the home guard, the wardens and those working in factories and on the land. Twenty three Members of this House and 20 Members of the other place gave their lives in world war two, and I know that Mr Speaker is working to mark that. We should celebrate the role of this place and our wartime coalition in saving democracy beyond our shores from what Winston Churchill called

“the abyss of a new dark age”.—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1940; Vol. 362, c. 60.]

Commemorative events will be held in many locations during the anniversary week, including: a military procession from Whitehall to Buckingham Palace; street parties across the country on the bank holiday; evensong at Manchester cathedral, followed by a celebratory ringing of bells; a celebratory picnic at Cardiff castle; a living history event at Sterling castle in Scotland; a series of commemoration events at Belfast city hall; and a service at Westminster Abbey, which will serve as both an act of shared remembrance and a celebration of the end of the war.

VE Day falls within the annual Commonwealth War Graves Commission's War Graves Week, and the commission is marking the 80th anniversary of VE Day with the “For Evermore” tour, a mobile exhibition travelling the UK sharing stories of those who died in world war two. The commission is also holding a special VE Day concert on 2 May at the historic Coventry cathedral, which was rebuilt after being destroyed by bombing in 1940. A concert will also take place at Horse Guards Parade to mark the end of commemorations on 8 May.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

As a Member of Parliament who represents Kingston upon Hull, a city that was routinely referred to anonymously in the second world war as a “north-east coastal town” despite bombing comparable to the east end of London, Hull’s celebrations for VE Day will be accompanied by a desire to see greater national recognition of the effects of the blitz on my city than we have had over the course of the past 80 years. Hull will have a memorial service at Hull cenotaph; the Hull History Centre will show free screenings of archive footage from VE Day in 1945 of the celebrations that took place in Hull; and in Cottingham there will be a 1940s music singalong at Cottingham civic hall.

It promises to be a special atmosphere in many communities and the order will allow people to celebrate for longer, should they so wish. Section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003 allows the Secretary of State to make a licensing hours order to allow licensed premises to open for specified, extended hours on occasions of exceptional international, national or local significance. By way of background, past occasions where the then Home Secretary has exercised this power to extend licensing hours have included: the King’s coronation; Her late Majesty the Queen’s platinum and diamond jubilee celebrations; the royal weddings in 2011 and 2018; and, most recently, the semi-final and final of the men’s UEFA European championship last year. The Government consider the 80th anniversary of VE Day to be an occasion of national significance and, as such, worthy of the proposed extension before the House today.

Turning to the practical details, the order makes provision to relax licensing arrangements in England and Wales, and allow licensed premises to extend their opening hours on Thursday the 8 May for a further two hours, from 11pm until 1am the following morning. A truncated consultation was conducted with key stakeholders who were supportive of the extension, and we take the view that the order will not bring about any significant crime and disorder due to the nature of the events. However, we recognise that there may be implications for police resourcing, and we will continue to work with stakeholders to mitigate any concerns around the impact.

As well as enabling celebrations, the extension has the added potential benefit of providing a welcome boost to the hospitality sector. I hope that Members across the House will agree that this order represents an appropriate use of the powers conferred on the Home Secretary by the Licensing Act 2003.

To conclude, this extension reflects our commitment to remembering what was a truly momentous event—our finest hour—and to celebrating those who defended our country, liberated Europe and secured peace. With that, I commend this order to the House.

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

5.9 pm

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I hope it will be apparent that all Members of the House strongly support this motion. Certainly those of us on the Opposition Benches welcome the opportunity for pubs

and other licensed venues across the country to stay open late to commemorate VE day without incurring any cost to extend their licences.

As time passes and those with direct memories of this momentous day grow older, it is critical that we continue to commemorate and remember the experiences of those who sacrificed so much and who in so many cases gave everything for our nation and for others’ freedom. We must celebrate the fact that their sacrifice was not in vain, but led to a great achievement, and recognise the efforts and endurance that overcame immense struggle. I hope I speak for all Members when I say that we are incredibly honoured to represent those who served in world war two and their family, friends and loved ones who survive to this day.

VE day is rightly a day for us all to share in celebration. As Churchill said on 8 May 1945,

“My dear friends, this is your hour. This is not a victory of a party or of any class. It’s a victory for the great British nation as a whole.”

It is only appropriate that we continue to reflect the evergreen truth and celebrate VE day as we should: unified as a country, proud of our history of determination and of sacrifice.

The motion to extend licensing hours appears exceptionally appropriate. Not only was a national holiday declared in Britain on 8 May 1945, but it is said that on that morning, Churchill—with his focus very much on the real priorities—gained assurances from the Ministry of Food that there would be sufficient beer available in the capital. Meanwhile, the Board of Trade announced that people could purchase red, white and blue bunting without using ration coupons. We share that same spirit today by approving this motion, which I hope will allow people to fully and memorably commemorate this truly historic day.

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

5.12 pm

**Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I speak on behalf of my party when I say that we join everybody in supporting this order, which will provide communities the opportunity to celebrate in many different ways across the country. Whether it be street parties, private gatherings or, indeed, going down the pub, people will want to mark the occasion in their own way and ultimately honour those who gave such sacrifices towards for our country. They fought for our democracy, our freedom and our way of life 80 years ago, and that should never be forgotten.

Of course, the order will also provide a boost to our local hospitality industry. We have many great pubs in Carshalton and Wallington, and I am going to try to name them all, if I can. We have the Butterchurn, the Railway Tavern, the Hope, the Sun, the Racehorse, the Greyhound and the Windsor Castle. We have the Coach and Horses, the Woodman, and the Cryer Arts. We have the Duke’s Head, the Whispering Moon, the Star, and the Harvest Home—I am a hostage to fortune here, I know. We also have the Dog House and the Plough, and we have the Jack & Jill, which is occasionally closed, but we are hoping to keep it open permanently. I will not say I am going to go to all those pubs on VE day, but I do try to go to many of them as often as I can.

Finally, I would just like to say a personal thanks because of something else that is happening that day. I am sure the Prime Minister will be particularly pleased to know that Tottenham are playing in Europe that night, and that if we win—if we get victory in Europe of our own—then we will be through to the Europa league final. I am sure many Spurs fans will appreciate the opportunity to stay out a little bit longer that evening, too, so I want to thank the Government for introducing this order. It is utterly appropriate to mark the occasion—it is in the national interest, and it is in my personal interest, too.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Crime and Policing Bill (Ways and Means)

*Motion made, and Question proposed,*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Crime and Policing Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Dame Diana Johnson.*)

5.14 pm

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): As we have said from the outset, we will support measures that improve policing and ensure that those who commit crimes face the full weight of the law. As such, we will support this finance motion as there are a great number of things in the Crime and Policing Bill with which we agree. Indeed, as we have pointed out on a number of occasions, significant elements of the legislation are effectively carried over from the Criminal Justice Bill in the last Parliament. Although there are areas with which we disagree, we must ensure that, following the passage of this legislation, the police have the resources they need.

That said, there are two elements that should be acknowledged. First, given that this is a matter of finance, the settlement for policing that we have seen from the Government is clearly causing challenges for the police. We have already seen the Metropolitan police announce cuts in officer numbers, and we are warned that 1,800 officers may be at risk. I am concerned that the number may be even higher. The Government must ensure that we do not see the decrease in officer numbers that many are concerned about and which would undermine the measures in the Bill.

Separately, on the matter of the Bill itself, although it is not an issue for today's vote, I ask Members of this House to carefully consider the proposals that are put in front of them in the future, including on Report. I hope that Members will have the opportunity to vote on sensible amendments, which we firmly believe are in the best interests of the country. Rather than merely following the whims of a party, I ask Members to consider what is right and wrong for our country, for law enforcement and for victims.

When there have been decades of historical abuse, particularly in the form of rape gangs, there must be thorough investigations—with no stone left unturned. Therefore, I hope this motion will not only cover what is currently in the Bill, but provide resources for a national statutory inquiry into rape gangs.

5.16 pm

**The Minister for Policing and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** I am grateful to the shadow Minister for her support, but on the financial settlement to police forces this year, it is worth saying that there is up to £19.6 billion going into policing. She will be well aware of the additional funding going in to support neighbourhood policing, which we want to restore after the decimation that happened under the previous Conservative Government.

The shadow Minister can make her points, but it is this Government who are committed to funding policing and supporting police officers. We are getting more police officers on our high streets, and in our communities and local areas. I know that she has only recently joined the House, but 14 years of history explain why we have



[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

found ourselves in the position where police forces are in challenging circumstances with their finances. This Government are committed to supporting policing, and the financial settlement this year does exactly that.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

That the draft Health and Social Care Information Standards (Procedure) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 25 March, be approved.—(*Sir Nicholas Dakin.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## Occupied Palestinian Territories

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Sir Nicholas Dakin.)*

5.18 pm

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): It is a great privilege to have secured this Adjournment debate on Government support for the people in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but I regret immensely the need to do so. I, like most of the world, was horrified by Hamas's attack on Israel and Hamas's killing and kidnapping of Israeli citizens. I supported, and continue to support, Israel's right to self-defence in response to that attack.

I also know that today—at least when the sun sets—will be Yom Ha'atzmaut. That is Israel's Independence Day, when many Israelis will be celebrating their country. None the less, I am here today to ask three principal questions of the Government. First, what more can they do to support the people of Palestine? Secondly, what can the British public, particularly my constituents in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, do as individuals and as a community to support the people of Palestine? Thirdly, if the Government believe that there is nothing more we as a Government, as a nation or as individuals can do to support the Palestinians, could the Minister please inform the House, so that we may so inform our constituents? I said I had three questions, but in actual fact I have 12 questions for my hon. Friend the Minister, and that I will be counting them as I ask them and as she replies; this is a very important subject, and there is a lot to cover.

The north-east of England may seem far away from Gaza and the west bank—it may even seem far away from London to some—but 24 hours a day the consequences of Israel's humanitarian blockade and use of weapons of modern warfare against civilians plays out on family televisions and social media platforms in the north-east, as it should. My constituents watch as the body of a five-year-old girl is pulled from beneath the wreckage of a car she was riding in with her family—a car that the Israel Defence Forces attacked with the most powerful weapons of modern warfare. My constituents watch a 20-day-old baby in Gaza, wrapped in a blanket by that baby's hysterical relatives, frozen to death in a sub-tropical country—the fifth child to die from hypothermia in Gaza in six days last winter. My constituents watch one by one the deaths of the 100 Palestinian children the Israel Defence Forces killed or maimed every day in the 10 days from 21 to 31 March.

I know that my constituents see this because they stop me in the street in Newcastle—in Grainger Market when I am buying my vegetables, on the West Road when I am visiting local businesses, when I play bingo in Blakelaw, when I visit cultural centres in Benwell and Scotswood, support community centres in Fenham and knock on doors in Lemington. They ask me, "What can we do to stop the suffering we see?"

I also know this because they write to me. One wrote:

"I kindly request that you please advocate for the people of Gaza in Parliament, as they too have the right to defend themselves, they too have the right to feel safe, to live in peace and enjoy freedom and liberty without occupation, colonisation or terrorism."

Another said:

“As a Jewish constituent of yours, I am very concerned about our Government’s relative silence regarding Israel’s abandonment of the Gaza ceasefire agreement, brokered by Qatar and Egypt. It is utterly deplorable that Israel is once again slaughtering Gazan civilians.”

I quote another constituent:

“What is the Government doing to stop the killing of Palestinian people?”

Another wrote:

“We are witnessing the most horrific of nightmares unfold. Trapped. Starved. Bombed. Surrounded by Israeli forces, with many of those who try to flee being shot at. Palestinians in north Gaza are living under a suffocating siege. Children are being bombed when they play on street corners. In central Gaza, people are being burnt alive in tents that were made to protect them. The UK must act urgently to protect Palestinians from extermination in Gaza.”

Finally, a constituent said:

“Last week, a new UN report detailed Israel’s sexual and reproductive violence: like the killing of pregnant women, the rape of male detainees, the destruction of an IVF clinic with its 4,000 embryos. Waging war on Palestinians’ ability to reproduce were termed ‘genocidal acts’. Last week, Israel’s environment Minister declared the ‘only solution for the Gaza strip is to empty it of Gazans’. I could go on as it seems there are limitless examples of other such acts. How can these actions so documented, evidenced and confessed to—facilitated by western weapons and diplomatic support—continue? No one in UK politics or media circles can plausibly say, ‘I did not know what was really happening’.”

**Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I have to intervene, because my hon. Friend’s experiences are the same as those I am having with my constituents. They are continuously asking me what we are doing to stop this bloodshed—the killing of women and children that is carrying on. When our diplomacy and negotiations are not having any effect on Israel and, I have to say, the United States, who our allies, for how long are we going to continue to wait for Israel to act to stop the bloodshed before we take further action that can have some effect?

**Chi Onwurah:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am pleased, though not surprised, to hear that the people of Wolverhampton West and the people of Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, as well as people across our country, have a similar response to the horrific acts and suffering they are seeing. As I will set out in my remarks, my objective is to ask—indeed, to demand—what more we can do, and will do, to ensure that the suffering comes to an end.

The examples that I read out are just a minute sample of what my constituents write and say to me. I have had hundreds and hundreds of emails, letters and exchanges on the streets of Newcastle. I emphasise that while many of the constituents who raise issues are Muslim or of Muslim heritage, many more are not. Many Christians were particularly appalled by the Israeli Government’s Palm Sunday attack on the al-Ahli hospital in Gaza, run by the Anglican diocese of Jerusalem—as a statement from the House of Bishops, supported by the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Newcastle Helen-Ann Hartley, has emphasised. That is why I am here: to address and demand action in relation to the horror and despair my constituents feel about the consequences of the Israeli Government’s blockade on humanitarian

aid to Gaza and the Israeli Defence Forces’ killing of Palestinian civilians, particularly children, in Gaza and the west bank.

My constituents simply do not believe that we as a nation, a people and a leading voice in the world community are helpless to affect in any way the behaviour of the Government of Israel—a nation with which for decades we have enjoyed friendly relations and strong diplomatic ties. It is a nation that many of us believed shared our values, our commitment to human rights and democracy, and our principled opposition to racism and ethnic cleansing.

At some level, we are all aware of the extremely long and complex history of what is now the state of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the west bank and Gaza, and the intertwining of the modern part of that history with both the British empire and the Holocaust. I do not wish to retell that story, as although I think this Adjournment debate will go on for longer than was anticipated, it cannot be long enough to do full justice to that history, so instead I will start from 7 October 2023.

On that day, Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups based in Gaza launched a sickening attack on Israel that killed over 1,200 Israeli men, women and children in horrific circumstances. Hamas and their allies kidnapped 251 Israelis and other nationalities and held them as hostages. My constituents were, as I was, absolutely horrified by those events, and supportive of the Israelis as victims of horrible crimes and, as a nation like ours, entitled to exercise their right to self-defence.

The stories of the experiences of Israelis—some facing their last moments—inspired huge sympathy and understanding among the people of the north-east. We stood with Israel in its demand that the hostages be immediately released and recognised that Israel had a right to defend itself and a right to strike against Hamas.

Five hundred and seventy-one days of violence have followed, with two periods of ceasefire—seemingly endless days of the world’s most powerful weapons being used against civilians by one of the world’s most powerful militaries. I just want to emphasise that Israel is the 15th most powerful nation in total firepower, according to Global Firepower. Gaza’s Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health has reported that between 7 October 2023 and 8 April 2025, the Israel Defence Forces have killed 51,000 Palestinians and injured over 100,000. Their numbers include 166 journalists and media workers, 120 academics and more than 224 humanitarian aid workers.

Estimates of the proportion of the dead in Gaza who are civilians range from the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*’s 61% to the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor’s estimate of 90%. A detailed study of bodies found in Gaza residential buildings by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights found that 44% were children and a further 27% were women, which makes a total of 71% and suggests that the total when civilian men are included is likely to be closer to 90% than 61%. A joint report by Oxfam and Action on Armed Violence in October 2024 found that the Israeli military had killed more women and children in Gaza than had been killed in any other conflict around the world in the past two decades. These numbers do not include deaths from disease and malnutrition.

[Chi Onwurah]

Israel has contested some numbers provided by the Gaza Health Ministry, but early in the war, Israel Defence Forces officials told *The Times of Israel* that approximately 66% of the Palestinian casualties in Gaza were civilians. Given that Israel does not provide its own figures for civilians killed in Gaza, nor does it permit UN fact-finders, international journalists or the BBC to enter Gaza, we must go with other sources. In January 2025, a peer reviewed study in *The Lancet*, the UK's premier medical journal, suggested that the Gaza Ministry of Health was undercounting the death toll by 41%. If that study is accurate, it is likely that the death toll in Gaza as a result of Israel's military operations today stands at over 90,000. In addition, 70% of all structures in Gaza have been destroyed by the Israelis.

There were audible sighs of relief across the country, and indeed the world, at the ceasefire of 19 January this year. However, on 18 March, Israel launched what it called "extensive strikes" in Gaza. Earlier in March, Israel's Government blocked humanitarian aid from entering Gaza. No supplies, including food and medicine, have entered Gaza in over seven weeks and 95% of aid operations in Gaza have been suspended or dramatically cut back. A joint statement issued on 17 April by a dozen aid organisations based in multiple countries, including Oxfam, CARE and Save the Children, confirmed that they had all the means necessary to deliver aid, but were being denied access to Gaza by Israeli authorities.

Infectious diseases, particularly those that affect children, are now on the rise. The World Food Programme announced three days ago that despite more than 116,000 tonnes of aid being ready at the border, 91% of Gaza's population, which is 1,802,000 people—human beings—face

"high levels of acute food insecurity".

That is basically international aid jargon that means malnutrition and actual starvation. This is my fourth question for my hon. Friend the Minister. Can she confirm that that is the Government's understanding of the humanitarian situation in Gaza today?

I will move on to what can be done to support the Palestinians in Palestine. I know that the Government are taking action by pressing for an immediate ceasefire and the release of the hostages, increasing funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, signing a memorandum of understanding with the leader of the Palestinian Authority, condemning settlements and settler violence in the occupied west bank, sanctioning settler groups involved in violence, and undertaking a comprehensive review of arms sales to Israel, which has resulted in the suspension of some arms transfers. I have also been advised that pressure on Israel would be more effective if the Palestinian high commissioner in Jerusalem and the UK ambassador to Israel in Tel Aviv were able to work more closely together. Could the Minister tell me if that is happening or if that is the case? That is question five.

I greatly welcome the fact that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom has stated that the Israeli Government's

"decision to block aid going into Gaza is completely wrong and should not be supported"—[*Official Report*, 3 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 32.]

However, the Israeli Government continue to kill Palestinian civilians, particularly children, and continue to prevent the flow of food, medicine and other humanitarian supplies into Gaza. My constituents ask me what the Government are doing to end that, and that is the question that I repeat to my hon. Friend the Minister. Specifically—question six—will the UK respond to the International Court of Justice's summer ruling on the legality of the Israeli occupation, and will the UK support the current case before the ICJ on humanitarian access in order to better hold the Israeli Government to account?

I shall turn now to what my constituents can do directly to support the Government in supporting Palestine, and to support Palestine directly. Newcastle, as I hope all Members are aware, has a long history of support for social justice and international solidarity. The people of Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West want to know how they can support the people of Palestine, so can the Minister tell me if the Government support the right of my constituents to protest and to show their horror at the death and destruction in Palestine? If so, how?

Money matters, so can my constituents support the people of Palestine through the way in which they spend or do not spend their money? Are there goods and services that they can buy from Palestinians? Is it clear what goods are from the illegally occupied Palestinian territories and what goods are from Israel? How can my constituents distinguish between the two? That is question eight.

Geordies are famously generous, and my constituents want to know how they can help Palestinians through their charitable giving without helping Hamas. With aid rotting at the border, which non-governmental organisations or charities does the Minister recommend my constituents support to ensure that aid gets through? On social media, there are regular appeals from GoFundMe accounts to help victims of Israeli military strikes or the blockade individually. Does the Minister recommend that my constituents provide funding to those appeals, and if not, how can they provide support to the people they are watching die on their screens?

Alternatively, are there other organisations to support advocacy efforts, legal aid and other forms of assistance that do not rely on physical access to Gaza itself? The UN Human Rights Council has identified what it calls "clear evidence" of war crimes being committed by Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians. The International Criminal Court intends to investigate the evidence of war crimes, but—question 11—what can my constituents do to support the survivors of war crimes on the ground? Finally, how can my constituents support constructive engagement between Palestinians and Israelis? That is question 12.

Every day, the people of Newcastle express to me how intensely they want their Government to act and how intensely they wish to directly and personally support the people of Palestine and help end their suffering. In the future, I believe we will all be asked what we did in the face of this horror. I urge the Minister to advise the people of Newcastle what the Government are doing to stop the Israeli Government's killing of civilians, particularly children, and their blockade on food and medicine reaching the people of the Gaza strip, and to advise us on what we as individuals and as a community



can do. If nothing more can be done by the British Government, in addition to what the Minister and the Foreign Office have talked about and the announced actions that have not resulted in the lifting of the blockade or the ending of Israeli strikes on Gaza, can the Minister be clear about that? If my constituents are condemned to watch the Israeli Government use their tanks, artillery and war planes against apartment buildings, tent encampments and family cars, and to watch dead toddlers being pulled from the rubble of their homes on the 10 o'clock news every night, please tell us.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We have three colleagues who also wish to contribute. I turn to Andy Slaughter first.

5.41 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I rise only briefly, principally to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah) on her tour de force of a speech and the pertinent questions she put to the Minister. Her comprehensiveness means that I can be brief. I want to say just two or three things.

I agree from the perspective of my Hammersmith and Chiswick constituency that there has been a huge outpouring of sympathy and a wish to help from constituents. I have had over 7,000 emails, letters and calls from constituents about the atrocities in Gaza, which is easily the largest postbag I have had on any single issue over the 20 years I have been here. That shows the level of empathy and support.

Unfortunately, there is little good news from Gaza, but one small piece of good news this week was the visit to London of the Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa to meet our Prime Minister to sign the memorandum of understanding, which included reaffirming the commitment to a two-state solution, announcing a further aid package of over £100 million and, importantly, showing solidarity between our two countries, which is not done nearly enough. I met the Palestinian Prime Minister briefly at the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group, where he spoke fluently, clearly and calmly under the circumstances of the demands he wishes to see, and many of them have been reflected in my hon. Friend's speech. He was asked by one of our colleagues of the eight asks he made which was the most important, and his answer was recognition of a Palestinian state. That may seem slightly strange given the immediate humanitarian disaster on the ground, but in reality, without recognition and without Palestine having—at least in diplomatic and constitutional terms—the same status as Israel, the situation in the region will never move forward. It is disappointing therefore that the Government have not committed to that.

I do not expect my hon. Friend the Minister to announce any major policy changes today, but I hope that we are moving further and more quickly towards that, and that there are strong hints, perhaps later this year, that more countries, including France, will follow those European countries that have already recognised the state of Palestine. I do not think there has been a better or more necessary time over the past few years for that step to be taken. I speak on behalf of my constituents when I say that it is very difficult to see

why, when we quite rightly recognised the state of Israel many years ago, we do not also recognise the state of Palestine.

I will touch briefly on the aid situation, which is dire. We have perhaps repeated that so often that it has lost some of its impact, but it is absolutely true. Not only are the bakeries empty and food not available in Gaza because of the blockade, which is, in anyone's terms, a breach of international humanitarian law—there is no food left in Gaza and people will starve and die as a horrific consequence—but an assessment in February by the UN, EU and World Bank estimated that 95% of hospitals are not functional, 91% of the population has high levels of acute food insecurity, which has worsened, and 100% of education facilities have been fully destroyed or partially damaged. The assessment estimated that the reconstruction and recovery costs are \$53 billion, including \$20 billion needed in the next three years.

Yes, the UK has historically been a generous donor of aid to Gaza, and it continues to be so, but there is such a level of need given the continuing violence and destruction. My hon. Friend was right to emphasise the horrific number of deaths, particularly civilian deaths, which account for the majority, but the problems go beyond that and into the destruction of a whole civil society, built environment and economy, which is clearly a deliberate policy that we should call out more profoundly in this House and at Government level.

I will not repeat my hon. Friend's points about the ICJ judgment. Our response to that is long overdue, as is a reconsideration of our trading relationship with illegal settlements. Given that Government policy is clearly and quite rightly that such settlements are illegal under international law, it has always puzzled me that we continue to trade with them.

I would like the Government to take a lead from the British people, who have made clear their sympathy for the people of Gaza, Palestine, the west bank and the other Occupied Territories, and to take more positive steps. If they do not, we will see only a continuation of the death and destruction.

5.48 pm

**Oliver Ryan** (Burnley) (Ind): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah) on securing this important debate to talk about the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the people of Palestine.

Much like my hon. Friend the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West and for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), many hundreds of constituents have been in touch with me throughout my time as the Member of Parliament for Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield to talk about the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and the death that they have witnessed on social media and television or heard about from families, friends and perhaps people from the region who have shared stories of the way lives are lived over there. I promised those people that I would raise my voice, and that is what I am doing today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West said—I could not have chosen better words—there has been such an outpouring of emotion and sympathy, and a desire to help and see peace in the region. That is why we are all here to speak about this today.

[*Oliver Ryan*]

As we have already heard, the situation for Palestinians is desperate—it is hell on earth. It is estimated by the United Nations that 40,000 to 50,000 people have been killed since 7 October, including over 250 aid workers, and over 100,000 people have been injured. Some 90% of Gazans face immediate hunger and the prospect of starving to death, and 70% of buildings on the Gaza strip have been destroyed in Israeli bombing. There are no education facilities—nothing—and very few standing hospitals. In March, Israel stopped all humanitarian aid and completely cut off power to the strip: no food, medicine or aid, only death. I say to Israel: we must have peace and a return to the ceasefire now, and in the long term we must have a two-state solution, about which a lot of Labour Members agree.

At the same time, when we talk about the context of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, we cannot forget that 59 abducted hostages are still being held by Hamas terrorists in Gaza. So I say to Hamas: Palestinians are suffering; stop this, bring the hostages home, disband and end this now. Hamas have killed thousands of innocents; they have killed women and children and they took over 200 hostages on 7 October. Hamas are not freedom fighters—they are monsters. I will not countenance any defence of Hamas or their actions.

But, turning to the actions of the Israeli Government, last month Israeli tanks moved into the west bank for the first time in decades. Some 40,000 Palestinians have been displaced from areas of the west bank and 916 Palestinians have been killed in the west bank since October 2023. I have met Palestinians living in the west bank, including a woman from the Tent of Nations farm. I can only describe their experiences as daily harassment, terror and bullying by Israeli troops and settlers to unreasonable and unnecessary levels, and that is before we talk about the specific actions of some of the very aggressive settlers from the illegal settlements. Those settlers want complete annexation of the west bank and the utter destruction of the possibility of a two-state solution, and consequently, of a Palestinian state.

I am glad that this Government have consistently called for a ceasefire and for the release of all hostages. On my first week in Parliament, I raised that with the Prime Minister. After the election, I was glad to hear him recommit to not only a two-state solution but a ceasefire in the region. It is worth remembering that this Government restored and increased funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees to more than ever before.

I condemn the awful violence that we have seen in settlements in the west bank. I am glad that this Government have strongly sanctioned settler groups, although I agree with the previous comments that those sanctions need to go further. It is important to say that those settlers do not represent all Israelis, but a niche and extreme group. There is a wider context that can bring about peace, as this is a battle not between nations or creeds but between extremists on both sides.

This Government have suspended a large number of arms transfers to Israel, where they are known to have been used or seem to have been used improperly. I know that is under constant review, which I welcome. We

must do more to get aid into the region, and I am glad that the Prime Minister yesterday set out a further £100 million for the Palestinian Authority. We have to end Israel's blocks on aid and electricity in the strip, and we must make the steps we promised in the election in supporting the creation of a Palestinian state. As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), that will allow legal protection and security for Palestinians and the wider region, and self-determination for the occupied areas, which they do not currently enjoy and have not enjoyed for some time. I caveat all that with a desire, certainly on my part, that Hamas will play no part in that Palestinian state.

Justice for Palestinians and Israelis who have lost loved ones is within our grasp. Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield want peace, to stop the death, get back to a ceasefire, get aid in and proudly uphold international law. We must use the opportunity of the June conference hosted by France and Saudi Arabia to progress statehood for Palestinians; recognition from the UK ought to be a serious consideration there. A political solution—a two-state solution—is the only solution. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West for securing this debate.

5.55 pm

**Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah) for securing this debate and for the solutions that she has put forward. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) that the time for us to recognise the state of Palestine is now. That would go some way towards trying to make some improvement to the situation. I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) that what Hamas did is unforgivable, but, as I have said in this House before, the actions of Hamas can in no way be used to justify what is happening to the Palestinians in Gaza.

We do not have any control over Hamas, but Israel is an ally, and we should have more of an influence on what is happening. Gaza has a population of more than 2 million people, who mostly depend on aid, but since 2 March no humanitarian or commercial supplies have gone into Gaza, because of the blockade that Israel has imposed on the territory. Since 9 March, no electricity has gone to Gaza, because of Israel cutting off the supply. Since January, there have been 10,000 cases of acute malnutrition among children and 1,600 cases of severe acute malnutrition—those are just the reported figures. The UN World Food Programme has said that as of 25 April, all food stocks in Gaza have been depleted. My constituents continuously say to me that we need to be on the right side of history. We cannot stand by and just wait for the Israeli Government to listen to us.

I have a lot of faith in this Government, and I am very pleased that they have repeatedly stated the urgent need for a return to a ceasefire in Gaza, for the hostages to be released and for the aid to be unblocked. I am also very pleased that this Government have continuously condemned the Israeli settlements and stated that they are illegal under international law. Those settlements are harmful to the prospect of a future Palestinian state. We must call for and recognise the state of Palestine now.

It was very good to have Prime Minister Mustafa of the Palestinian Authority in this country, and the memorandum of understanding signed between our two countries is a good step forward. I am very pleased that we have announced the £101 million package of support for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but I have a question. It is all very well pledging that support, but if Israel continues to behave in the way that it has so far, what effect will that aid have? Will it actually stop the killing, the bloodshed and the malnutrition being suffered by the Palestinians in Gaza? Although my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West went a lot further than I am going in coming up with solutions, as I said earlier, I have faith in this Government, and I want them to come to some kind of conclusion about the further steps they can take to improve the situation. I have to confess my frustration that although we are making all the right comments and statements, nothing is improving. People—women, children and others—are continuing to die in Gaza, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. How much longer are we going to tolerate this?

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

6 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West):**

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for this important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Chi Onwurah) for securing it; she is an active campaigner on this topic and on a number of other foreign policy matters. I also thank her for the thoughtful way in which she put the debate in context. Of course, tomorrow is Yom Ha'atzmaut, which is a national holiday in Israel, and my hon. Friend also emphasised the suffering from the dreadful attacks in October 2023—the horrific terror attacks—and her support for the people of Israel following that terrible moment. She is quite right to ask how she can support the situation in the middle east, quoting her constituents assiduously, and to ask how she can respond to their compassion and concern.

The Minister for the Middle East, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), would usually have been at the Dispatch Box for this debate. He will watch it later on, and will be very happy to reply to any bits that I miss out, or any questions that are only half-answered—as the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, I might occasionally answer only half the question, rather than give the full answer that the Minister for the Middle East could provide. I am also grateful to the hon. Members for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) and for Burnley (Oliver Ryan), and I will attempt to answer some of the questions raised and respond to some of the points made.

The Government are steadfast in our friendship with, and support for, the Palestinian people. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West asked what support we can provide and what more we can do. Several Members have mentioned the visit of Palestinian Prime Minister Mustafa to London yesterday for high-level meetings with both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, and I reassure my hon.

Friends the Members for Hammersmith and Chiswick and for Wolverhampton West that we support the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination, including to an independent state. Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister signed a memorandum of understanding with Prime Minister Mustafa, enshrining the UK's commitment to advancing Palestinian statehood as part of a two-state solution. That memorandum of understanding also underscored the commitment of the Palestinian Authority to deliver its reform agenda as a matter of priority.

I now turn to the UK's support for Gaza, and the main question that my hon. Friend's constituents in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West want an answer to: is the UK doing all it possibly can to alleviate the humanitarian situation in Gaza? In the last financial year, the UK provided £129 million in funding to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, or OPTs. This week, the UK announced a £101 million package of funding for this financial year, which will include substantial funding for the humanitarian response in Gaza, as well as support for Palestinian economic development and strengthening the Palestinian Authority's governance and reform—they have to be ready. Our support is making a real difference to those who need it most. To date, the UK's support has provided essential healthcare to over 430,000 people, food to almost 650,000 people, and improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene services to close to 380,000 people.

**Chi Onwurah:** I thank the Minister for her comments and the context she is giving. I just want to be clear about something: is the humanitarian aid we are providing to Gaza getting through into Gaza right now?

**Catherine West:** My hon. Friend is right to say that funding is one thing and access is another. That is why it is crucial that we have been pressing the Government of Israel to ensure that vital aid can reach Gaza and that our humanitarian partners, including the United Nations, can deliver their work effectively. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Burnley for reminding the House that UNRWA funding was reintroduced under this Government, and for emphasising that UNRWA has been at the centre of things since July last year. Given the infrastructure that it has on the ground, it is critical to the provision of assistance.

In addition, UK funding to UK-Med has helped to sustain its field hospital operations. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West asked which organisations can be trusted to deliver. UK-Med has facilitated more than 405,000 consultations in Gaza since January 2024, so that patients can receive critical life and limb-saving surgery. We are also providing funding to the World Health Organisation Egypt to ensure vital medical supplies reach evacuated Gazans being treated there.

My hon. Friend asks who can help. Our Government, through the international groups such as the World Health Organisation that public funding goes towards, are providing this vital treatment. The experts in development aid always say it is best to work through those big funding organisations, because they do that enormously helpful work. For example, there is the delivery of the polio vaccination campaigns. My hon. Friend mentioned communicable diseases and the risk



[Catherine West]

of further illness, but that polio vaccination campaign protected more than 600,000 vulnerable children across Gaza through funding to the global polio eradication initiative. We know that the scale of the crisis means that more support is crucial. That is why we continue to support UNRWA's vital work. That includes providing essential services, education and healthcare to civilians in Gaza and the west bank and to Palestinian refugees across the region.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise that I could not be here for the beginning, because I was in Westminster Hall—the times were all out of kilter. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) and I were both there, and we have just arrived.

All the things that the Minister has outlined about the medical help that can be given are important, but what is also important, particularly for young children, is education. Can she perhaps give us some more information about education? It is not just about what they are missing out on, but the opportunities that can change their lives.

**Catherine West:** I thank the hon. Member for mentioning education, because it is so crucial. We do not want children to go uneducated and then, perhaps through a sense of the well of suffering, recreate in the next generation less education and less understanding of the world. Some Members who spoke earlier mentioned the destruction of schools. That is why it is so important that UNRWA can gain access to Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, so that schools can be rebuilt and classrooms can be re-provided. That is not just in terms of education, but that important psychosocial help that so many traumatised families need now.

People may ask, as indeed have Members, “What are the Government doing? Can't we do more?” The Foreign Secretary has intervened time and again. Most recently, he spoke to Israeli Foreign Minister Sa'ar on 15 April, where he raised urgent concerns about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza and the urgent need to restore the flow of aid. The UK issued a joint statement last week with France and Germany calling on the Government of Israel to restart immediately the rapid and unimpeded flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza. We have repeatedly raised our concerns at the UN Security Council, including on the safety of aid workers. The Minister with responsibility for the United Nations intervened at the Security Council just this week, expressing outrage at recent attacks, including the killing of Palestinian Red Crescent workers and the strike on a United Nations compound on 19 March.

**Warinder Juss:** Can my hon. Friend give any indication of what response we have received suggesting that Israel might change its course of action?

**Catherine West:** As my hon. Friend will, I think, appreciate, many Israelis say that people outside the region simply do not understand their desire for security. Equally, Palestinian communities say that those outside the region cannot possibly understand the extent of their suffering. That, in a nutshell, is the depth of what we are facing, and that is why we must redouble our

efforts not just to make the case to the senior people involved and the decision-makers in this conflict, but to impress on them the importance for our constituents that their reply must be true and must come with some action attached.

Let me return briefly to the subject of the strike on the UN compound on 19 March. Israel has admitted that it was caused by one of its tanks, despite the compound being known to the IDF as a UN humanitarian facility. That is inexcusable, and we urge Israel to ensure that accurate public statements are made about such grave incidents. It must conduct full and transparent investigations of these incidents, hold those responsible to account, and reinstate an effective deconfliction system to prevent such terrible tragedies from reoccurring.

Members have mentioned the International Court of Justice. Let me remind them of what has been said in the past by both the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the Middle East:

“The UK is fully committed to international law and respects the independence of the International Court of Justice. We continue to consider the Court's Advisory Opinion carefully, with the seriousness and rigour it deserves.”

Let me reassure Members on both sides of the House that we are committed to a two-state solution, and that commitment is unwavering. The statement continued:

“We are of the clear view that Israel should bring an end to its presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as rapidly as possible, but it must be done in a way that creates the conditions for negotiations towards a two-state solution.”

That, I know, is an issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick has raised on a number of occasions in his cross-party work on this important subject.

The hon. Member for Burnley mentioned settlements and settler violence. The UK Government's position is that Israeli settlements in the west bank are illegal under international law, and harm prospects for a two-state solution. Settlements do not offer security to either Israel or Palestinians. Settlement expansion and settler violence have reached record levels. The Israeli Government seized more of the west bank in 2024 than in the past 20 years, and that is completely unacceptable. The Foreign Secretary met Palestinian community members in the west bank, where he heard how communities—not just Palestinian communities, but other local groups—are affected, and made it clear to Israeli Ministers that the Israeli Government must clamp down on settler violence and end settlement expansion.

I thank the hon. Member for Burnley for mentioning the hostages. This is, of course, a situation about which we feel very strongly, because of the involvement of the British hostages and people who have family members still stuck with the terrible terrorist group Hamas. Let me respond briefly to the hon. Gentleman's point. The UK Government welcomed the announcement of an agreement last January to end the fighting in Gaza and release the 38 hostages, including the British national Emily Damari and the UK-linked Eli Sharabi. Securing an immediate ceasefire and the safe release of all hostages has been a priority for the Government since the start of the conflict, and we will not stop until they are all back at home. The death of Oded Lifshitz, who had strong UK links and was tragically held hostage by terrorists in Gaza, is absolutely heartbreaking. This is a crucial time for the region, and we thank Qatar, Egypt and the

United States for their support in bringing the horrific ordeal of those individuals and their families to an end. The hostages have endured unimaginable suffering, and the situation in Gaza has continued to worsen. The ceasefire needs to get back on track.

I want to briefly mention the Bibas family—our thoughts are with them. They are going through intolerable anguish over Shiri and her young children Kfir and Ariel. As the Prime Minister said, we want to see all remaining hostages released and the ceasefire restarted. The Government remain committed to working with international partners to end the suffering and secure long-term peace in the middle east.

**Chi Onwurah:** I am sure the Minister will join me in expressing our pleasure at seeing the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his place. I would not have felt that I had really had an Adjournment debate had I not heard his voice, for which I am very grateful.

I thank the Minister for her comments. She mentioned that the settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are illegal. One of the questions I put to her was about distinguishing between goods from illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and goods from Israel so that my constituents can make decisions about what they purchase.

**Catherine West:** With my hon. Friend's permission, I will write to her on that point or ask the Minister for the Middle East to write to her. With Israel being a close friend of the UK, we have a trading relationship with it. On her specific point about whether there are particular products that could be purchased to support the situation at the moment—for example, specific products that may have been made by particular groups that she wishes to support, such as traditional handicrafts and so forth—I will seek the guidance of officials so that I

can write to her with confidence. More generally, we are keen to maintain our trading relationship, which gives us another way of talking to Israel about this important question.

**Chi Onwurah:** I thank the Minister greatly for her generosity. As the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, she did a fantastic job of setting out the complex issues in response to Members' contributions. I will take her up on her offer to write to me on these issues, and I will make sure that the Minister for the Middle East has both the *Hansard* record and a copy of all the questions I have set out.

**Catherine West:** I think my hon. Friend came into the House with me in 2015, and we have learned some very nice manners over the years. It is very important in these potentially heartfelt debates that we have the tone that we have had this afternoon.

The Government are steadfast in our friendship with, and support for, the Palestinian people—my hon. Friend can reassure her constituents about that. Our support for the Palestinian Authority continues to provide essential services, and promotes reform and state building. Our support for the humanitarian response in Gaza provides food and medical assistance to those who most need it, and we will keep pressing for access. Our consistent support for Palestinian statehood through a two-state solution aims to ensure a political horizon and future in which Palestinians and Israelis can live in peace and security. In the end, that is the only solution that can bring stability and prosperity to the entire region.

*Question put and agreed to.*

6.18 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

*Wednesday 30 April 2025*

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

## Global Deforestation

9.30 am

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policies to limit global deforestation.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for this debate, Mr Vickers. I know how important these matters are to your constituents in Brigg and Immingham, as they are to mine in Brent West.

It may seem strange to start a debate on policies to combat deforestation by speaking about rivers, but I want to pose a challenge to colleagues this morning, to see whether any of them can name the largest river on the planet. I will happily give way to anyone who thinks they can.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):** Is it the Plate?

**Barry Gardiner:** No, it is not the Plate. It is not the River Nile, and it is not the Amazon, but if anyone thought it was the Amazon, they are getting close. The river I am speaking of is actually, for the most part, invisible and airborne. Every day, 20 billion cubic metres of water—that is 20 billion metric tonnes of water—is pushed up into the atmosphere by the forests of the Amazon basin. That water does not stay in the atmosphere; it is not like evaporation from the oceans. It is generated by a unique combination of the organic forest interacting with the inorganic atmosphere. It is seeded with microscopic spores of pollen and fungi. These make the Amazonian clouds heavy, which means that all that water rains back down across the continent, replenishing the forest and irrigating a land mass that otherwise would probably be a desert. The Amazon river as we know it—all 4,000 miles of it—pours just 17 billion tonnes of water into the Atlantic ocean every day, so the invisible river of transpiration beats it by 3 billion tonnes a day. Imagine the power it takes to push 20 billion tonnes up into the atmosphere.

On Brazil's border with Paraguay is the Itaipu dam, the second most powerful hydroelectric power station in the world after the Three Gorges dam in China. Itaipu's capacity is 14 MW. That is about four and a half times the capacity of Hinkley Point C, if Hinkley ever manages to get built. We would need 5,000 Itaipu power stations to push the 20 billion tonnes of water up into the atmosphere that that forest does every single day.

Forests are amazing. The Amazon is not alone, of course. The second lung of our planet is the Congo basin in Africa, and while we are talking about famous dams, it is worth noting that the Aswan dam, some 2,000 miles away, relies for 85% of its power on water that the Congo forest transpiration has deposited into the Ethiopian highlands, coming down through the Nile to Aswan.

Forests are amazing, or, to be a little more scientific about it, forest ecosystems provide critical and diverse services to human society. They are a primary habitat for a wide range of species. They support biodiversity and conservation. Forest growth sequesters and stores carbon from the atmosphere. It contributes to regulation of the global carbon cycle and mitigates climate change. Healthy forests produce soil and conserve it. They stabilise stream flows and water run-off, preventing land degradation and desertification. Forests reduce the risks of natural disasters such as droughts, floods and landslides. They contribute to poverty eradication and to economic development by providing food, fibre, timber and other forest products for subsistence and income generation. They are a key genetic source for the pharmaceutical industry, contributing to global human health, and they even serve as sites of aesthetic, recreational and spiritual values in so many cultures.

Forests may be home to 80% of land species, but they are also vital to the survival of our own. They produce 40% of the oxygen we breathe, support 1.6 billion livelihoods and play a crucial role in holding back a climate disaster on a massive scale.

What about deforestation? That has been happening for a long time. In fact, since the end of the last ice age, the world has lost one third of all its forests—that is about 2 billion hectares, or two United States of Americas. But even though it has been happening for about 11,000 years, the rate of acceleration is rather recent and incredibly alarming. More than half of all the forest lost since the Pleistocene has gone in the last 125 years—1.1 billion hectares gone.

The drivers of deforestation are well known. Agricultural expansion remains the single largest cause, and according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, is responsible for 88% of global deforestation. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says that it contributes 11% of global carbon dioxide emissions. Similarly, in its report on deforestation in January last year, the Environmental Audit Committee identified what we might call the seven deadly sins of deforestation—the seven commodities that are driving 90% of global deforestation: beef and leather, soy, timber, palm oil, paper, rubber and cocoa.

However, the EAC was only picking up on the Global Resource Initiative taskforce's recommendations from 2020. I commend the previous Conservative Government for establishing the GRI taskforce under the chairmanship of Sir Ian Cheshire as part of the 25-year environment plan. Sir Ian realised that if the market was to transition to sustainable commodity supply chains, it would need Government to adopt a strategic, co-ordinated approach to align and accelerate action.

The Government's response to the taskforce's 14 recommendations showed real understanding of the issues. They said:

“When nature's free services fail, the poorest people suffer first and worst. Over a billion people rely directly on forests for their livelihoods—including indigenous peoples who look after around 80% of biodiversity.”

They continued:

“Protecting and restoring mangroves, forests, and peatlands could provide around a third of the most cost-effective climate change solutions we need, while supporting species and helping communities adapt to become more resilient. Shifting towards more sustainable forms of agriculture would not only protect the planet's lungs, but it could add a further \$2.3trn in productive

[Barry Gardiner]

growth to the global economy and create a further 200 million jobs by 2050...We know that there is no pathway to Net Zero emissions—or indeed the Sustainable Development Goals—that does not involve protecting and restoring nature on an unprecedented scale. But despite the huge contribution nature can make, it attracts just 3% of global climate finance.”

I suspect that the excellence of that written response is directly attributable to the noble Lord Goldsmith. But an excellence of understanding requires an excellence of follow-through, and that was less excellent.

It is true that in response to the taskforce’s recommendation to mobilise

“a global call for action to tackle deforestation and build sustainable commodity supply chains in the lead up to COP26”,

the Johnson Government did deliver a call to action—but a call to action and action are two different things. Yes, more than 100 global leaders signed up to the pledge to halt deforestation by 2030, and, yes, 30 financial institutions, managing nearly \$9 trillion in assets between them, promised to disclose the

“deforestation risk and mitigation activities in their portfolios”

by 2023, and to eliminate harmful practices from their portfolios by 2025. But ’23 has come and gone. Today it is 2025, and we are still not eating the

“guilt free chocolate...that’s carbon not calorie guilt free”,

that Boris Johnson boasted about. We are nowhere near on track to halting forest loss by 2030.

One of the things that fuels people’s disillusionment with politics is that so much fanfare surrounds policy announcements, but so little of the hard graft of delivery gets done after the announcements have been made. The public understand that our diets and supply chains are deeply entwined with this issue. We may not see the bulldozers or the farmers who are eking out a living with slash and burn, but the products we consume every day, from chocolate bars to cooking oils, link us directly to the deforestation that we say we want to stop. If we told the public that we had just destroyed the entire New Forest, they would be horrified, yet that is the area of forest that our failure to enact the due diligence recommendations has eradicated since 2021. With that knowledge comes the understanding that we are complicit.

But there is only so much that people can do through their individual action and choices. That is why the taskforce’s recommendations about a due diligence obligation were so important. It said that the Government should “urgently” introduce

“a mandatory due diligence obligation for companies that place commodities and derived products that contribute to deforestation on the UK market”,

and that they should take action to ensure that similar principles are applied to the finance industry. That due diligence obligation would require companies to analyse the presence of environmental and human rights risks and impacts within their supply chains, take action to prevent or mitigate them, and publicly report on actions taken and planned. The financial sector would also be covered by a similar mandatory due diligence obligation, requiring it to exercise due diligence to ensure that its lending and investments do not fund deforestation.

The taskforce demanded action, and in the Environment Act 2021 it got a pale version of it. The Act introduced measures to prohibit UK businesses from using

commodities grown on illegally deforested or occupied land. At the COP28 summit in Dubai in 2023, the UK delegation announced the list of commodities that could be included in environmental law and explained that businesses with more than £50 million in global annual turnover that use more than 500 metric tonnes of commodities a year would need to source from land they could prove was not illegally deforested.

Although well intentioned, by focusing on legality, the Act failed to hold out an absolute standard of whether the supply chain was in fact involved in deforestation. It ignored the fact that politicians such as Jair Bolsonaro would simply change their domestic legislation to grant legal status to what had previously been illegally deforested land, and so get round the Act’s intention.

The failure to impose adequate due diligence on companies, banks and finance houses and institutions has meant that, since the Glasgow declaration, UK banks have provided more than £1 billion to companies that present a forest risk. Last July, UK investors still held £1.4 billion-worth of assets and shares issued by these companies. The largest 50 of those investors make up 99% of the total UK forest-risk investments, yet 18 of them were actually signatories to the net zero asset managers initiative. Sadly, just eight have made any clear public commitment to eventually removing deforestation from their portfolios. That leaves 42 that should be ashamed of themselves.

Three names stand out, but for all the wrong reasons: HSBC, Barclays and Standard Chartered. Between them, those three banks have provided 97% of the £4.5 billion-worth of credit lines for forest-risk companies since the Paris agreement was signed in 2015. It is not just in government where there is a gap between policy and action. In 2017, HSBC committed

“not to provide services to customers either directly or indirectly involved in deforestation”.

In fact, it has provided credit lines amounting to £1.9 billion to forest-risk companies such as JBS, the world’s largest meat company, which, despite a record of corruption and forest destruction, just last week was approved by the Securities and Exchange Commission to list on the New York stock exchange, giving it access to new sources of finance and capital markets. It is, of course, just a few months since JBS dropped its net zero by 2040 climate pledge, claiming, “Well, it was never a formal commitment.”

The Environment Act was an important marker that the UK takes seriously its role in the global supply chain, and that it wants to lead the way and manage the responsibility that comes with it. But a marker only stands in place of action for so long. Four years later, it has become an ironic sign of failure.

UK financial institutions continue to bankroll deforestation. Trade agreements lack meaningful environmental safeguards, and indigenous land defenders face daily violence and intimidation. Unsustainable logging fuels forest destruction; weak governance and corruption continue; and infrastructure projects and mining operations further encroach on forested lands, fragmenting ecosystems and threatening indigenous territories. Land tenure insecurity, poor enforcement and a lack of economic alternatives all conspire to make deforestation a systemic problem.

There can be no one silver bullet but, my goodness, there must be a desire to start. With COP30 this November being hosted in Brazil, there is a compelling case to move from intention to delivery. First, the Minister knows only too well that we must urgently expand the due diligence regime to cover all forest-risk commodities, whether legal or illegal, under producer country law. We should introduce criminal liability for companies knowingly profiting from deforestation, and require UK banks and investors to disclose their deforestation risk.

There will need to be a phased timeline, but my question is not when it will be done but why it has not been done already. If we understand where the blockage in the machinery is, perhaps we can help apply a bit of pressure to assist the Minister in getting it done. I know she will be keen to do so. Some say the blockage is in the Cabinet Office, some say Northern Ireland and the Windsor framework. I would point out to the Minister and her ministerial colleagues that the strong due diligence measures of the European deforestation legislation are due to come into force in December this year. It would be best if the regulation of the whole of the UK were consonant with that. Will the Minister set out a clear timeline for the full implementation of schedule 17 to the Environment Act?

Secondly, the UK must champion a trade model that values environmental protection and human rights. As the UK is in advanced trade negotiations with the EU and India, and to a lesser extent with the USA, what discussions has the Minister had with her colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade about the need to embed deforestation safeguards and environmental standards in all future trade agreements? I immodestly recommend to her the blueprint set out in the Labour party's green paper of 2018, entitled, "Just Trading: What would a just trading system look like?", when I was shadow Trade Secretary.

Thirdly, the tropical forests forever facility—TFFF—championed by Brazil, will inevitably assume centre stage as we progress towards Belém and COP30. By using arbitrage between the cost of long-dated Government bonds and loans and the returns of a more diversified portfolio, the TFFF fund seeks to provide a long-term payment for conservation and restoration of tropical forests. The facility would help to address a significant market failure, placing a value to the ecosystem services that those forests provide, and returning that to the forest communities that curate them.

Will the Minister tell us how the UK will be involved in the TFFF? What conversations has she had with colleagues in international development? How will the fund prioritise and reward the role of indigenous and traditional knowledge partners in forest stewardship? She knows that indigenous peoples need specific legal protections, recognition and direct funding. Forests thrive when indigenous rights are upheld. Our aid and climate finance must prioritise those locally led solutions. That is fundamental, not just for nature and climate mitigation, but for justice, for addressing poverty and for human rights.

The establishment at the convention on biological diversity COP16 meeting in Rome of the Cali fund, which commits 50% of its resources to indigenous communities, was an overdue recognition of their role as custodians of forests and the nature and biodiversity that make them. I ask the Minister to update the House about the steps our Government are taking to help

operationalise that fund, and to ensure that its resources reach those local communities quickly and without loss. Can she tell us whether and how indigenous communities are represented on the fund's board of management, and how the Cali fund will work alongside the TFFF? Is the UK planning to invest in the TFFF, and now with the 40% cut in official development assistance from 0.5% to just 0.3% of GNI, what will happen to the £11.6 billion that was ringfenced for climate in ICF3, and the £3 billion within that that was further ringfenced for nature?

After years of declining indicators, we now have an opportunity to reverse the trend of deforestation. I am proud of the direction that our Labour Government have taken since July, from creating a special envoy for nature to committing to deliver three new national forests. Domestically, the Government are investing up to £400 million in tree planting and peatland restoration over 2024-25 and 2025-26. However, if we are to lead globally we must also act globally, and that includes how we mobilise capital. Public funding is crucial, but on its own it is not enough. We need to unlock private finance to support conservation and sustainable development, especially in regions safeguarding the planet's remaining great forests, and that means scaling up tools such as green bonds, blended finance and debt-for-nature swaps. The City of London can and should be a hub for that kind of innovation, not only for climate finance, but for nature-positive finance.

We sometimes hear the environment and the economy pitted against each other, as if nature is a subset of the economy. Of course the truth is the other way round, because without nature and the ecosystem services that it provides, there is no economy, and the most vital part of that nature is our amazing forests.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Martin Vickers (in the Chair):** Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak in the debate. I will not impose a formal time limit at the moment, but I will be calling the Front-Bench speakers at 10.28 am. Jim Shannon will show us how it is done.

9.52 am

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers—you have set me a challenge, and it is one I will adhere to. I thank the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) for opening this debate. During my time in this Parliament he has always shown himself to be enthusiastic and energetic on these subjects. He always speaks with a knowledge that I appreciate—I think we all do, to be fair—and today he has exemplified that incredibly well. I thank him for that, and for reminding us all, including me, of the importance of such debates.

Deforestation poses, and indeed has posed, a massive global issue for quite some time. It was sad to listen to the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks and the issues raised, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about a way forward, just as we always look to getting things right and doing better. I would also like to give some insight into our local situation. I know this debate is about global deforestation, but perhaps I can give some facts about back home, as that adds to what we are doing here on deforestation.



[Jim Shannon]

Approximately 8.6% of Northern Ireland's land is covered by woodland, which is among the lowest in Europe. Between 2000 and 2023, Northern Ireland lost some 21,700 hectares of natural forest, representing an 11% decrease, so there is more that we can do back home. I declare an interest as a landowner and a farmer. Some 15, or perhaps 20 years ago, we planted 4,500 trees, so that is the small part that I and my family played on this issue. Storms take their toll, but I am glad that out of 4,500 trees we lost only 12, and they have been replaced. That is what we do.

The United Kingdom has approximately 3.25 million hectares of woodland, accounting for about 13% of its total land area. The impacts of deforestation are often underestimated. The Environmental Audit Committee, which has done an incredible job, concluded that forests hold some 80% of the world's terrestrial biodiversity and support the livelihood of 1.6 billion people. That is 25% of the world's population, so forests are incredibly important for a quarter of the world's population. They also support the livelihood of 90% of the world's population who live in extreme poverty, so the impact upon them is greater than ever. Those people depend on forests for some part of their livelihood. Poverty is a massive issue around the globe, and ultimately, once forests and trees are removed, the resources that thousands of people required to survive are destroyed. We have just been reminded about that 500-year-old tree in London that was cut down. When we cut it down, we cannot just grow it the next day. There is a court case ongoing, so I will not be saying too much, but when a tree is cut down, it cannot just be planted the next day and got back to where it was. Those are the things that we must remember—the resources that thousands of people require to survive are destroyed.

The same report stated that we, the United Kingdom, are a significant consumer of commodities linked to deforestation. I gently remind us all that the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds estimated that UK imports of forest-risk commodities, such as soy, beef, leather and coca, account for a land footprint equivalent to 88% of the UK in size every year, which is massively huge. Just think of what that means to all of us in this world today. Our responsibility is not just for ourselves, but for others, and not just our constituents—who our first obligation is to—and our families, but to the world family.

We have made progress through the Conference of the Parties in the past, but it is evident that there is still so much more to be done to have maximum impact. It is important to take our forest-risk commodities into consideration and analyse what impact they are having on other countries across the globe. That is part of our responsibility as a caring nation and a compassionate people. That can be done collectively within our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but also working alongside our NATO partners.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister what our Government can do in this place to ensure progress, not only with the commitment to our global partners—we must continue to work with them, and do so more effectively—but by taking into consideration the benefits of maintaining good forestation in our own country, for the sake of our environment and climate change commitments.

9.57 am

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) for securing this debate. It is a really important issue, which looms large over us.

I want to talk about one specific project that could be absolutely devastating for the global climate and biodiversity. We always talk about the Amazon, but the world's third largest rainforest is on the island of Papua, in Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. A huge shadow looms over Indonesia's forests. We have seen recent media coverage in the British, Indonesian and international press about an initiative that has been described as the world's largest deforestation project. That project, backed directly by the Indonesian Government, is targeting 3 million hectares of moist tropical forest, dry forest, mangrove and wetland for conversion to huge commercial rice and sugar cane plantations in the district of Merauke, West Papua. That is an area one and a half times the size of Wales—or, as there are so many Members, including myself, with strong Yorkshire connections, three Yorkshires. Similar projects in Borneo and Sumatra are threatening orangutans, tigers and other critically endangered species.

Battalions of soldiers from the Indonesian military have been deployed to clear land and quell resistance from local and indigenous communities, many of whom strongly oppose the project but lack the rights and means to protest. West Papua, in particular, is a highly militarised territory, which is effectively under military occupation and rule. Community leaders who object face violence and intimidation in a landscape already marred by a conflict that is now 60 years old. The communities are also not even being recompensed properly for the land. There are reports that some communities are being forced to sell concessions within the state plantation for £5 an acre. The value of the timber alone should make the land worth many hundred times that.

Indonesia has a long history of failed mega-projects. Similar mega-projects failed in the past because draining wetlands makes the soil more acidic and farming more difficult. Once cleared, vast stretches of forest are abandoned and burned, as we have previously seen in the Amazon. Indigenous people rely on natural forests for hunting and gathering, and burn waste wood for cooking, so the practice increases malnutrition and disease, and affects the whole lifestyle of indigenous people.

From an environmental point of view, the project will destroy globally critical habitats, triggering irreversible ecosystem degradation on a vast scale. It is estimated that this one project in Papua will release an estimated 782.5 million tonnes of additional CO<sub>2</sub>, which is equivalent to a carbon loss valued at £2.1 billion. That means that the Merauke food and energy estate alone could more than double Indonesia's emissions.

Like the UK, Indonesia is signed up to the Paris agreement and COP, as well as to the CBD protocols. The astonishing impact of the project threatens to completely undo any progress Indonesia has made in reducing deforestation and undermine the UK Government's efforts to help the country to drive down forest loss and meet its climate targets. Some 10,000 hectares of land have already been destroyed, but that is a minute amount compared with what we could see.

Where does the UK come in? In November 2024, the UK and Indonesian Governments agreed to work together in on new strategic partnership, which they stated is designed to provide

“a framework, grounded in the principles of mutual respect and cooperation, to deliver the full potential of our relationship”.

The partnership will engage

“our respective businesses, academia and research institutions, cultural organisations and wider societies.”

In addition to having closer political, economic and societal ties, Indonesia is an important partner for the UK in advancing our shared global climate commitments, particularly with regard to the protection of forests. Through programmes such as the forestry, land use and governance programme, the UK is working with Indonesia to address deforestation and promote sustainable forest management to combat climate change. The work is critical and has contributed to a significant decrease in deforestation since 2020. I pay tribute to the former Minister Lord Goldsmith, with whom I have discussed this matter many times, including at COPs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent West mentioned schedule 17 to the Environment Act 2021. When it is finally implemented, it should ensure that products that contain palm oil or cocoa that have been grown on recently deforested land such as Merauke—palm oil and cocoa could well end up being grown there, because the land is not at all suitable for rice growing—are not sold in the UK. That is the intent behind schedule 17, and its implementation is long overdue.

My hon. Friend also made the point that responsibility for this matter sits across a number of Departments, but as we are in a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs debate, I will address my questions to the DEFRA Minister. Given the new partnership framework with Indonesia, and the UK’s status as a respectful but critical friend of Indonesia, do the Government intend to provide technical analysis, advice and support to help the Indonesian Government to find ways of meeting the country’s food and energy needs that do not require setting off such a climate time bomb as the Merauke project? Given the UK’s global forests agenda, its leadership role in the Glasgow declaration, and existing trade partnerships, does the Minister believe this is an opportunity for the UK Government to take diplomatic action regarding this colossal project, given not just its implications for deforestation but its devastating impact on indigenous communities?

10.4 am

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner)—in this case, he is a friend—on raising a matter of paramount importance that will affect the future of our children and grandchildren. I am fortunate enough to have five of the latter. I decided to participate in this debate having yesterday received a work of fiction, in the form of a briefing note from the Drax organisation. I also had the good fortune yesterday to meet two charming ladies, Dr Krystal Martin and Katherine Eglund, both from the United State of Mississippi, where Drax has an operation that is hugely impacting their lives and their communities.

I am a simple man and I find long equations hard to follow, but it strikes me that if someone fells carbon-sequestering trees, using power to do so, and if they

turn the wood into pellets, using power, transport those pellets across the United States, by either water or land, and then transport those pellets across the Atlantic in diesel-powered boats, the chances are that they are using quite a lot of carbon. It strikes me that Drax’s claim that its operation is somehow carbon-friendly has to be a myth.

One of my wiser colleagues reminded me that, for Drax, the clock starts ticking when the pellets arrive at the power station gates, and everything that goes before is written off. This is an absolute nonsense. It was subsidised by the British taxpayer to a considerable extent under the previous Government. To give credit where it is due, the current Government have secured a rather better deal than the previous one. Nevertheless, these practices are still being subsidised to a ridiculous extent.

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): First, I would like to correct the record, because the right hon. Gentleman is anything but simple. He has always been a leading light in every debate he contributes to. In my constituency we reclaim wood that would have otherwise gone into landfill and turn it into pellets, but unfortunately the Government subsidy for that is about to end, making the situation the right hon. Gentleman describes ever more perverse.

**Sir Roger Gale:** The hon. Lady makes an unassailable point.

This should not be happening. Drax is felling trees in the southern states of the United States—in Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana—and throughout Canada on an unimaginable scale. The people at Drax claim that they are using pulp wood from

“thinnings that help to open up the forest canopy and get light onto the forest floor”.

Oh no they are not! They are engaged in scorched-earth forestry. They are felling acres and acres of woodland in the southern United States and Canada, and that is not acceptable. And it is being subsidised by the British Government. Worse still, the health of the local populations in Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi is being directly and adversely affected by Drax’s practices.

Drax has lied—there is no other word for it—to secure its contracts and licences. I shall do my damndest to ensure that the renewal of those licences is contested in every way. I urge the Minister to go back to her Government, particularly the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, to expose the myth that is Drax, and to insist that we must find viable alternatives—not tomorrow, but now.

**Martin Vickers (in the Chair):** If hon. Members restrict their speeches to four minutes, we will fit everyone in.

10.9 am

**Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) on securing this important debate. When I worked for UK Steel, it was always a pleasure to get in touch with him about carbon sequestration from steel, and it is a pleasure to speak with him now on the subject of deforestation.

Deforestation does not simply cut down trees: it cuts off food chains, collapses ecosystems and drives animals from their homes. It is, as the right hon. Member for

[Joe Morris]

Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) said, a global crisis that will have impacts that reverberate down the generations. It is a devastating loss to our planet that up to 15 billion trees are cut down every year right around the world, and it does not only destroy the homes of vital species. I put on the record my thanks to Northumberland College at Kirkley Hall zoo, which kindly hosted me after my election to talk about its great work in preserving biodiversity. Deforestation is contributing hugely to the deeply concerning examples of climate change that we are seeing.

I also put on the record my support for the responsible forestry industry—I have a lot of it in my Hexham constituency, where I see the jobs, employment and certainty it provides to local communities—and recognise the great Northumberland forest plan to plant millions of trees, which has commanded genuine cross-party support in my part of the world. I am conscious that we have local elections on Thursday, but we can get together with the Tory group at Morpeth and recognise that they do have some good ideas occasionally.

We need to recognise that we cannot fight climate change simply by sacrificing biodiversity. In fact, we need to embrace it. We are stripping away the lungs of our planet and the homes of irreplaceable wildlife, sacrificing the Amazon and other great forests at the altar of industrial agriculture, as land is carved out for cattle and soy at the expense of our planet's future.

I am conscious that the Minister will not be able to speak on issues that affect the Department for Business and Trade, but I urge her, when she has the relevant conversations, not just to look at how we preserve and protect our high food standards. When we look at UK Government procurement, we should look at transport and the other emissions incurred by goods that are brought out of the planet using suboptimal methods, and ensure that, wherever possible, we use the best methods for getting products into the UK and make sure they are produced to a high standard, wherever they come from. That comes up in my inbox an awful lot.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have grown up surrounded by the Northumberland landscape. We must preserve such landscapes not just in Northumberland but around the world. We must protect our climate and confront deforestation head on. I note the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West, and from other hon. Members who have far more experience of this than I do, about the practices of certain large corporations.

To touch briefly on my previous life working in the steel sector, timber and lumber are products that sequester carbon far more effectively. We need to have a truly honest conversation with ourselves about how the 1.5 million new homes target can be achieved using products that are far kinder to the environment, that provide jobs here at home and that provide environmental benefits right across the world.

10.12 am

**Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers, and to speak in this debate. I put on the record that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the wood panel industry.

Our global forests are not just the world's lungs but help to manage the worst effects of climate change. They lock in carbon, maintain biodiversity and help to manage flooding. The UK's domestic forestry planting has been in decline since the '70s, when it peaked at 30,000 hectares per year. Given the length of time required for a tree to grow to maturity, this is an issue that we need to consider now. The UK Government have committed to planting 30,000 hectares per annum by 2030, which is to be welcomed. Although 20,500 hectares of newly created woodland were reported across the UK in 2023-24, we also need to consider the different types of forestry planting and the importance of both productive commercial forestry and broadleaf.

Manufacturing from timber is an important form of carbon sequestration. Whereas recent statistics show a year-on-year increase in forestry planting, the amount of productive forestry has decreased by 4.5%. That limits the ability of the wood panel industry, among others, to meet customer demand. It can currently meet only 65% of customer demand from domestic sources. If the industry had a secure supply, it would be able to satisfy 100% of demand. To reduce our reliance on exports, the UK and devolved Governments must achieve their tree-planting targets and commit to 60% of new planting being made up of productive species such as conifers.

Wood panel products manufactured in the UK recycle waste wood into everyday products in our homes, such as kitchens, cabinets and furniture. The volume of waste wood used for energy sources such as woody biomass has increased substantially over the last decade, and that limits the waste wood available to the wood panel industry and other wood recycling industries.

The wood panel industry is a British manufacturing success story, with British products made from British timber supplying the UK's biggest brands, such as B&Q, Jewson, Wickes and Howdens. The industry is also one of the UK's most productive manufacturing sectors, at two and half times more productive than the UK industrial average, and it generates an estimated annual turnover of £1.4 billion. The wood panel industry generates £287 million for the Exchequer annually, through production taxes across the industry and its supply chain, taxes from employee spending, and income tax, as well as national insurance contributions.

More tree planting will help the industry to become self-sufficient, reduce imports and be better for the environment. However, the failure to meet tree-planting targets risks direct job losses in the forestry, nursery and silviculture sectors. Indirectly, it threatens employment in wood processing, environmental services and rural economies. Reduced timber supply and weakened climate commitments may also deter investment, undermining long-term job security and economic sustainability in related industries.

10.15 am

**Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global deforestation, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) for bringing this important topic to Parliament today, and for being a strong voice championing our environment for many years. Protecting and restoring forests around the world is not just about



climate and nature, although those are vital. It is also about safeguarding communities and livelihoods, both globally and here in the UK.

It has been nearly four years since the Environment Act passed into law, but we are still waiting for one of its most crucial elements: the implementation of schedule 17 and the due diligence regulations needed to ensure that UK supply chains are no longer linked to illegal deforestation abroad. British consumers want to know that when they spend their hard-earned pounds they are part of the solution, not the problem. People in South East Cornwall want to be part of building a cleaner, brighter future.

Once enacted, the regulations will make it unlawful for large businesses operating in the UK to use products not produced in accordance with local laws in their country of origin. They will require businesses to establish due diligence systems to assess and mitigate risks, and to report with transparency on their findings. Since the Environment Act was passed, UK imports alone have been linked to over 39,000 hectares of deforestation. To put that into context, there are more MPs in this House than there are Sumatran tigers left on earth—that is a crisis.

Forests are the green lungs of our planet, and alongside our oceans they absorb vast amounts of the carbon dioxide emitted across the world every day, every month and every year. They hold 80% of the world's land-based biodiversity and support the livelihoods of 1.6 billion people globally. I know that this Government are supportive of nature—and of the efforts to protect and restore our natural spaces—and forest dwellers and economic development. But we need greater clarity on when these regulations will be introduced and how they will meet our global commitments to halt and reverse deforestation.

Some British businesses are already trying to do the right thing, but they need clear and consistent rules. The public is with us too. Polling by the World Wide Fund for Nature shows that 70% of British people support Government action to prevent the sale of products linked to those activities.

Moving forward, we have to be fair and inclusive. The UK forest-risk commodities regulation could inadvertently harm smallholder farmers within global supply chains, many of whom are already struggling. We must ensure that the policy empowers rather than excludes, and that it promotes fair compliance costs, living incomes and meaningful engagement with producers, especially those without formal land titles.

Closer to home, we must ensure that the changes do not increase food costs for UK households at a time when many are already struggling. Public food procurement, which accounts for £2.4 billion every year, must support our environmental goals, not undermine them. Public pounds spent should help deliver on climate and nature protection. That is what both the public and the Government want.

Farmers both here and abroad are part of that solution. In South East Cornwall we are proud of those brilliant farmers working every day to feed our communities and steward our land. Agriculture must be part of that sustainable future, and that means supporting practices that restore nature. We know that UK action alone is not enough to protect forests. We must work in lockstep with key partners such as Brazil, China, the Democratic

Republic of the Congo and others to keep forests standing. The bilateral relationships between the UK and our global partners are key.

Brazil is home to a third of the world's remaining primary tropical forests and will host COP30 in November. Reports of forests being felled to build roads for that climate summit in Belém are alarming, as is the extent to which human activities are impacting on the summit. Unless we can make progress at COP30 on enforcing supply chain rules and holding financial institutions accountable, our window of opportunity to end forest loss is at risk of closing. Will the Minister confirm that the Government, while supporting the Brazilian presidency, will take on that huge task and ensure that they push for the most ambitious outcomes on forest protection?

I also want to see a mention of joint action on global deforestation included in the recent UK-China climate dialogue. I understand that the Government will launch a new UK-China environment dialogue later this year, which is another good opportunity to have that issue mentioned. Will the Minister confirm that she will discuss that point with the Chinese?

Recently, I was proud to meet members of the public from the Congo who are calling on their Government to halt oil and gas expansion. Given the announcement by the DRC's oil Minister, will the Minister assure Members that work will be done with partners in key global areas to safeguard the Congo basin's future? Time is not on our side, so when will the Government introduce the long overdue legislation to implement schedule 17 and ensure that the UK is part of the bright future that has been discussed today?

10.20 am

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your guidance, Mr Vickers, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) for securing this debate. It is very poignant to have it on the day that the Climate Change Committee is saying that we will not reach our climate targets.

I will focus on building on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd). It is an important issue and one on which the United Kingdom can demonstrate real leadership: tackling illegal deforestation linked to the UK supply chain.

In the Environment Act 2021, Parliament rightly included a requirement for due diligence provisions to prevent larger businesses from using forest-risk commodities that contribute to illegal deforestation. Those regulations are crucial to our meeting our commitments to halt and reverse forest loss by 2030. Yet today, more than 1,100 days have passed since the consultation on implementation closed, and the due diligence regulations remain unpublished and unimplemented. Every hour that passes, an area of rainforest equivalent in size to 300 football pitches is cleared, often to make way for unsustainable agricultural practices. Such destruction not only exacerbates climate change but pushes precious wildlife, such as orangutans, tigers, rhinoceroses, hornbills and elephants, towards extinction. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall said, there are now more MPs in Westminster than there are Sumatran tigers left alive on Earth, which is a sobering and powerful reminder of what is at stake with this issue.

[Sarah Champion]

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for zoos and aquariums, I am pleased that Chester zoo, one of the world's leading conservation organisations, has been at the forefront of efforts to champion sustainable palm oil and combat deforestation. The zoo is leading the way in creating the world's first sustainable palm oil city in Chester, and it has worked with plantation owners in Malaysian Borneo to restore over 200 hectares of rainforest, reconnecting fragmented landscapes and protecting our critical wildlife corridors.

Chester zoo's real and practical experience makes it an invaluable voice on this issue, so it is no surprise that DEFRA officials have previously visited the zoo to consult its experts and even filmed content for what was intended to be the public launch of the regulations. That launch was postponed due to the general election, but the fact that it was planned proves that the due diligence regulation is sitting on a desk somewhere, waiting to be published.

The delay in publication and implementation risks sending entirely the wrong message to businesses seeking certainty, to our international partners and to the public, who rightly expect us to lead on this issue. Chester zoo, alongside other organisations, is calling not for endless revisions of proposals but for the Government to introduce their version of the regulations without further delay.

Just last week, the EU proposed adapting its deforestation regulations to streamline their implementation. In my view, that shows that the UK Government should move faster on implementing their regulations to create certainty on this issue. A practical, balanced approach would be for the Government to conduct a formal review 12 months after implementation, which would allow us to address any operational challenges and assess the compatibility of the regulations with the EU's deforestation regulations.

This is a moment when we can turn our commitments into reality. Introducing the regulations now would honour the spirit of the Environment Act, provide businesses with much needed clarity, and show that the United Kingdom remains determined to protect the world's precious forests and wildlife. I urge the Minister to act swiftly and to ensure that trusted voices such as Chester zoo and the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums—the membership body for zoos—are included in any future reviews, so that the regulations are grounded in real conservation and operational experience.

10.25 am

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) for securing this debate and for giving us such an educational introduction. It is notable that all Members have spoken not just with passion but with rare unanimity on this topic.

Forests are not merely scenic landscapes; they are the lungs of our planet, absorbing more than 7.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. They house more than 80% of our biodiversity and support the livelihoods of more than 1.6 billion people globally, including many of the world's poorest communities, yet the World Wide Fund for Nature estimates that we are losing

around 15 billion trees every year. That is a direct threat to our climate targets, our food security and our global stability.

World Animal Protection notes that, as president of COP26, the UK introduced the Glasgow leaders' declaration on forests and land use, but has made little progress in the years since. At COP29, leaders reaffirmed the goal to end deforestation by 2030. We were proud to support that pledge, but words must become action. A number of my constituents, including the children of Old Sodbury primary school, have contacted me to express their concern about deforestation. They highlighted the plight of orangutans and the damage being done by people who are destroying forests in order to grow palm trees for the palm oil used in soap, shampoo, chocolate and many other toiletries and food. I am sure that they will be pleased to have heard a number of hon. Members express concern about orangutans in this debate.

A number of hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) and South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd), set out clearly the damaging impacts of deforestation, including soil acidification, vast carbon emissions and the damage to people who depend on those forests, including some of the poorest in the world. The new Labour Government have pledged stronger regulations to prevent UK businesses from fuelling illegal deforestation through their supply chains but, as the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) set out, every day of delay allows more trees, and the species that rely on them, to be destroyed. Will the Minister tell us when the Government will put forward the regulations?

The Liberal Democrats would support the introduction of a business, human rights and environment Act to require companies to take adequate measures and conduct due diligence to prevent and manage the impacts of activities on people and the environment, both in the UK and around the world. Will the Minister go further and introduce a general duty of care for the environment and human rights to require companies, financial institutions and public sector agencies to exercise due diligence in avoiding specified products, such as commodities produced with deforestation, in their operations and supply chains, and to report on their actions?

The right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) raised the issue of Drax. I had a robust conversation with proponents of biomass energy production at one of the many drop-ins in Parliament. That case illustrates why we need to look at whole-life-cycle emissions, not simply consumption emissions, as the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) pointed out. Under the previous Conservative Government, the UK continued to subsidise biomass energy production, particularly at the Drax power station. It burns the equivalent of 27 million trees a year and, although it is classed as renewable under current definitions, that is both inefficient and ecologically damaging. The Lib Dems oppose the continued classification of biomass as renewable energy and would like the Government to change that so that we can focus on genuine renewables such as wind and solar.

We should not forget the problems on our own doorstep, and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for giving us a Northern Ireland perspective on this. The Woodland Trust has said that, here in England, we have some of the lowest woodland cover in Europe at just 10%, far behind the European average of

38%. In my constituency, where the Liberal Democrats lead on the climate and nature emergency, the council is part of a partnership that has won a bid for the western forest to become a new national forest. It will serve more than 2.5 million people, and the aim is to plant 2,500 hectares of new woodland in the first five years, with an aspiration to plant 20 million trees by 2050. Last year, the Liberal Democrats committed to doubling woodland cover by 2050, and I hope that aspiration will make a contribution to our policy. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones) made the good point that the types of planting are important.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has said that protecting and restoring forests is essential to limiting warming to 1.5°, and organisations from the World Wildlife Fund to the Tree Council have warned us that delay is no longer an option. Forests do not recognise borders, and neither does climate change. To protect nature, we must act globally, act boldly and act now. According to the UN, we lose approximately 10 million hectares of forest a year—an area roughly the size of Portugal. As a result of the previous Conservative Government's policies, the World Wildlife Fund and Global Forest Watch rank the UK in the bottom third of G7 nations for its overall progress on halting imported deforestation.

The COP29 declaration reaffirmed the global goal of ending deforestation by 2030. This is not a distant crisis; it is happening now and it threatens us all. I call on the Government to act with urgency and vision, stop subsidising environmental destruction, implement rigorous supply chain standards and work with global partners to safeguard forests around the world. The world cannot afford half-measures. We need real action to stop deforestation now.

10.31 am

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank everyone for their important contributions, and I am grateful to my good friend, the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), for bringing forward this important debate. I have extremely fond memories of our time serving together as members of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in the previous Parliament.

Caring deeply about the world we live in, our precious environment and the people and the creatures that live within it unites us in humanity across this Chamber. Given the hon. Gentleman's clear and passionate commitment to the natural environment, it is no surprise that he has chosen to bring this topic to Westminster Hall. I thank him again for doing so and congratulate him on his thoughtful and powerful speech.

There have been excellent contributions from Members on both sides of the House, including from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) talked powerfully about what is going on in Indonesia. My right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) made a powerful speech about the implications of Drax. We heard from the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones). The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) is a powerful advocate of the work of Chester zoo, which I will talk about later.

As the Member for Parliament for Epping Forest, it is an honour to speak for His Majesty's most loyal Opposition on protecting our precious forest. My constituents know of Epping Forest's important role as the heart and lungs for north-east London and our part of Essex.

As Members highlighted, it is vital that we address the drivers and risks of global deforestation. Deforestation is the second leading cause of climate change globally, and is responsible for approximately 10% to 15% of all greenhouse gas emissions—nearly as much as all the world's vehicles combined. To put it starkly, if deforestation were a country, it would rank third behind only China and the USA for carbon dioxide emissions.

Forests host approximately 80% of the world's wildlife on land. In the last 60 years, more than half of tropical forests globally have been destroyed, reducing biodiversity and endangering species. Alarming, it is estimated that every hour—less than the length of this debate—an area of rainforest equivalent to 300 football pitches is cleared to make way for unsustainable palm oil production. That not only contributes to climate change but leads to a huge decline in precious wildlife such as orangutans, tigers and elephants, jeopardising their very survival as species.

I thank and pay tribute to Chester zoo, which does great work, and indeed all zoos across the world for their work on conservation species. Chester zoo has worked on a responsible sourcing policy for the use of sustainable palm oil produced with the lowest possible environmental impact and without deforestation.

The facts and figures we have heard today are truly shocking and leave us in no doubt about the urgent need to tackle deforestation and the threat it poses to us leaving the world in a cleaner, greener state than we found it. Although there have been positive steps in the right direction in recent years, including a significant reduction in deforestation in some countries, there is still clearly much to do.

For example, a 2024 report by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation found that while deforestation rates have declined in forest-rich countries such as Brazil and Indonesia—but there are still problems there, we must remember—

“climate change is making forests more vulnerable to abiotic and biotic stressors such as wildfires and pests”.

With demand for wood projected to significantly increase by 2050, it is more important than ever that the Government ensure that the UK continues to play a leading role in protecting the world's forests.

As the Minister will know, I am proud that the previous Conservative Government had a strong record on tackling deforestation, both at home and abroad, cementing the UK's position as a global leader. We passed the landmark Environment Act 2021 and supported the recovery of England's globally rare temperate rainforests, while playing an important role in supporting efforts to reduce global deforestation. In the Amazon, for example, under the previous Government, the UK became one of the largest contributors to Brazil's Amazon fund and supported measures to address the underlying drivers of deforestation.

That is not to mention the important work that we spearheaded during the UK's COP26 presidency, including securing a commitment from 141 countries, representing more than 90% of the world's forests, to work collectively



[Dr Neil Hudson]

to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030. We have heard that those commitments were made, but we need to hold people to account on that. I was privileged to attend COP26 and see the previous Government in action, working hard on the global stage to tackle deforestation and looking more widely at sustainable ways of using our land, including in agriculture, and making those ways more affordable and achievable across the world. International co-operation is the only way that countries across the world can tackle the threat to our planet and livelihoods that deforestation and climate change more widely pose.

Furthermore, at the COP28 nature day in December 2023, the Conservative Government set out plans to ensure that supermarket essentials are no longer linked to illegal deforestation. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update on that important work, and on the Government's plans to ensure that the UK continues to lead international action to protect the planet's forests.

Experts recently warned that Governments must take immediate steps if we are to meet the important commitment to restore the world's forests by 2030, with a key recommendation that countries must strengthen trade agreements and regulations to stop deforestation-linked products from entering global markets. What assessment has the Minister made of such reports? What plans does her Department have to ensure that the UK is promoting deforestation-free trade?

Speaking of upholding our environmental standards worldwide in our agreements and trade, it is important that we likewise uphold other standards in trade agreements, such as animal welfare standards, not least in the current negotiations with the United States. We must hold firm on banning the importation of chlorine-washed poultry, ractopamine-fed pork and hormone-treated beef and dairy. These are red lines, not only for the sake of animal and bird welfare, but for our fantastic UK farmers, who farm to the highest standards of animal welfare, and must not be undercut in an attempt to cut a deal.

This is about not protectionism, but standing up for our values. In that, we, the United Kingdom, can be a beacon to the world by driving up animal health and welfare standards globally. Can the Minister confirm that the current Government will do all they can to uphold environmental and animal welfare standards internationally in their international trade negotiations?

Returning to global deforestation, the previous Government introduced world-leading due diligence provisions to help to address illegal deforestation across UK supply chains through our groundbreaking Environment Act. Ministers in the current Government have said that they will set out an approach to ensure that UK consumption of so-called forest-risk commodities, such as beef, soy and palm oil, is not driving deforestation. They have said that they will do that "in due course", but they are yet to do so. Can the Minister provide an update on that today? Will she confirm whether the Government plan to introduce the necessary secondary legislation to enact measures in the Environment Act in key areas such as schedule 17?

As the Minister will be aware, campaigners are urging the Government to introduce such secondary legislation before COP30 this November. That is spurred on by

recent reports that the UK's imports of forest-risk commodities are linked to the destruction of forests the size of major cities such as Newcastle, Liverpool or Cardiff over the past year. I acknowledge that the process has not been without its difficulties, but will the Minister set out a timeline for introducing the necessary secondary legislation?

Finally, I would like to mention forest finance. The previous Government doubled the UK's commitment to international climate finance to £11.6 billion from 2021-22 to 2025-26. ICF has been an important part of the UK's work to protect the world's forests, enabling us to work side by side with Brazil to tackle deforestation in all nine Amazon states, and to carefully monitor deforestation across the Amazon region. As we know, the Government recently announced a reduction in funding for overseas development, but they have yet to give details of the projects and initiatives that they will be funding. It is therefore unclear what, if any, projects relating to the rainforests, biodiversity and the protection of sensitive ecosystems the UK Government will support. What engagement has the Minister had with colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office about such funding, and will she shed light on the Government's funding priorities with regard to tackling global deforestation?

In conclusion, there is a clear consensus across the House that serious cross-party efforts must be taken to address the threat of global deforestation around the world. While much has been done, much more still needs to be done by the Government and in collaboration with nations around the world to protect our precious environment, the people and the creatures that live within it. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how the Government intend to pick up the baton from the previous Conservative Government and deliver those global environmental protections for the sake of our planet, and for generations to come.

10.42 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):** It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) on securing this debate on such an important issue, and on taking us to the Amazon forest and its atmospheric river. That was a brilliantly poetic way to talk about the aerial rivers that forests produce, and an important way of explaining ecosystem services. We sometimes talk about the forest as if it is an economic asset, which of course it is, but we are not very good at the poetry.

We know that trees bring us peace, shade and joy, as well as all the other stuff. It is important that we talk about the emotional and spiritual connections that trees bring to people and to places, and the threats that they face from deforestation, whether legal or illegal. I very much take my hon. Friend's point about illegal versus legal deforestation, which is an observation that I also noted about the previous Government's approach.

This nation is afforesting, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones) stated. We are planting a new national forest, the Western forest, which the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young) mentioned. Indeed, I was delighted to go there and plant a crab apple tree as part of the

agroforestry part of that. The forest will deliver flood prevention services and, critically, link up ancient woodland, which has become fragmented in the landscape. It will stretch from the Forest of Dean right down to the Mendip hills—a truly massive undertaking.

We are here to talk about deforestation, which is an issue that touches on many different Departments, including the Departments for Business and Trade, and for Energy Security and Net Zero—I have a DESNZ official with me in the Box, as well as officials from DEFRA. That three Ministers are responsible for international forestry—those from FCDO, DESNZ and myself—shows the complexity around this issue, and explains why I have about 25 different notes in my hand. I do have a prepared speech, which I will try to deliver, but I will also try to answer questions as we go along. If Members feel that we are getting to five to 11 and they have not had satisfaction, I ask them to intervene on me, but I will try to get through my notes.

First, tackling the climate and nature crises is central to the UK's national interest, for both security and prosperity. Our forests are a strategic asset, and protecting them is fundamental to achieving the Government's vision for a world free from poverty on a liveable planet. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West said, nature is the monopoly provider of everything that we need to exist. It is not a subsection of the economy; the economy is a subsection of nature.

More than 1 billion people rely on forests for sustenance and their livelihoods. We have heard, in the many passionate and brilliant speeches from colleagues, that forests provide food, energy, water and medicines worldwide and play a vital role in global economic resilience. They host most of the world's terrestrial biodiversity, including the slightly terrifying giant otters from the Amazon that we can see at Chester zoo. I have never seen anything like them—they are utterly terrifying animals, like something out of "Jurassic Park", the size of a Great Dane and quite terrifying for those of us who are used to the more manageable British otter.

Forests contain rare and endangered species and, of course, plants that are essential for modern medicines. Almost everything we have, whether aspirin from willow or heart medicines from foxglove digitalis, has come from ancient herbal and medical practices. The biodiversity COP's Cali fund is an important statement and an important way for the pharmaceutical, cosmetic and beauty companies—who profit from those discoveries and now have access to the data sequenced internationally—to make a contribution to protecting and preserving the future discoveries of medicine and the beauty and cosmetics industry—because their future innovations are literally on fire.

I am pleased that UK officials led the establishment of the Cali fund, as hon. Members know. We will officially launch it at London Climate Action Week in June. I hope we will be able to say more about that in due course. We are also hosting the conference of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services—IPBES, the equivalent of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for nature—in England in February 2026, and we hope to make an official announcement about that. Next year will be a very big year for nature.

We know that forests are major carbon sinks: 662 billion tonnes of carbon, equivalent to 15 years of human-made emissions, are stored in them. They cool our planet,

providing up to 1° of cooling at mid latitudes. Hon. Members have made brilliant speeches, so they do not need to hear from me about the problems of deforestation, but time is running out. Deforestation is pushing critical biomes such as the Amazon towards potentially catastrophic tipping points, from which they will not recover. We are seeing annual Canadian wildfires, and even wildfires in our own country, with peat fires. All that is putting a massive strain on forest ecosystems.

I am just as concerned about the collapse of the Russian and Canadian boreal forests, to use another slightly jargonistic word; those northern forests are as important to our ecosystem services and our wildlife as the tropical mega-forests. It is essential that we protect, restore and manage forests in a cost-effective way to tackle climate change while supporting livelihoods. Often, the forest is seen as less economically valuable than other land uses such as cash crops, agriculture, infrastructure and urban development. I remember, on a visit to the eastern Congo in 2008, seeing the Batwa forest people living in a tea plantation. Their forests had been cut down as a cash crop, and they were living among those tea bushes because of the disastrous security situation obtaining in South Kivu at that time.

To halt deforestation, forested communities and countries need money to conserve forests. It must become more positive to conserve them than to clear them. That means three changes: an economic shift that values forests and rewards sustainable practices, governance reforms that support effective forest stewardship and tackle illegal activities, and market transformation here in this country to grow green enterprises, protect nature and enhance local livelihoods—not only livelihoods in forested countries, but changing the way that we as consumers purchase. We have heard about consumer demand leading to 35,000 hectares of forest loss overseas.

We import 45% of our food and 80% of our timber; we are the second largest importer in the world after China. That creates resilience problems for the future. Many sectors are underpinned by forest goods and services. A loss of forest will disrupt UK supply chains and businesses, pushing up prices for consumers and undermining our national resilience.

On the point my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West made about the financial industry, I had a meeting yesterday with Sacha Sadan of the Financial Conduct Authority—not specifically on deforestation, but about the sustainability branding of investment managers. I am pleased to say that the FCA, as the regulator, is taking strong and firm action to clean up greenwashing. If they are called sustainability funds, they have to comply with a series of rules and recommendations. That is why many funds have pivoted to "stewardship", because they can no longer use "sustainability". I say that for us all to understand what is happening in the financial context.

We are setting significant steps to protect and expand our domestic forests. Our key achievements include a legally binding target to increase tree cover to 16.5% of England's land area by 2050, and planting more than 21,000 hectares of woodland across the UK between 2023 and 2024, including 5,530 hectares in England, the highest rate in a generation. When we see this year's figures, they will be even higher. That is good news on the England tree-planting target. There has been some fallaway in Scotland and a slight change in the mix.

[*Mary Creagh*]

I take on the board the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones) to increase our conifer planting, because that is the productive forest we need. I am going to visit a factory constructing timber housing in Kenilworth and Southam on Friday; I am coming to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for a three-day visit, because it is so difficult to get to, and to see the brilliant timber production that is going on there, as well as enjoy a midsummer night sky. I have much to do and look forward to.

Internationally, the previous Government persuaded partners to commit to halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation by 2030. We want a just transition for forest-positive economies. That means securing development and the livelihoods of indigenous peoples and local communities, while tackling climate change and protecting nature. Through overseas development assistance, we support stronger forest governments.

I have been asked about ICF. We continue to support Brazil in its development. To begin with the TFFF, we are also supporting Brazil in its development. We cannot commit to an investment while work is still being done to develop the mechanism, but we will, of course, consider it in due course. Forests are a pillar of the UK-Brazil partnership, and we will support Brazilians ambitions for COP30, including through co-chairing the forest and climate leaders' partnership, which I believe is covered by my colleague, the Minister for climate change.

On UK-China relations, we continue to work with key partners, including Indonesia and China, to support the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change global stocktake objective to halt and reverse forest loss by 2030. On TFFF, we are providing technical assistance. We are involved in all the technical workstreams on environmental criteria, financial mechanisms and governance. From what I have seen, that seems to be similar to the Cali mechanism, which tries to crowd in funding from the private sector as well as public finance, because there is a limit to how much public finance can support this.

**Barry Gardiner:** If the Minister could clarify whether indigenous communities are represented on the board of the Cali fund, that would be really helpful.

**Mary Creagh:** I am afraid I have absolutely no idea; I will have to write to my hon. Friend. That is genuinely not my area.

We welcome the positive conclusions to the COP in Rome. The key outcome is the launch of the Cali fund, which will drive benefit sharing from the use of DSI—digital sequence information—on genetic resources, allowing companies using this information to direct funds towards indigenous people and local communities who safeguard biodiversity. At the biodiversity COP, for the first time we created the process by which IPLCs now have a seat at the table, which is very important.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) mentioned the UK-Indonesia joint energy transition. As I have said, we will continue to work with key partners, including Indonesia and China, on the stocktake that supports the objective of halting and

reversing forest loss by 2030. Future ICF is subject to business planning this year and to the spending review from next year. I am meeting the Minister for International Development this afternoon to discuss our approach on that; this is all work that is happening at the moment.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a particularly important region, but it has received less attention and less climate finance than the Amazon and south-east Asia. We are committed to working with others to secure the next phase of support, which will be announced at COP30, for the forests, people and biodiversity of the Congo basin countries. That will sit alongside the pledge for IPLCs' land tenure. We know that communities are better able to protect ecosystems when their land rights are secure, and that areas managed by IPLCs are better protected than any other areas. The Foreign Secretary has already announced that the UK will lead on this IPLC land tenure pledge.

**Sarah Champion:** Will the Minister be covering the regulations on due diligence and when they will be published?

**Mary Creagh:** I am coming to that. Legislation complements the measures I have described. The UK timber regs aim to eliminate demand for illegally harvested timber, and the EU's timber regulation continues to apply, unamended, in Northern Ireland. Both regs require operators that place timber on the market to implement due diligence and review their supply chains, and a recent review of the UK timber regulations demonstrated that they have led to a reduction of illegal timber in UK supply chains.

Over the past 12 years, our delivery partner, the Office for Product Safety and Standards—which, again, is part of the Department for Business and Trade, so not my area—has reviewed the due diligence systems of more than 600 businesses and issued 100 warning letters and 100 notices of remedial action. Recent notable enforcement by OPSS includes the prosecution of luxury yacht maker Sunseeker International, which received a fine of £360,000 plus prosecution costs in relation to illegal imports of timber from Myanmar and Africa.

At home, the Government must also abide by the rules we have made. The Government's timber procurement policy requires all Government procurers and suppliers to prove the legality and sustainability of timber. We will only accept sustainable timber, and we have a wider approach to encouraging legal and sustainable forestry domestically and internationally. We are currently reviewing the timber procurement policy, with the aim of securing better recognition of British certification schemes such as Grown in Britain and FLEGT—forest law enforcement governance and trade—licensed timber.

We are at a critical moment for forests, and the international community must go further and faster to deliver our ambition. We need to tackle nature loss and enhance planetary stewardship. We are working to unlock more finance for nature, promote deforestation-free agriculture and reform global supply chains. Supporting indigenous rights and access to finance are also vital, and require targeted efforts across all tropical forest basins.

COP30 in Brazil, home to the world's largest rainforest, will be a pivotal moment. We are working closely with Brazil and other partners to ensure that forests and



nature take centre stage. We are partnering with Guyana as co-chairs of the forest and climate leaders' partnership to build a valuable forum for driving wider ambition.

Agricultural expansion, particularly for a few key commodities, is the primary driver of illegal deforestation worldwide. As colleagues have said, the Environment Act made provision for the Government to bring forward legislation to exclude commodities. We recognise the urgency of the task to ensure that UK consumption of those commodities—

**Barry Gardiner:** Before the Minister runs down the clock, I just want to say that it is clear from Members across the House that we will not accept any further delay to the due diligence regulations, and that they must be placed not just—

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

## Parthenon Marbles: British Museum Act 1963

11 am

**Martin Vickers (in the Chair):** I will call Alberto Costa to move the motion, and then I will call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge and the Minister. As is the convention in 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Parthenon marbles and the British Museum Act 1963.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I declare at the outset that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Greece, and yesterday I attended a lunch with parliamentarians at the Greek embassy—I hasten to add that I paid for my lunch in advance at a cost of £35. I know that the Minister, who is my predecessor as Chair of the Committee on Standards, would welcome and expect nothing less than my making that declaration.

I welcome the Minister to his place, and I hope he is enjoying his role as what he and I once termed the “Minister for fun,” although I do not know how much fun he has been having over the last few months.

I am here today not for Greece but for my South Leicestershire constituents—who, like the constituents of many colleagues, are highly cultured people—and for all British people, who I think could benefit from a deal with Greece on the Parthenon marbles. The discussion about the Parthenon marbles, which reside in the British Museum, is very well known. I want to highlight at the outset that this is not a debate about the background to how the British Museum acquired these marbles, nor is it a debate about apportioning blame or arguing that the British Museum, its trustees or the British people have some form of moral responsibility to return these artefacts.

The sole and exclusive purpose of this debate is to put forward a proposition to benefit my South Leicestershire constituents and the constituents of all MPs across the United Kingdom, on whether a new and positive opportunity has presented itself to the United Kingdom, having left the European Union, to decide how it wishes to forge stronger relationships with each EU member state.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. He is right to say that this is about not just his constituents but constituents across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I want to read a quote from a report by the eminent historian and senior adviser to Policy Exchange, Sir Noel Malcolm. He found that:

“the claim that Elgin’s removal of the sculptures was illegal is false; the claim that his actions were invalidated by coercive bribery is false; the claim that he acted against the clear wishes of the Greek community is certainly unproven and probably false; the claim that his actions saved the Marbles from an ongoing process of serious damage, dispersal and destruction is certainly true.”

That should be the Government’s clear and unequivocal position.

**Alberto Costa:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very valued view. I reiterate that this debate has nothing to do with how the marbles came to be acquired by the British Museum. The hon. Gentleman may well be right to quote that individual. My only interest in this debate is to find out whether, in the 21st century, there is a deal to be had that would benefit his constituents. If he bears with me, I will come to the deal in a moment.

The issue at hand is whether a new and positive opportunity has presented itself to the United Kingdom, having left the European Union, to decide how it wishes to forge stronger relationships with EU member states, and in this case with the Hellenic Republic. We all agree that the Parthenon marbles are a symbol of national identity. They are to the Hellenic Republic what the Elizabeth Tower—formerly the Clock Tower, colloquially known as “Big Ben”—is to us in the UK. The marbles were sculpted in the 5th century BC, when Athens was in her prime, and they adorned the Parthenon. They were the backdrop to the golden age of philosophy, democracy and art. These sculptures would have been admired in their original glory by the likes of Plato and Socrates, and they would have served as inspiration to Sophocles, other great playwrights and now legendary thinkers.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend will know Socrates famously said that the only thing worth knowing is that we know very little, but we do know that these marbles are part of western civilisation. They are not exclusively part of Greek civilisation; we all have ownership of them, and the British Museum’s stewardship has been profound and valued. Are we to return every Canaletto to Italy or gain every Hockney back from abroad?

**Alberto Costa:** Most certainly not. I thank my right hon. Friend for his valued contribution. That is precisely the issue that I do not wish to debate. He may well be absolutely correct to say that these sculptures are of such western significance, and that the way in which they were acquired by the British Museum may have been entirely lawful. That is not the purpose of the debate. My right hon. Friend is an excellent individual for wanting to achieve a deal that would benefit his constituents in Lincolnshire.

**Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Alberto Costa:** I will make a further point first.

Let me be clear: this is not a debate about returning all the treasures in the British Museum. If it were, we might be here for another century. I put on record that I collect antiquities, so the idea that they should all be returned to their countries of origin is not one that I share.

This is a very specific debate about one isolated group of items that have a strong identity with a friendly allied country. That identity, and that alone, means there is an opportunity for the United Kingdom to materially benefit from some form of deal or agreement that goes beyond simply possessing the marbles in the British Museum. What sort of creative but dignified win-win scenario could be reached between the UK and Greece?

**Andrew George:** I congratulate the hon. Member both on securing this debate and on the manner in which he is approaching it. He is absolutely right that we should not stray into the areas that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) are getting involved in by arguing about the past.

I declare my interest as chair of the British Association for the Reunification of the Parthenon Sculptures and as someone who has campaigned on this issue. I think it would be better to look forward. The UK’s relationship with the European Union is irrelevant to the strength of the case for having a deal with the Greeks on a return.

Going forward, we need to undertake a gracious act. We have a dishonourable past on this issue, and there is a way to redeem ourselves by doing the honourable thing. We are on the cusp of being able to do that, given the chairmanship of the British Museum and the current political environment—I hope the Minister will confirm that.

**Martin Vickers (in the Chair):** Order. Interventions should be somewhat briefer than that.

**Andrew George:** Sorry, Mr Vickers.

**Alberto Costa:** I welcome the contribution of the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George), just as I welcome the contributions of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). It is not so much about making a gracious gesture. My argument is about the possibility of achieving a win-win for our two respective countries that offers the United Kingdom material benefits beyond the mere possession of the marbles in the British Museum.

What if consideration were given to returning the marbles over time, perhaps over a generation—20 or 30 years—as a temporary or permanent loan, or through some other legal device? In return, I would expect the Hellenic Republic to lend some of its most highly prized treasures to be exhibited, on a rolling basis, not just in the British Museum but in principal museums across the whole United Kingdom.

**Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate, to which I am largely sympathetic, even as a member of the British Museum. He speaks of a win-win, for which the Lewis chessmen are a template. One of the most iconic parts of the British Museum’s collection, they were found in Uig in Lewis, in my constituency, in 1831. Six pieces of the set have been returned on a long-term loan to Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway, where they are much admired, 11 are in the National Museum of Scotland, and the remainder are here in London at the British Museum. Perhaps the score is not even, but a deal is there to be done, and the Lewis chessmen provide a template for what the hon. Gentleman wants to achieve.

**Alberto Costa:** I thank the hon. Member for citing the welcome example of those artefacts, which I have enjoyed viewing on a number of occasions.

I want to ensure that every Member of Parliament and, most importantly, our constituents are able to access and see at first hand some of Greece’s most

valued treasures. Let me give some examples: the Antikythera mechanism, that ancient Greek clockwork gadget that some have ascribed with a connection to Archimedes—it is basically the world’s first clockwork device, and it could be called a computer; the dazzling treasures of Philip II of Macedon, reputedly the father of Alexander the Great; the bronze statue of Zeus; or indeed the famed golden mask of Agamemnon, which was my introduction to the treasures of Greece when I read the “Collins Children’s Encyclopedia” at the age of six, back in 1977. Greece is replete with superb treasures. Imagine if we had some of those fabulous treasures on rotation in the Leicester Museum to benefit my constituents, or in the National Museum of Scotland or the Ulster Museum.

**Sir John Hayes:** Or in Spalding.

**Alberto Costa:** Or in Spalding, or any other principal museum across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Indeed, the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff would be a prime candidate, as I am sure the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism, and many of his Rhondda constituents, would agree. The North Lincolnshire Museum, which serves many of your constituents, Mr Vickers, would make a wonderful temporary home for some of Greece’s greatest treasures.

I propose that Greece goes further. The agreement with Greece should permit the same rules for British citizens that apply to Greek citizens when visiting the Acropolis Museum, which is a splendid new museum in the foothills of the Acropolis that could potentially house the marbles. Greece could show its goodwill by allowing British citizens free access to view the marbles in their new purpose-built potential home overlooking the Parthenon.

There is already tremendous friendship and goodwill between our two countries. In 2023, more than 4.5 million British tourists flocked to Greece—the highest number on record. Of course, we in the UK also benefit from thousands of Greeks coming here to study and work. Indeed, some call the UK their home, and they enrich our country.

Let us also not forget our shared history: Britain stood shoulder to shoulder with Greece in world war two. Churchill is often quoted as saying during that war that, “We will not say that Greeks fight like heroes, but that heroes fight like Greeks.” That is a tribute to their courage and loyalty, and to the unshakable bonds between our two nations—not just our history but our shared values and mutual respect.

Greece and Britain are democratic families. Most families have their disputes, but Greece and the UK have none, except this one. We now have an opportunity to heal a decades-long disagreement, and to turn the one and only issue that has ever caused our nations to argue into a triumph of teamwork—a win-win exchange that brings superb Greek treasures to our shores, free museum entrance for British tourists in Athens, and sees the marbles back on home soil, overlooking the Parthenon.

I would be grateful to the Minister if he would, at the very least, commit to writing to me with responses not just to the points that I have raised but, especially, to the following questions. First, have the Government had any communication with Greek authorities since early

July 2024 about the status of the marbles? If so, will the Minister write to me outlining the substance of those communications, when they took place and between whom?

Secondly, do the Government consider that under current UK law, the British Museum trustees have the authority to temporarily lend the artefacts to the Acropolis Museum? If so, will the Minister write to me about the terms under which such a temporary loan to the Acropolis Museum could be made?

Thirdly, if it is the Government’s view, on the other hand, that the British Museum trustees do not have the authority, under current UK law, to temporarily lend the artefacts to the Acropolis Museum, what legal changes would be required—and to which Act or Acts—to permit a temporary or permanent loan, with the British Museum trustees retaining legal ownership of the marbles?

Fourthly, under what circumstances would the UK Government be prepared to undertake an assessment of whether there is an opportunity for a mutually beneficial agreement with Greece about the future status of the artefacts? In other words, what conditions would need to be met for the Government to consider it possible that an opportunity presents itself for the UK to enhance its relationship with Greece by viewing the artefacts as an instrument to advance Britain’s material interests?

Throughout my speech, I have sought to avoid apportioning any blame about the historical acquisition of the artefacts. I have also made it clear that the debate wholly and exclusively concerns the use of these specific artefacts to enhance Britain’s relations with Greece through a win-win, mutually beneficial partnership. This debate should in no way give succour to any suggestion that Britain is under a moral duty to repatriate the artefacts, nor does it seek to argue or give strength to any third-party argument that other artefacts possessed by any UK-based museum should also be returned to the country of origin. I do not and never have held that view. As I said at the outset, my sole focus is on how to benefit my South Leicestershire constituents, and MPs’ constituents across the whole of the United Kingdom, by using the artefacts as an instrument to materially benefit their interests.

11.19 am

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant):** Kalimera, Mr Vickers. It is very good to have this debate and I commend the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) for bringing it to the House. Interestingly, it is the first one on this issue in this Parliament, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak about it.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that UK relations with Greece are extremely warm and tender, and have been for many centuries in many regards. Perhaps Lord Byron is best known in the UK for his poetry, and for being

“mad, bad and dangerous to know”,

but in Greece, he is considered to be quite a hero. That is why I am delighted that we are in the process of having the statue of Lord Byron moved to Hyde Park, where it will have a more prominent display. I know that the Greek Government have been supportive of that. For that matter, I have been to one production of Oedipus in the last few months, and there have been



[Chris Bryant]

two—albeit rather updated—versions here. I think we all know that Greek culture is a really important part of our foundational understanding of what it is to be a modern democracy. Indeed, the word “democracy” comes from two Greek words, and “telephone”, “oligarchy” and so many other parts of our language are determined by their Greek origins.

The hon. Gentleman was also absolutely right to point to the many millions of British people who go to Greece every year. I think one in four British people goes to Spain every year and one in six British people goes to Greece. That is why it is so important that in the conversations I have had, particularly with my Greek counterparts, both as Tourism Minister and as Culture Minister, we have often focused on those issues more than anything else.

We want to enhance the relationship. This is nothing to do with being a member of the European Union or not being a member of the European Union. I was really delighted only a couple of weeks ago to be invited as a Culture Minister—I think it is the first time this has happened since Brexit—to the informal meeting of Culture Ministers in Warsaw. There are so many areas in which our cultural relationships are intrinsically linked with Greece, not least in our discussions about Ukraine and security in the eastern Balkans. There are so many areas in culture and security where our geopolitical relationship with Greece is absolutely vital. That is nothing to do with whether we are a member of the European Union. That is why we want to press the reset button on our relationship with the EU.

**Andrew George:** Will the Minister give way?

**Chris Bryant:** I will, but it will limit the amount of time I have to respond to the questions.

**Andrew George:** I welcome the Minister’s opening remarks, particularly about Lord Byron, who, of course, was opposed to Lord Elgin’s actions regarding the removal of the Parthenon sculptures. Clearly, the specific point for today is whether it is possible, under the 1963 Act, for the British Museum to arrange a loan, and whether the Minister and the Government would stand in its way.

**Chris Bryant:** If the hon. Gentleman had let me get on to that subject, we would have got there earlier, but he got to make his point—I think he divided the speech he would otherwise have made into two interventions. That is not something that I ever did when I was—

**Andrew George:** Of course not.

**Chris Bryant:** That is the use of irony, which is also, of course, another fundamentally Greek concept.

I want to say at the outset that the marbles are an extraordinarily significant and important part of Greek and—I would argue—western artistic and architectural understanding. Nobody should ever diminish their importance. Indeed, it is upsetting to think of previous moments when the Acropolis was used as an arsenal, and a big explosion ended up destroying large parts of it. That was many centuries ago. The marbles were built between 447 BC and 438 BC by Phidias, who was one of the greatest of all Greek artists and sculptors. He also designed and built the great statue of Zeus at

Olympia, which was one of the seven great wonders of the world, along with the hanging gardens of Babylon and so on.

Many of us who have been to see, both here and in Athens, all the different elements of the marbles know how extraordinary they are, although I worry that we do not quite see them in the brilliance that people would have seen them originally. We know now, from lots of research that has been conducted, that they would have been painted or tinted in some way, and they would really have stuck out. The battle of the Centaurs and the Lapiths, and the frieze with the Panathenaic procession, would have looked very different from how we experience them today.

This is a debate that has gone on for 200 years, although I think the first direct bid from the Greek Government to the UK Government was back in 1983, and it was turned down in 1984. I should make some things very clear. First, the Parthenon marbles—or the Elgin marbles, whatever we want to call them—are not the property of the UK Government. That is sometimes misunderstood, because in different countries, parts of the national patrimony are actually under the direct ownership of the Government. We do not have that structure in the UK. From the outset, the British Museum was set up as an independent body. Its trustees are given fiduciary responsibilities under the British Museum Act 1963 now—it was originally under previous Acts before that—and they have to adhere by them. If they do not, they will find themselves in court. That is one of the aspects of this debate that we have to bear in careful consideration.

One of the questions that has been raised fairly regularly is whether it is legally possible for there to be an indefinite loan. I want to be clear about that issue, because I noted that an article in *The Daily Telegraph*—I think it followed a conversation that the hon. Member for South Leicestershire had with the paper—talked about an indefinite loan. Let me be absolutely clear that the British Museum Act 1963 states in section 3, on the keeping and inspection of collections:

“Subject to the provisions of this Act, it shall be the duty of the Trustees of the British Museum to keep the objects comprised in the collections of the Museum within the authorised repositories of the Museum, except in so far as they may consider it expedient to remove them temporarily for any purpose connected with the administration of the Museum and the care of its collections.”

It is possible for loans to be enabled through an open individual export licence. They are granted by Government, but can be granted only for up to three years. Obviously, the working assumption of anything that is temporary—a temporary licence—is that it is guaranteed that the items are returning. That puts paid under existing law to any idea of an indefinite or permanent loan.

I have read articles where people in Greece say that they are not interested in a loan anyway, because a loan implies that the marbles still belong to the British Museum rather than to Greece. The important point that I am trying to clarify—because I think there has been some misunderstanding—is that under existing law, it would be impossible for there to be a permanent or indefinite loan. The trustees would be required, in seeking a licence to export, to show that they were absolutely certain that the items were returning. I do not think that would be easy if they had arranged a permanent or indefinite loan—the point being that we

would have to change the law. The immediate question that the hon. Member may ask is whether we are intending to change the law. We have no intention to change the law.

I will respond to some of the hon. Member's other questions in writing. He asked about conversations or communications with the Greek Government on this issue since last July. I have met several Ministers, including Culture Ministers and Tourism Ministers, at various different times. The only occasion on which this issue was mentioned was when the Tourism Minister came to see me on 4 November last year, and she very briefly raised the matter. We mostly talked about tourism, but there was a brief mention of the Parthenon sculptures. I will check if there have been any other communications from the Greek Government since last July, but I am not sure there have been. I may be wrong, so I will write to the hon. Member.

There are provisions in the 1963 Act for temporary loans, and my understanding is that the chairman of the British Museum has been in some discussions. We have not been party to those discussions, but he has briefly outlined some of the issues that have arisen, both to me and to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. I am not aware of any further developments in that area in recent months. If a suggestion of a temporary loan were to come from the British Museum, there is a process for considering that under existing law, but that would—

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

11.30 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Safety of Humanitarian Workers: Conflict Zones

[EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Mr Tom Morrison** (Cheadle) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the safety of humanitarian workers in conflict zones.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank those who have attended the debate and the Minister for his presence, which is greatly appreciated. Today, we face more conflicts across the world than at any point since world war two. Some 343 million people face hunger and starvation, while one in six children—473 million—live in conflict zones or are displaced, which is the most in recorded history. Despite the dangers, there are an estimated half a million workers in these areas attempting to support those who desperately need it. Rather than running away from the danger, they are running towards it, in an attempt to provide aid, shelter and support to people in need. We should be celebrating them, but instead, we are letting them down.

Last year, 2024, was the deadliest year on record for humanitarian workers, with at least 325 aid workers killed. The majority of those were killed in Gaza. However, the crisis spans across multiple conflict zones, with recorded attacks on aid workers in areas such as Ukraine, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia.

Despite being protected under international humanitarian law, these workers are under daily threat from conflict violence such as shelling and shootings. They often face violent intimidation, and there have been several incidents of kidnapping and the use of sexual violence against them. While this happens, the agencies and organisations impacted cannot speak, whether that is due to fear of reprisals or worry that their funding will be cut and access blocked. Many of the people I spoke to while preparing for this debate did so under the condition of anonymity. They need a voice, and today I hope the House can provide one.

Members will be aware of the awful killing of 15 paramedics and rescue workers on 23 March in Rafah. The bodies of the workers were found buried in shallow graves a week later next to their vehicles, which had been crushed. While the Israeli military were quick to claim that they had fired on “suspicious vehicles” driving in the dark without emergency lights or headlights on, video footage released of the attack showed that those claims were false, and that not only were the emergency lights on and flashing, but the drivers left the vehicles as the gunfire started. The Israeli military have since investigated the incident and conceded that there was an “operational misunderstanding” and “a breach of orders during a combat setting”, which led to the killings. However, there has still been no independent investigation into the incident.

People will not have missed the significance of the fact that the attack on Red Crescent workers came almost a year to the day after the World Central Kitchen aid convoy attack in April 2024, which took the lives of seven aid workers, three of them British citizens. In that tragic incident, the convoy's route had been co-ordinated in advance, but the co-ordinates were misidentified.

[Mr Tom Morrison]

The humanitarian notification system is used to alert parties in conflict zones to the location of aid and humanitarian workers and their facilities, in order to protect workers in conflict zones. One agency told me how the system used in Gaza is completely inadequate and often ignored. They said:

“At this point we are using the HNS as an accountability measure, not a protective one”.

Another worker who supported a charity working in the refugee camps around the occupied territories of Palestine described to me how the camps he worked in were managed, with no armed support or protection. There had been times when he and the team he was with were completely outnumbered by people clambering for help and support—they were desperate, so naturally things became fevered and chaotic. He said:

“The safest I felt was when I was in the hotel two hours away, surrounded by metal detectors and armed guards. But during the day I was in the camps, with no support or guards in sight—we were completely alone and forgotten”.

A further aid worker told me:

“When you congregate groups of people your chance of being targeted increases massively. We do our best to limit numbers but every single one of our beneficiaries and us...are placed inadvertently at risk whenever we work.”

The picture these workers paint tells a similar story time and again: that humanitarian workers are often alone and unsupported, with no way to defend themselves.

Now known as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, Sudan’s war has seen over 12 million people displaced and over 30 million people needing humanitarian aid. However, more than 387 aid workers have been killed in Sudan over the past five years, with a large proportion of them being national workers. In the last year, 18 workers have been kidnapped. There is mounting evidence that those attacks were deliberately targeted, including aerial bombardments, attacks on refugee camps and violent incidents against local responders.

Islamic Relief, which has offices in the area, has had to relocate several times. One person told me that

“each move was a desperate escape from advancing militias, looters and gunmen. Roads were lined with armed checkpoints, towns were besieged, our office in Sennar even became a target.”

Because of that, many aid agencies are now pausing or suspending their operations in Sudan, leading to a worsening of the humanitarian crisis. I could go on with examples, each worse and more harrowing than the last.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a significant speech on something that should concern us all. Does he agree that wherever these abuses are found, whether in Gaza, Sudan or any other theatre, they do not happen by accident? They happen because forces such as the Israeli Defence Forces, for example, are effectively given licence to do this by their Government. That is why, on a Government-to-Government basis, there is something that this country can actively do to make it clear to the Governments responsible for this treatment that it is not acceptable, and that we will take action to highlight their abuse and remove support from them.

**Mr Morrison:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will speak later about an element of political will that we can partake in to make sure that we crack down on these abuses.

When this debate was secured, I was inundated with responses from organisations and workers who wanted to share their stories and have their voices heard. Although those stories are deeply personal, they all contain the same theme. People all felt that they had been forgotten.

As I said at the beginning, these workers are running into danger to save lives. They are often local responders, people who live in the communities impacted, and are often volunteers. It is incumbent on this House and the Government to do all we can to ensure that those volunteers are safe, protected and supported. Most of the organisations and workers who contacted me mentioned political will. It is clear that the Government need to do more to provide clear, consistent leadership on the world stage. Without that, they risk undermining the UK’s commitment to international law.

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that bomb disposal experts, such as the British national recently injured in Gaza, play a vital humanitarian role in conflict zones, and that attacks on humanitarian facilities are a grave breach of international law, which must be addressed urgently through prosecutions?

**Mr Morrison:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. All breaches of international humanitarian law need to be properly investigated and those responsible prosecuted.

In April 2025, the UN’s Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs emphasised that there is no shortage of robust legal frameworks to ensure that humanitarian workers are protected, but

“what is lacking is the political will to comply.”

Many of us have sat in the Chamber and heard the Government roll out the same line time and again when asked to apply pressure on state and non-state actors to comply with international law. The UK Government should not underestimate their power to influence global change; now is the time to step up and be a leader.

I therefore urge the Government to push for greater accountability when violations occur and prosecute those who attack aid workers as breaches of international law. I urge them to work with the UN to ensure that better and more responsive humanitarian notification systems are in place so that they work as protective measures, not just accountability measures. We should train partners to improve security procedures and responsibilities under international humanitarian law, and provide mental health support for workers who have served in conflict zones. I also urge the Government to introduce a presumption of denial for arms exports to Governments listed as human rights concerns in the human rights report from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Finally, the Government must reverse their decision to cut international aid. The world faces the biggest humanitarian crisis since 1945. Not only is cutting the aid budget counterproductive, but it damages our country’s standing in the world. It is clear from the stories many of us have heard that charities and NGOs that are managing vital work in some of the most dangerous



situations need more resources to protect their staff and volunteers. The Government must reconsider that dreadful decision.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to open this debate, Ms Lewell. I wanted to use my platform to give a voice to people and organisations that, for many reasons, cannot speak for themselves. We have experienced the most dangerous year ever for humanitarian workers and there is no sign that the situation will improve. It is therefore vital that the Government act now.

2.41 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. You have been a good friend of mine for many years; it is nice to see you in your place and doing well.

First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) on leading this debate. I know that others who participate will support what he has said, and they may also give some examples of areas on which we need to focus. There is no doubt that humanitarian workers face unprecedented dangers merely by doing their jobs. We are all greatly in awe of anyone who does those jobs, because of the courage, bravery, dedication and commitment that they show, so I say a big thank you to them. Humanitarian workers doing aid jobs should always be protected. Unfortunately, we have seen too many examples across the world where they have not been offered protection by those who are in a position to do so. So I recognise what the hon. Gentleman said and the importance of giving them the safety and support that they need.

Aid workers are pivotal in providing aid and medical assistance, and they operate in high-tension environments to protect those who are suffering as a result of war. Aid workers really are the people who rush in at the last minute to give innocent people protection and safety, and the hon. Member was right to underline that. It is imperative that we do all we can to support aid workers in doing their jobs, so it is important that those of us who can be in the Chamber are here to discuss giving aid workers the support that they need across the world.

Stats are always important, because they give us an idea of what is happening across the world. The UN data is clear. It says that 2023 and 2024 were among the deadliest years for aid workers. In 2024 alone, some 280 humanitarian workers were killed. Increasingly, aid workers are being specifically targeted. It is not a case of them being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Aid workers are in these places doing their jobs at the right time, but they find themselves being targeted by those who, in many cases, should be there to protect them, and who sometimes just want to destroy the work that they are doing, because they know the impact that it has.

Better protection mechanisms are imperative to preserve the safety of aid workers and to ensure that they are able to do their jobs to the best of their ability. Today in this House, I commend aid workers for what they do and I wish only that others could recognise it in the same way. Not only do aid workers risk their lives every day, but they are a point of contact for those in desperate need. We must recognise the good work they do and protect them, and make sure that that happens.

I will give some recent examples. As the hon. Member for Cheadle referred to, we have seen in Sudan that aid has been obstructed by the Sudanese armed forces.

Sudan is one of those countries where the depravity, violence, cruelty and evil of man against man, woman and children are incredibly hard to understand.

The United Nations has reported that 22 aid workers have been killed in Sudan since the conflict there began in April 2023, not to mention the depravity that the killers have shown to female aid workers, who have reported sexual exploitation. I am of a generation who always looked out for ladies. We would open the door for ladies, and let them through before moving through ourselves. We would always carry their bags home. People may say that those are silly things, wee small things, but that was the respect we had for women and ladies when I was growing up. Today, that respect is no longer in the places where it should be. Evil seems to have its way, and I find it incredibly difficult to read some of the stories in the press.

Furthermore, the safety of humanitarian workers in Afghanistan has been extremely compromised since the Taliban took power in 2021. The United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs has identified Afghanistan as one of the most hazardous environments for aid workers globally. Between 2022 and 2024, at least 38 aid workers were killed, predominantly those who carried out polio vaccinations and other medical workers. Some of those involved in education have also been targeted and killed. The restriction on female participation has increased dramatically: women must adhere to a strict dress code and have “male guardianship”. Those are just a couple of examples of the prevalent situation. As an international counterparty, we must do more to protect those who are doing their best to help other people.

The hon. Member for Cheadle was right to mention the aid budget. It is disappointing that the Government have decided to reduce the aid budget; the impact of that will be great. In my constituency, many church groups, through NGOs and the work of their missionary societies, help those who need vaccinations or other treatments, whether for polio or AIDS. The aid budget has done all that good work, but now, unfortunately, there is a question mark over the extent to which it can continue at the same level. I agree with the hon. Gentleman and put on the record my support for what he has said.

The Minister will say that money is tight—he is right, in a way—and I understand that, but something could be done. I suggest that one thing that might fill some of the gap—not all of it, financially, but some of it—is working with church groups across the United Kingdom. They are already out there in Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria, for example, and it is possible to work alongside them. If the Minister has any thoughts and ideas on that, I would appreciate hearing them. A partnership could be arrived at so that such groups could do some of the work that cannot be done with the reduced budget that the Minister now has.

To conclude, we must work alongside our counterparts in the UN to ensure that humanitarian workers are protected. In 2024, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, alongside other countries, formed the ministerial group for the protection of humanitarian personnel. What can be done? The group recommended two practical but important things. It pushed for enhanced digital tracking and safety systems,

[Jim Shannon]

and for improved local partnerships. Humanitarian workers are always in dangerous situations, given the nature of their work so those partnerships with those on the ground are important. When things go wrong, lessons need to be learned.

I very much look to the Minister for his commitment and response. I know he will never be found wanting in answering my questions and I thank him for that. We must support this initiative and ensure the safety of those who work so hard. Again, well done to the hon. Member for Cheadle. I also look forward to the contributions of the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), and the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), on how we can do this better together.

2.49 pm

**Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) for securing this important debate.

As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I have been fortunate in meeting those on the frontline of humanitarian responses, often in some of the most difficult and dangerous circumstances. They are individuals who willingly step into uncertainty. Many do so for less financial reward than they could find elsewhere; they are driven not by salary, but rather by the conviction that service to others is worth so much more. Their work is not getting easier. From Gaza to Sudan, from the DRC to Ukraine, humanitarian workers are confronting a growing number of complex emergencies, where conflict, displacement, disease, food insecurity and climate disruption are regular occurrences.

In 2024, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project estimated that one in eight people worldwide were exposed to armed conflict. Every day, thousands continue their work, delivering aid, supporting fragile health systems and helping communities rebuild. International humanitarian law exists to protect these workers, but in recent years that protection has been eroded. Eight convoys have been attacked, humanitarian staff detained and entire operations halted due to insecurity. The apparent lack of consequences for these incidents sends a dangerous message not only to those in the field, but to the international system as a whole.

The UK should be at the forefront of challenging that trend. We must continue to be a voice to uphold the Geneva convention, strengthen accountability mechanisms and press for practical tools, such as early warning systems in negotiated humanitarian corridors, that allow aid to reach those who need it most. The protection of aid workers should never be up for negotiation and must not depend on whether or not a crisis is in the headlines.

Sadly, the very resources needed to carry out this life-saving work are under threat. The reduction in the UK's official development assistance from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI by 2027 will lead to the closure of health programmes, education services and nutrition schemes in some of the world's most fragile states. At the same time, cuts to United States Agency for International Development in the United States are significantly adding to the pressure that both aid organisations and workers are feeling.

What we are seeing, in real terms, is food rotting at the border crossings, vaccines that cannot be delivered, and aid workers unable to access food, fuel, shelter and basic supplies. The result is not only increased suffering on the ground, but a shrinking of the humanitarian space at precisely the moment when we need it to expand. That retreat is not just a budgetary issue; it is a strategic and moral one. When the UK steps back, others fill the void—often with radically different intentions. We risk weakening the international order that we helped to build; in doing so, we abandon those who continue to act in our name, under our flag and in line with the values we claim to defend.

The Government must also ensure that British citizens serving in humanitarian roles overseas are supported, recognised and valued. One of my constituents, who deployed as an aid worker to Ukraine, shared with me his experience of working under the threat of missile attacks without heating, running water or electricity. He was not seeking praise. He was asking whether this House values public service.

The introduction of the humanitarian medal was an important step, but the decision to exclude from eligibility those who deployed to Ukraine prior to July 2023 is deeply disappointing. For those who answered the call during the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe, the absence of formal recognition feels not only unfair but inconsistent with the spirit of the medal itself. The previous Government explicitly removed the five-year rule, and allowed eligibility only for events from 19 July 2023 onwards. Minister, how many of the British humanitarians who have deployed across the globe will be ineligible for the medal due to the 2023 cut-off point? I would like the Minister to use this opportunity to pledge to remove that cut-off, so that all those who answered the humanitarian call can be recognised.

**Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): Would my hon. Friend be so kind as to pass on my gratitude to his constituent, and echo my gratitude for anyone from our country who puts themselves in harm's way—not for financial recognition, but for humanity, which transcends politics altogether?

**Edward Morello**: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his intervention. From someone who has in fact put himself in harm's way, that is a wonderful sentiment.

There is also the broader issue of how we treat those who work on the frontline of global emergencies, often representing this country's values abroad. That includes how we fund and support the organisations they work through. We should remember that humanitarian work is not only about crisis response, but prevention, resilience and stability. When that work is undermined, it is not just the world's most vulnerable who pay the price; it is all of us, because the effects of conflict, poverty and displacement do not stop at borders. They shape our security, trade and the kind of world we leave behind. I hope that this debate will serve as a moment to reflect not only on what humanitarian workers do, but on what we owe them, in policy, in practice and in principle.

2.55 pm

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell, and I extend my gratitude to the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) for securing this extremely important

debate. Like others who have spoken, I cannot think of a more noble profession than that of humanitarian aid workers. These are the people who go into areas that everyone else is trying to flee; their work is driven by compassion, courage and commitment to the most desperate and vulnerable. That work is simply indispensable. It is all the more shocking that conflict zones have become deadlier for those trying to help. Aid workers have been kidnapped, injured and killed while performing their duties. Hospitals, paramedics and aid convoys, clearly marked and protected under international law, have been deliberately targeted or caught in the crossfire.

In some places, providing aid has become as dangerous as fighting in the war itself. The statistics speak for themselves. In Gaza, at least 418 aid workers have been killed since October 2023, almost all Palestinian, but including at least eight internationals. At least 1,400 health workers have been killed, although there may be some overlap with the previous number, but that includes health workers and aid workers such as those in the Palestine Red Crescent Society. At least 42 aid workers have been killed so far in 2025.

In Lebanon, Israel has killed over 200 aid workers. Last week I attended a viewing of a documentary called “Under Fire: Israel’s War on Medics”, in which we learned the tactic chillingly called the “double tap”. The double tap is where an invading force will attack a building or location, and wait until the aid workers, paramedics and first responders arrive. After they have arrived, it will then attack the same place again. That has resulted in the death and maiming of many, many aid workers.

**Cameron Thomas:** The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, which rang an alarm bell in my mind. What he is describing are the same tactics being used by the state of Israel, or at least its Government, as were exhibited by the IRA back in the 1980s: a bomb would be set off and once help had arrived, a secondary device would be set off at the point of evacuation. Does he recognise that as terrorism, as I do?

**Iqbal Mohamed:** That is the classic definition of terrorism, in my view. Some of the killings, such as the murder by Israel earlier this year of 14 emergency workers and a UN worker on 23 March, are reported, but many are not. In Gaza, the lives of those aid workers are casually and brutally taken by the Israeli regime, destroying the entire infrastructure of civilised life in Gaza, and especially the healthcare system. They are targeting and have deliberately targeted the healthcare system as a tactic in war, and to achieve their aims of ethnic cleansing. Their policy is to make life simply unliveable for the Palestinians.

I am not the only one who is struck by the contrast in how the Government respond to humanitarian outrages in Ukraine, with their calls for more sanctions and measures on Russia, and their apparent fatalism when such attacks take place in Gaza. Apparently, for this Government, some lives are more equal than others. That is not the case under international humanitarian law: a Palestinian life is equal to an Israeli life, which is equal to a Ukrainian life and every other life on this planet.

International law considers that all parties to a conflict are obligated to protect aid workers and ensure safe access to civilians in need. We must call for and provide greater accountability for those who target aid workers.

We must support stronger security measures and better co-ordination in dangerous areas. Most of all, we must never normalise these attacks.

To that end, I support the calls from the humanitarian charity Islamic Relief for the Government to urge all parties to a conflict to comply with international law, including obligations that relate to the passage of humanitarian supplies, equipment and personnel, and respecting and protecting aid workers; to lead efforts and strengthen commitments to protect aid workers, finalise the political declaration on the protection of humanitarian workers initiated by the Australia-led ministerial group, and commit to concrete actions that go beyond rhetoric, including reporting mechanisms and the monitoring of compliance; and to increase the funding for international and local humanitarian organisations that operate in conflict zones, to ensure they have the resources and protection needed to deliver aid safely.

I was absolutely flabbergasted when the Government decided to slash the aid budget to redirect funds towards the purchase of more bombs, bullets, tanks and drones. Will the Minister share the assessment of the impact of that decision on the safety and security of aid workers? Will it result in a risk of more conflict and wars than there would be if we actually supported the people in need?

3.2 pm

**Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) for securing this debate.

Across conflict lines from Gaza to South Sudan, the Congo, Syria and Ukraine, people wearing nothing more than a hi-vis vest risk, and too often lose, their lives to keep hope alive. The United Nations warns that 2024 is the deadliest year on record for humanitarian workers, with 325 having died that year, as we have heard. Of course, many of them died in Gaza, including seven people working for the food aid charity World Central Kitchen, who were killed in an Israeli strike. Those who died were Australian, Polish, British and Palestinian, along with a dual US-Canadian citizen. The thought that British-made arms could have been used in such strikes is completely unacceptable. The Liberal Democrats call on the Government to immediately suspend the supply of British arms exports to Israel.

Today, children are dying of starvation in Gaza as Israel prevents food aid from reaching them, while hospitals are destroyed and medical treatment vanishes under the Israeli bombardment. Those who provide lifesaving aid are dying alongside. The protection of committed humanitarian workers is not an abstract principle: it is vital under international humanitarian law and deserves to be properly funded. Safety training, armoured transport, secure radios and trauma counselling all cost money. Yet while danger rises, funding falls.

My constituents in Mid Dunbartonshire care, and are asking me to raise this issue with the Government so that the value and sacrifice of aid workers and medical staff are recognised. The UK aid budget dropped from nearly £15.5 billion in 2023 to £14 billion in 2024—down to 0.5% of national income—and Ministers are now floating a further cut to 0.3%. Every fraction shaved off forces agencies to cancel evacuations, postpone security



[Susan Murray]

upgrades and send workers out with less protection. Less money on the ledger means more names on the memorial.

We cannot credibly insist that combatants respect humanitarian space while dismantling the lifeline that keeps that space viable. I therefore encourage the Government to reassess their approach to aid funding and view it as a tool not just to help those in need but to prevent future conflict and protect aid workers. Alongside that, we need vigorous diplomacy to prosecute those who target aid workers. If we truly want a safer world, we must safeguard the people who deliver the world's help. Cutting aid does the opposite, and the price is paid in human lives.

3.6 pm

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) for securing this very important debate.

Our world is becoming more dangerous. Today, more than 120 conflict zones scar dozens of nations. The UN estimates that almost 90% of the resulting casualties are civilians, and the International Rescue Committee calculates that more than 300 million people are in need of humanitarian aid right now. That need is disproportionately concentrated in just a handful of countries. It is in those places, which are some of the world's most dangerous—Sudan, Gaza, Ukraine, Myanmar and others—that humanitarian aid workers are most needed and most under threat.

The most dangerous year on record for aid workers was 2024, in which at least 325 lost their lives, the overwhelming majority of whom were national, rather than international, staff. We face a difficult confluence of proliferating conflict, even as we reduce funding for development, stability building and humanitarian response. Conflict is changing: fewer wars are being fought between states, and more are fought within states by various armed groups, particularly in urban areas. Efforts towards conflict prevention and peacebuilding are not working, and global tensions are rising. The UK holds an important position in upholding and calling out abuses of international humanitarian law, and in its responsibility to fund development and aid in conflict zones.

I regret that the Labour Government have made the deepest cuts to international aid this century—a shameful retreat from previous Labour Government's legacy. It is shameful that the UK is not opposing but following the global trend of abandoning international solidarity, certainly when it comes to funding overseas development. I urge the Government to row back on their cuts to aid and stand steadfast as a global development leader.

Although development work needs money, it also requires the heavy lifting of diplomacy, not least to ensure adherence to international law, since aid workers today are facing increasing harm. Aid workers make personal sacrifices and place themselves in harm's way to deliver lifesaving assistance. It is deeply worrying, therefore, to see a growing disregard for humanitarian workers—indeed, for humanitarian law—in conflicts around the world.

Last month, I took part in the International Development Committee's trip to Geneva, where we met UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The IDC is investigating the protection of aid workers, and I look forward to the Minister receiving and reading our report. I was reassured by the ICRC that international humanitarian law is robust, strong and protective, and that there is no need for a renegotiation of the Geneva conventions, but I was concerned to hear that its implementation is becoming more and more problematic. The problem is not with the law but with non-compliance and attempts to undermine it. There must be more, and stronger, measures of accountability.

The Aid Worker Security Database counted 247 major attacks against aid workers in 2022, 281 in 2023, and 402 in 2024. Insecurity Insight has calculated that instances of drone-delivered explosives directed by named state forces towards aid or health programmes rose by a factor of 25 between 2022 and 2024. In written evidence to the International Development Committee, the organisation also testified that the expansion of violence in major conflict zones has coincided with rising attacks on humanitarian operations, particularly health facilities, camps for refugees and internally displaced people, and aid offices.

There have been far too many horrifying examples. Last year in Sudan, the ICRC lost two drivers to gunmen, and the World Food Programme lost three aid workers following aerial bombardment. Gaza has been by far the deadliest single location for aid workers, with over 212 losing their lives in the strip last year. The whole House was horrified at the end of March by Israel's killing of 15 aid workers, as mentioned by many Members.

The UK must lead on efforts to stop all attacks on aid workers. The recent cancellation of the conference of the high contracting parties to the fourth Geneva convention due to "profound differences" only underscores the growing challenges for those committed to upholding international law. The Government have repeatedly said they are using their Security Council seat and bilateral relations to encourage aid access and aid-worker protection; will the Minister share what specific bilateral meetings the Government have had with state and non-state actors regarding the protection of aid workers in Gaza, Sudan, South Sudan, Ukraine and Myanmar? What specific steps are they taking to build international support in multilateral forums for protecting aid workers and strengthening the legal frameworks that bind the actions of combatants?

Accountability is critical, both for justice and for deterrence. The UK provides funding for the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court through ODA. Will the Minister confirm whether, once most of the cuts occur in 2026-27, the UK will maintain contributions to international courts, including non-assessed discretionary spending?

The UK needs to ask itself an important question: what does standing up for international humanitarian law look like? We must be prepared to roll up our sleeves and tell our friends and allies to adhere to international humanitarian law or face consequential action. Will the Minister outline what the UK is doing to ensure that there is accountability for all those who attack aid workers?

Most aid worker casualties are nationals, not international, but last year three Britons were killed when Israel struck World Central Kitchen workers in Gaza. This appalling incident highlighted the ongoing need both for accountability and for the protection of the brave people who do humanitarian work overseas, including our own nationals. What steps is the Minister taking to safeguard British aid workers in conflict zones, and those who are completing British projects? I welcome the Government joining partners and allies in September to form a ministerial group focused on enhancing the protection of humanitarian personnel and reversing the growing trend of attacks on them, and urge the Government to push forward with that engagement.

Even as aid workers are kidnapped, wounded and killed, aid itself is too often treated as just another instrument of war. We can see this in specific conflicts. Israel's total blockade of all aid into Gaza, which has now been in place for more than 50 days, is deepening the already terrible suffering of Gazans. Yesterday, the ICJ opened hearings on precisely this point, and in the Chamber I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer) to confirm that the Government will recognise the Court's judgment, when it comes, on Israel's responsibility under international law to facilitate aid to the people of Gaza. I did not receive a reply then, so will this Minister please reply today?

Another conflict characterised by the denial of aid access is the ongoing war in Sudan. This catastrophe—the world's largest—has left 25 million people in need of food aid. Throughout, all sides have blocked humanitarian assistance to civilians.

Changes to warfare are having a profound impact on aid-worker safety. The more permissive environment regarding international humanitarian law threatens medical personnel and infrastructure, which are being targeted. Technological changes to warfare—particularly the use of drones and the rising prevalence of aerial bombardment—are increasing the peril faced by aid workers. Around 60% of aid-worker deaths in Gaza last year were attributable to aerial bombardment. How are the Government's efforts to safeguard aid workers and uphold international humanitarian law taking account of these specific dangers? How is the UK ensuring that accountability frameworks cover the use of drones and related tactics, such as double-tap strikes?

There is a false belief that democracies will automatically act ethically in war, but the current permissive nature in respect of adherence to IHL has shown that this is not the case. As defence investment increases, there is a need to train armed forces. The UK leads in that regard, so how can it share best practice to ensure that IHL is upheld in conflict zones?

The UK has a leading role to play in diplomatic efforts to ensure the protection of aid workers through upholding international humanitarian law, and I urge the Government to do so with the vigour we would expect from a leadership so experienced in that. But that must be in concert with playing a leadership role in international development, including the funding of deconfliction and the stabilisation of nations. The cuts to UK aid will only exacerbate conflict. I urge the Government to reconsider the cuts, return to spending

0.7% of GNI on ODA, and continue a proud UK legacy. Now, in this deadliest year, it is not the time to row back.

3.16 pm

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) on securing this debate. It is fair to say that hon. Members who have contributed today have demonstrated their knowledge and the conversations they have had with the sector. I think we all agree that those who work in the humanitarian aid sector, especially in conflict zones, do an incredibly important job under very challenging circumstances.

From multilateral to localised grassroots organisations, there are so many in the sector to acknowledge, but in the interests of time I will be brief. First, I should like to thank the International Committee of the Red Cross, the ICRC, which the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), and I have met recently. Its expertise and neutrality enables it to reach some of the most difficult areas, and it works in more than 90 countries. I also thank Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff, who I know work on the UK's humanitarian programmes; they are highly dedicated individuals, who often work around the clock. We are grateful for their efforts.

Mine Awareness Day was 4 April, and I pay tribute to the HALO Trust and Mines Advisory Group. Those are examples of Great British organisations that work globally to lead efforts in de-mining and restoring land in post-conflict communities. There are some remarkable achievements, but as HALO and MAG demonstrate, there is so much more to do if we are to reach a mine-free world.

Provisional ODA spend figures for 2024 show that £1.4 billion of bilateral ODA was spent on humanitarian assistance—an increase of 60% from 2023. That really underlines the impact of global crises and conflicts. In the 2023 international development White Paper, we outlined tackling conflict and state fragility as a priority. Part of our vision for 2030 was greater emphasis on improving foresight and conflict prevention.

It is also worth remembering that the UK is uniquely placed to be a leader in this area, with our groundbreaking data science, AI, machine learning, and open-source intelligence capabilities. That new technology can be used to expedite forecasting of conflict and mass atrocity risks, buying time for a response from a few months to a few years in advance. There are some specific questions I would like to ask the Minister today. Could he update us on what his Department is doing to continue that work, and what discussions he has had with the UK science, technology, and research sectors to leverage expertise into conflict prevention abroad?

As well as the clear humanitarian need of civilians in conflict zones, colleagues are right to raise concerns about the safety of humanitarian workers delivering aid. I would like to press the Minister on a few of those conflict zones.

First, I will turn to Ukraine. In January 2025, the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that there are 12.7 million Ukrainians in need, of which 6 million will be targeted by aid agencies in 2025. Can the Minister reassure us on what steps he is

[Wendy Morton]

taking to support the safety of aid workers operating near the frontlines? Disinformation, including Russian disinformation, is another challenge that can compromise the safety of aid workers. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of disinformation on the ability of humanitarian agencies to function in Ukraine? What steps is he taking to counter it?

In Sudan, millions of innocent people have been affected by the appalling conflict and the humanitarian need is dire. It was regrettable that the Foreign Secretary's conference in London failed to settle on a final communiqué among the parties present to agree a long-term political solution. Clearly, a transition to a truly inclusive civilian-led Government is crucial and we should not lose sight of that. On the ground, we know that aid access and delivery is an enduring challenge. What assessment has the Minister made of incidences of aid blocking in Sudan? What steps are being taken to protect humanitarian workers trying to deliver that aid?

In the middle east, we are in a very difficult moment with a breakdown of the ceasefire agreement in Gaza. We need this Government to ensure that the UK is a proactive participant in efforts to find a way through. On aid access, can the Minister update us on the practical efforts he is making to unblock the current situation, including updating us on recent engagement with the Government of Israel on this? What is his assessment of the amount of UK-funded aid that is getting through?

**Iqbal Mohamed:** In the earlier part of the current conflict, where aid was blocked, there were air drops from different nations in the UN. I am not aware of the participation of the UK Government. Does the right hon. Lady agree that there is an immediate need for every single channel through which aid can get into Gaza to be put in place and used?

**Wendy Morton:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I will leave the specific point of air drops to the Minister, and perhaps he will pick up on that. Wherever the conflict is, it is incumbent on all players to do the utmost to make sure that aid gets through where it is needed. That is why those of us on the Opposition Benches often do, and will continue to, press the Government when it comes to that important issue of access, as I have done this afternoon.

I would also be grateful for an update on the Minister's discussions following the deaths of the 15 aid workers in Gaza in March, and on the need for effective deconfliction in this conflict. Can he also tell us how his Department is working with the ICRC and other agencies to help ensure they can operate safely and to minimise the risks?

Finally, in Myanmar, despite a ceasefire agreed by the warring parties following the devastating earthquake, fighting has reportedly continued. We understand that it is a very hostile environment for traditional aid agencies operating in Myanmar, so the FCDO has opted for a grassroots approach to aid delivery. What recent assessment has the Minister made of the effectiveness of that approach in getting aid to where it is needed, and importantly, protecting aid workers? Has the earthquake affected the balance between working with localised grassroots organisations and more traditional humanitarian

agencies? If we are working with more multilateral agencies, what steps is he taking to ensure they can operate safely?

There are too many good humanitarian organisations, and sadly too many conflicts, to name and discuss them in the short time we have today, but I want to be clear that that in no way diminishes their importance, or the impact on civilians and humanitarian workers grappling with their consequences. As I bring my remarks to a close, I want to again put on record our thanks to all those who put themselves at risk to deliver life-saving support to people in desperate situations. We are living in a more dangerous world and there are more competing demands for humanitarian assistance. It is essential that these brave individuals can work safely and without fear, so they can focus on supporting the most vulnerable.

3.24 pm

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty):** It is a genuine pleasure to sit under your chairpersonship today, Ms Lewell, and I thank the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison) for securing this debate and highlighting the grave threats facing aid and humanitarian workers around the world. I say that with genuine sincerity, having spent many years working for humanitarian non-governmental organisations and the former Department for International Development, and as a former member of the International Development Committee, along with a number of hon. Members in this room. I have witnessed the courageous work of humanitarian workers, as well as that of staff from the FCDO—formerly the FCO—and DFID, in extremely challenging situations around the world. They have always operated in dangerous environments, but the threats they face today, as has been highlighted so powerfully, are escalating to intolerable levels, with many paying the ultimate price. Their protection is essential for agencies to operate, for our obligations under international law, and for our shared humanity. I welcome the International Development Committee's ongoing inquiry on this topic. Its focus on the safety and protection of those courageous individuals is timely and vital. We will engage with the Committee fully on that and consider its findings.

As I said, these issues are deeply personal to me. Along with the late and missed colleague of ours, Jo Cox, I have worked with many people, and I still have friends who are working in some of these environments and agencies, including in some of the circumstances that have been described. This is deeply personal for me. As colleagues will understand I obviously will not go into the details, but having worked with Oxfam, World Vision and many other organisations, I have seen this for myself.

It is absolutely right that Members highlighted that last year was the deadliest year for humanitarian personnel, with the situation in Gaza providing the most dangerous context. More than 400 aid workers have been killed there since October 2023, including three British citizens serving with World Central Kitchen. In March, attacks on a UN facility and a Palestinian Red Crescent Society convoy showed that Israel must do much more to prevent further tragedies, and I will come on to some of the specific comments on that in due course. Reports from Sudan highlight the tragic deaths of aid workers in the Zamzam camp. As has been highlighted, those



losses are part of a global trend driven by the scale, complexity and urbanisation of armed conflicts, but behind every incident is a family shattered, a team destabilised, and often a community and extremely vulnerable individuals left without assistance.

Fatalities are, of course, only part of the tragic picture. Aid workers face rising levels of injury, abduction and detention, with an immense psychological toll. They sometimes question whether their humanitarian logos and emblems help to distinguish them from parties to conflict, or increase their risks. Those workers must have basic assurances of protection, and they must not be targeted. The UK is committed to promoting compliance with international law, including international humanitarian law, and supporting mechanisms that protect those working in the world's most dangerous environments.

The hon. Member for Cheadle gave a powerful testimony as context for the debate and the wider risks, and he highlighted many of the contexts. I assure him that those workers are absolutely not forgotten. Importantly, he highlighted the volunteers, often locals, who are involved in these contexts, and raised a number of important questions. He specifically asked about mental health, and I assure him that the FCDO has funded additional mental health support for partners where there is an identified gap in available service provision.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as always, spoke powerfully and passionately, and I commend, as he did, the work of church groups in his constituency, and indeed all faith groups. We know that many faith groups in our constituencies, including my constituency of Cardiff South and Penarth, have partnerships with NGOs, and faith groups and others are crucial in responding in these circumstances. They are often the first responders and the first on the ground. The hon. Gentleman specifically asked me about Afghanistan. He will know that humanitarian operations in Afghanistan face serious access challenges, particularly for women, due to the Taliban ban on female aid workers. Despite those challenges, we have supported partners to negotiate local and case-by-case exemptions to continue the work and respond to the needs of women and girls.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) spoke about the convictions and values that drive humanitarian aid workers. I have seen that myself repeatedly, and we hugely value their personal duty and service. He asked some specific questions about the humanitarian medal. That has been awarded to those who responded to the Moroccan earthquake, the Libyan floods and the Gaza crisis, and we are still working through the consideration of other humanitarian emergencies. I appreciate his raising the point about eligibility. I will endeavour to come back to him on that, and I or one of my ministerial colleagues will write back to him in due course.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) raised the important issue of kidnappings and other incidents. The issue is not just those who die in attacks but those who are kidnapped and detained, and the psychological, and often physical, toll that that takes on them. He rightly highlighted a number of contexts, from Gaza to Lebanon. I do not accept his comparison with Ukraine, not least because I was in Ukraine a few weeks ago, under bombardment, and saw what was happening to civilians there. The

actions of my ministerial colleagues in relation to Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan and many other crises are substantial and sincere.

I certainly will not apologise for the difficult decisions we have had to take about ODA to keep the people of this country safe from the many threats that we face, and I will come on to that point in due course. The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley asked me specifically about Lebanon, and we use our diplomatic levers to press all parties to honour and respect the humanitarian notification system, which is a deconfliction mechanism to ensure that the location of humanitarian facilities and movements is entitled to protection under international humanitarian law. We are working to make sure that humanitarians are protected in that conflict and many others.

There were many other important contributions, including that made by the hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray). I will highlight a few points in response to some of those comments. It is important to note that we have seen not only state-on-state violence and other conflicts but non-state armed groups growing in number. That has increased the risk and complexity of many humanitarian environments, including across the Sahel. In 2023, according to the Aid Worker Security Database, non-state groups remained the most frequent perpetrators of incidents globally, but the proportion of incidents involving state actors increased. There are a whole series of factors at play here. We watch all of them closely and try to respond in the best way that we can.

On Gaza specifically, the Foreign Secretary spoke to the UN emergency relief co-ordinator, Tom Fletcher, on 14 March. The Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), spoke with him on 17 March. The Foreign Secretary spoke directly to Israeli Foreign Minister Sa'ar on 15 April and directly raised concerns about the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the urgent need to restore the flow of aid. We are obviously appalled by recent attacks on aid workers, including that on the UNOPS guesthouse on 19 March, and the killing of rescue workers and paramedics, including at least eight Palestine Red Crescent medics, on 23 March. Our thoughts are very much with the victims and their families.

**Iqbal Mohamed:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Stephen Doughty:** I am going to try to respond to all the comments; I will then, perhaps, take some interventions.

We expect those responsible for the killing to be held to account, and we expect that to be done transparently. The Foreign Secretary has pressed Foreign Minister Sa'ar to conclude the Military Advocate General's consideration of the World Central Kitchen incident, including determining whether criminal proceedings should be initiated. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary and my hon. Friend the Minister for the middle east have met the families of those killed in the attacks and assured them that the Government will continue to support their calls for justice. On 28 March, the UK and France called an urgent UN Security Council meeting to discuss the risks facing humanitarian aid workers in Gaza. That work is substantial and it is going on at many levels. We have also called for the Palestine Red Crescent Society incident to be investigated fully at the Security Council on 5 April. On 21 March, an E3

[Stephen Doughty]

Foreign Ministers' statement made clear that the UN and its premises should be protected, and should never be a target.

Hon. Members asked about arms exports. We have been clear; Members will have heard the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the middle east speak about this on many occasions. We suspended certain licences to export to Israel for use in military operations in Gaza following a review that concluded that there is a clear risk that items might be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law in Gaza. On the wider situation, over the past few days the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the middle east met Prime Minister Mustafa and discussed the humanitarian situation in the west bank and in Gaza. We announced a £101 million package of support for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and that will be dedicated to humanitarian relief, support for Palestinian economic development and strengthening Palestinian authority, governance and reform.

I was asked, on many occasions, about the support that we give specifically for the protection of aid workers. That includes support to the Aid Worker Security Database, core funding to UNOCHA and the International NGO Safety Organisation, and funding at the country level in many contexts. For example, in Ukraine we support the Humanitarian Action through Volunteers, Enablers and Networks consortium to provide a duty of care package. We also provide funding to the ICRC and UN-managed country-based pooled funds, and we are keeping all our ODA priorities under review. I can assure hon. Members that humanitarian response remains absolutely crucial to what we are doing, particularly in the contexts that have been mentioned most today: Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan. There are many other contexts but those three in particular have been highlighted by the Prime Minister.

The shadow Minister asked about disinformation. We are absolutely aware of that challenge. We worked at the UN on resolution 2730, which condemns disinformation targeting aid workers, and we are working on a number of programmes in that regard. She asked about the aid workers in Ukraine and I have mentioned the HAVEN programme. We are also providing personal protective equipment, individual first aid kits and so on through that scheme. That is crucial.

We constantly take work through the UN. We called for a series of measures in the circumstances that I identified and we also co-chaired a UN event demanding the release of aid workers detained by the Houthis in Yemen. We support a new political declaration by Australia to strengthen global commitments to protect aid workers, which will complement UN Security Council resolution 2730. We respond to direct incidents at the highest levels—I have identified some of those in relation to Sudan—and, of course, we condemned the reported attacks on aid workers and pressed for investigations. We recently hosted the London Sudan conference alongside the African Union, the EU, Germany and France to galvanise co-ordinated action. We must use our momentum to keep applying pressure to all the parties there to comply with their obligations.

We are also working very closely with organisations working to support female aid workers who face particular issues with restrictions, threats and sexual violence. The

UK invests in safeguarding and directly supports women's rights organisations to help mitigate those risks. My ministerial colleagues and I try to take account of all of the specific and granular risks that workers face, but it is about more than just those specific circumstances. It is about a wider commitment by the United Kingdom to the protection of aid workers and to humanitarian principles. I can assure Members that we will continue to uphold those principles and stand up for them in the work that we do.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions today, which have been passionate and sincere. I have heard what has been said and I will certainly communicate that to ministerial colleagues. I once again thank the hon. Member for Cheadle for sponsoring the debate in the first place.

3.37 pm

**Mr Morrison:** I thank Members for their contributions today and, in particular, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for raising the point about women and educators being targeted in Sudan and Afghanistan. It was a really important point, as was the point about the community groups in our communities that work hard for humanitarian workers abroad.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) that we need more protections for workers abroad because those protections are being eroded, and it seems that the world's Governments are turning a blind eye.

I agree with the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) that we need concrete actions and, perhaps, red lines that the Government could put forward.

Finally, I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) and for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding). I completely agree that the foreign aid cuts have been a shameful retreat from Labour's legacy on foreign aid.

The shadow Minister was absolutely right to highlight how misinformation causes even more danger for our aid workers.

Finally, I thank the Minister not just for his remarks today, but for his service as a humanitarian worker. It is really appreciated and I have much respect for him. I refer to my earlier comments: I think the Government need to step up. I truly believe that the Government have more influence and power than they perhaps give themselves credit for. From hearing the speeches made today and elsewhere in this House, I think more and more Members agree. I urge the Government to do more, to consider the suggestions highlighted today, and perhaps to bring out those red lines for what we are going to do when international humanitarian law is broken. It is vital that we act now; we have no time to wait. We must act now.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the safety of humanitarian workers in conflict zones.

3.39 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Windsor Framework: Parcel Delivery

4 pm

**Emma Lewell (in the Chair):** I will call the Member in charge of the debate to move the motion and then I will call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may only make a speech with prior permission from the Member in charge and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

**Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of the Windsor Framework on parcel deliveries across the Irish Sea.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. Tomorrow, 1 May, the noose of the Irish sea border will tighten even further in respect of business in Northern Ireland. We already have the red lane Irish sea border, subject to the full complement of EU requirements, through which all raw materials for our businesses have to pass. We also have what was called the green lane, which has been renamed but otherwise little about it has changed, for the passage of other goods; we have a business-to-consumer border for parcels; and now—in some ways the most threatening because of the scale of the businesses that will be affected—we have the business-to-business parcel border. Of course, that is a border partitioning the supposed United Kingdom and its supposed internal market.

The essence of an internal market is that goods move unfettered and unchecked between and within all parts of it. We now have something else, courtesy of the absurd protocol—or, as we now call it, the Windsor framework. In view of the fact that that decreed that we in Northern Ireland are subject to the EU's customs code, which in turn decrees that Great Britain is a third or foreign country, we now have the absurdity of various dimensions of border for the passage of goods from GB to Northern Ireland.

For 200 years, the Northern Ireland economy has been intensely integrated with the GB economy, particularly in manufacturing. It was always the northern part of Ireland that had the big manufacturing sectors. Therefore, the integration, in particular with regard to the supply of raw materials, has been pivotal and GB has been the primary source of all that.

Now, parcels will be subject to rigorous EU requirements, including the requirement for a commodity code—

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

**Jim Allister:** In a moment. Information must be provided about the country of origin each item, the value of each item and the total value of all the items in the parcel, and any goods that are at risk of passing into the EU's single market across the border. One of the weaknesses of the protocol is the presumption that everything is at risk of passing, and therefore any raw material—if it is going into manufacturing, who knows where it will end up?—has to go through all that rigour.

That is a preposterous imposition, not just in bureaucracy, but in cost and making Northern Ireland non-competitive. It means that a business manufacturing something in Northern Ireland that it wants to sell back on the GB

market or wherever is subject to restraints, which will increase costs, making it less and less competitive. That is one of the greatest iniquities of the sea border and of the business-to-business parcels border.

We have had the protocol in place for four years. Is there any evidence that business parcels are imposing any harm on the EU single market? Have the Government, the EU or anyone else carried out an audit of the alleged harm that business parcels passing from GB to Northern Ireland could do? For four years, they have been flowing unfettered because of the grace periods, so where is the harm caused to the single market that must now be protected from?

**Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** One of the points that the Secretary of State will probably make in response is that firms can apply to be part of the UK internal market scheme and therefore escape some of this by showing that goods are not at risk. As the hon. and learned Member has pointed out, there is no evidence that goods are at risk, but His Majesty's Revenue and Customs says that it could take months for firms to have their applications to the internal market scheme processed, and even when they are processed, the amount of work that must go in to show that the goods did not go into the Irish Republic adds considerable cost and is a considerable barrier to doing trade.

**Jim Allister:** Of course, the natural, inevitable consequence of that is that GB suppliers will simply say, "It's not worth the candle. We're not going to make the effort. Why should we put ourselves through all these hoops in order to supply to Northern Ireland? It's not a huge market in the first place. We'll simply stop supplying." That has already happened. I constantly receive complaints from consumers, but increasingly I am getting them from businesses that say, "We know that our suppliers will simply stop supplying." That is going to be another hammer blow to our economy.

**Jim Shannon:** I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for bringing forward the debate. He is right to underline the issues and the concerns of both his constituents and mine. The internal market movement information obligation, which begins tomorrow, means that importers must be members of the internal market scheme as authorised parties, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) referred to. My constituents tell me that they are most concerned and confused, and that they do not quite understand the system. Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that it is totally unrealistic for the Government to expect small businesses and individuals—my constituents in Strangford—to understand the obligations and abide by them due to ridiculous EU interference? The Government have an easier way of sorting this out: they must take steps to legally remove the obligation from their citizens in Northern Ireland. Do that and the problems are solved.

**Jim Allister:** Indeed. This is a real issue. In my constituency of North Antrim, I have many satellite small engineering firms. Many of them are subcontractors to Wrightbus, for example. They get their raw materials from GB. To get a simple parcel of bolts, nuts, washers or whatever, because they are manufacturers, they will now have to go through the processes of the red lane



[Jim Allister]

business-to-business border. That is in circumstances in which there is no evidence—if there were, we would have heard of it—that the EU's vast single market is being the least bit impacted by business-to-business parcels. The people who will now be affected are those businesses—the people who employ my constituents.

The other consequence of the machinations of this border is that when GB suppliers stop supplying, firms will have to get their raw materials from somewhere, and some of them will have to come from the Republic of Ireland. Of course, that is the overall, underlying intent of the Windsor framework: to reorientate the economy of Northern Ireland away from its GB roots and connections, and to force an increase in all-Ireland trade. Here we are, arriving at a situation where we have a perfectly unfettered, all-Ireland single market, but in the nation of which we are a part, the United Kingdom, our single market is fettered and partitioned. That was the intent of the protocol. The protocol was always about making Northern Ireland the price of Brexit, and so it is turning out to be.

**Sammy Wilson:** The hon. and learned Gentleman has outlined very clearly the bureaucratic issues involved that disturb trade, as well as the long-term political implications, but does he also accept that there are economic implications for firms? First, they are forced to purchase goods from elsewhere, if they were not doing so in the first place—probably because they were too expensive, so now they have more expensive ones. Secondly, many of them have to pay taxes on goods that they bring into Northern Ireland and then reclaim them, and HMRC is taking not weeks, but months to pay those taxes back—if they can be reclaimed—causing cash-flow problems.

**Jim Allister:** The right hon. Member makes a key point. When people bring business-to-business parcels into Northern Ireland from their own country, from GB, and those parcels are decreed—as the presumption is—to be at risk of going into the European single market in their ultimate manifestation, when manufactured, they have to not only complete the full EU-dictated data regime of declarations, but pay duty. People have to pay duty to bring goods from their own country to another part of their own country. That is how extensive and wrong placing Northern Ireland in the EU single market and customs code has proven to be: when goods are moved now, they are subject to taxation tariffs, because they are moving from a so-called foreign single market into what is decreed to be the entry point of the EU's single market.

I have a question for the Secretary of State: where and when will those duties be collected? As the right hon. Member pointed out, we already know that when duties are collected in the red lane, for example, they may be recoverable, if someone can show—the onus is on them—that the goods did not go into the EU single market, but the duty is paid on the presumption that they will, and the process to reclaim it is taking months upon months.

My other question for the Secretary of State is: will parcels be held until the duties are paid? Will we really get into the ludicrous situation where someone buying a

parcel of bolts to bring to Ballymena or Ballymoney will have to pay duty on those bolts because he is bringing them from a foreign market, even though that is the GB market? Where and when will he have to pay that duty? We all know that he will wait months upon months to get that duty back, if he can demonstrate—it is very difficult in a manufacturing situation—that the end product never went near the EU.

The absurdity is obvious, but the political connotations are overwhelming, because they send a clear constitutional message to the people of Northern Ireland: “You are not really any longer a part of the United Kingdom—your trade laws, your customs laws and the laws that govern how you make your goods are now all made by a foreign Parliament, not by this Parliament.” Here am I, a Member standing in the United Kingdom Parliament talking about something governed by rules set by a foreign jurisdiction. They are rules of that foreign jurisdiction and it is their foreign border.

That sends a clear constitutional message, which was of course the intent of the protocol: to create, through economics, a stepping stone for Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom. We now have a Government who, through their junior Minister, tell us that a couple of dodgy opinion polls might be enough to trigger the exit sign for Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom.

Those are some of the issues that rightly concern us. They particularly concern businesses, which have been very patient with the Government. They have been looking for guidance for months and have not got adequate guidance, and now they are facing a dire situation, whereby even to keep their businesses going with the basic raw materials that have flowed for decades to them from the source, they will be put through not just the difficulty but the humiliation of not being a proper part of this United Kingdom.

The Secretary of State can tell us all he likes about how we have access to dual markets. No, we do not. We have unfettered access to the EU single market, but our access to and from GB is very much fettered by these rules. That is the fundamental objection for a part of the nation whose economy is so intertwined with that of Great Britain.

4.16 pm

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):** It is a great pleasure to respond to this debate and to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I begin by offering my thanks—

*Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.*

4.39 pm

*On resuming—*

**Hilary Benn:** Let me start again. It is a pleasure to respond to this debate. I offer my thanks to the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for having secured it, giving us another opportunity to debate the Windsor framework.

As Members will be aware, the new arrangements for freight and parcels come into effect tomorrow, 1 May. They are an important step forward in the implementation of the Windsor framework, and an important part of the commitments that were made in the “Safeguarding the Union” Command Paper. They follow a lot of

preparatory work across Government and industry to ensure that the necessary processes and systems are in place.

The Government recognise, and I recognise, that the new arrangements represent a change for some businesses when sending and receiving goods, but I must be frank: the system in place since the UK formally left the EU was never viable in the long term. My point goes right back to the reason why we have a Windsor framework, which the hon. and learned Gentleman and I have debated many times: when we left the European Union, there was an issue that needed to be addressed. The United Kingdom had one set of rules, and the European Union had another. In every other part of the world, trade between those two entities would be governed by a border, and stuff would be checked to ensure that what was coming in complied with the rules of one jurisdiction or the other.

The unique difference in respect of Northern Ireland is that there is no practical border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Therefore, the question that the previous Government had to address when negotiating the Windsor framework was: as a good neighbour, how do we ensure that goods that move into the Republic—and therefore into the European Union—comply with the rules of that jurisdiction, in exactly the same way that the United Kingdom ensures that goods that come into our jurisdiction comply with our rules? That is the first point.

The Windsor framework is a huge improvement on the Northern Ireland protocol, which, as I have said many times, was never going to work.

**Jim Allister:** The answer for the Secretary of State, and indeed the last Government, shamefully, was to sacrifice the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom and to allow part of the United Kingdom to be governed by laws that we do not make and cannot change. Is it not a principle of international law—to which the EU is supposed to adhere as well—that in agreements and treaties we should respect, not challenge, the territorial integrity of those with which we reach the agreement? That is the source of the problem. We sacrificed the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom in respect of Northern Ireland in order to placate the EU, who had their objectives in that regard.

**Hilary Benn:** I simply do not accept that characterisation of what we are debating and what I am seeking to describe.

To return to the point that I was in the process of putting to Members, a very practical question had to be addressed. Some may argue, “Well, that’s not our problem. Leave the EU to work out what they’re going to do.” However, that would not be the response of a good neighbour. We would not do it ourselves, and therefore we should not do that to the EU. The Windsor framework recognises the nature of the practical problem and finds a mechanism for dealing with it.

The same is true in respect of parcels, because the United Kingdom would not allow parcels from any other part of the world to come in without knowing what was in them. We would not permit that, would we? Certainly not. That is not the arrangement that we operate. In the same way, because once the goods arrive in Northern Ireland, potentially they could move into

the European Union, the EU wants to be satisfied in the same way in seeking these new arrangements. That is the fundamental point of principle.

What we have is much better than what would have applied had there been an attempt to implement the original Northern Ireland protocol. That is why, when I was in opposition, and before I became the shadow Secretary of State, I welcomed the negotiations of the Windsor framework. I congratulated the then Prime Minister, because it represented a really important way forward.

My second point is that by agreeing to the new parcels arrangement, we have unlocked agreement on new customs arrangements that will simplify processes for businesses moving goods via freight. Unnecessary customs paperwork will be removed, and goods will be able to move using a simplified set of what is described as internal market movement information. For example, from tomorrow, the arrangement will reduce the standard range of data fields that need to be completed from a possible 75 to 21 for standard goods. That is, on anyone’s measure, a simplification.

**Sammy Wilson:** The Secretary of State is making light of the burden that the arrangement places on small businesses. One small local businessman who does business in only one town—where most of his customers come from—told me that to bring goods in from GB, which used to flow freely, he now has 27 pages of paperwork. Since he sells a mixture of all kinds of goods, we can guess how many goods that is spread over. He says, “I could spend all my time filling paper in and have no time to sell goods.” Let us not play down the bureaucratic burden that this presents. For many, it makes business almost impossible.

**Hilary Benn:** I am not seeking to play down anything. If the right hon. Gentleman would be kind enough to write to me with further details of the business that he described, I will look into it and come back to him.

I was about to say that this change will be further supported by the introduction of the trader goods profile, which holds data based on past movements. That goes directly to the point that the right hon. Gentleman just raised about obligations that the arrangement puts on businesses because, in many cases, that dataset can, in the jargon, auto-populate forms for freight movement. In other words, it can fill in forms automatically so that businesses only have to add ordinary commercial information, such as the volume, weight and invoice value. Over 10,000 UK businesses are now registered for the UK internal market scheme, which allows businesses to take advantage of the new arrangements. The existing “not at risk” arrangements will continue to allow tariff-free movement of eligible goods from GB to NI.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim referred to the flow of goods. I would simply say that the data shows that the value of goods moving from GB to Northern Ireland has gone up, not down. Qualifying Northern Ireland goods continue to have full, unfettered access to Great Britain when they are sent in parcels or freight, meaning that those parcels can be moved as normal with no new requirements.

For parcels sent to consumers—the hon. and learned Gentleman did not touch on that, but I wish to refer to it—no customs declarations, safety or security declarations

[*Hilary Benn*]

or customs duties are required for movements from Great Britain to consumers in Northern Ireland under the new arrangement. The practical effect is that there should be no noticeable change for people sending parcels to friends and family in Northern Ireland, and minimal noticeable change for most consumers sending and receiving parcels that move from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. Where parcels are moved between businesses, they can access the same arrangements as freight movements.

**Jim Allister:** The Secretary of State ignores the impact on consumers of the general product safety regulation, which requires the business in GB that is sending to Northern Ireland to have an agent in Northern Ireland and to be in a trusted trader scheme—all the things that are totally alien to supposedly being in the same single market.

**Hilary Benn:** I am not ignoring the general product safety regulation. This is a debate about parcels. I am well aware of the issues that arise because of its implementation. There is no bar on traders and businesses sending products to Northern Ireland, or indeed to the European Union. The European Union has put in place that requirement to apply to goods that come into its jurisdiction, for the same reason that I gave at the start of my response to this debate: there has to be a mechanism for ensuring that goods that come in comply with the rules of the EU single market. Many businesses have found a way of having an authorised economic operator. I understand the burden that that puts on particularly small operators, but it is another aspect of the need to ensure that we are good neighbours.

I was about to say that the specific arrangements for moving parcels that contain sanitary and phytosanitary goods have not changed. Businesses can make use of the Windsor framework schemes for moving agrifood goods, and the Northern Ireland retail movement scheme and the Northern Ireland plant health label scheme allow GB businesses to send SPS parcels to businesses in Northern Ireland for sale to consumers. That represents a considerable improvement. Guidance and support are available to help businesses understand the schemes. I recognise that the transition to the new arrangements from tomorrow will be challenging for some businesses, but in time they will get used to them. We are in touch with industry to understand where businesses need extra support and assistance. His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has been alerting businesses—

4.51 pm

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

## Gender Incongruence: Puberty Suppressing Hormones

5.5 pm

**Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential impact of puberty suppressing hormones on children and young people with gender incongruence.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I am pleased to have the opportunity to shine a light on this important topic, one that impacts the health and wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable children in our country. This debate must be led by science, data and evidence, not by ideology, bias or belief. I will do my best to do that today.

The number of children and young people presenting to the UK NHS with gender distress has increased year on year since 2009, with an exponential rise in 2014. What is behind the increase among Generation Z is unclear and the reasons are likely to be multifaceted. It is speculated that the factors may include 24/7 internet access, increased acceptance of trans identities, or even peer, social and cultural influences.

Over the last 20 years we have seen groups such as Stonewall and Mermaids call for better access to treatment and increased rights for trans people. Large corporates have gone big on diversity and inclusion to boost their brands, impactful TV dramas centring trans stories, such as “Butterfly”, have been widely viewed, and the public sector, from the NHS to the police, has been flying the progress flag at every opportunity. So it can be no surprise that gender identity is at the front of young people's minds in a way that it simply was not when I was growing up.

In 2009, only 51 patients were referred to GIDS—the NHS gender identity development service for children—of whom two thirds were male. In 2016, there were 1,766 referrals and two thirds of them were female. That is quite the change. There has been an overall surge in the number of children suffering gender distress, but the increase is especially notable among girls; we also see over-representation of neurodiversity, mental health issues and trauma in this group. To put it another way, these children are much more likely to have been in care, to suffer with anxiety and depression, to be autistic and to have been abused. It is a group of incredibly vulnerable children.

GIDS was established in 1989. Its main approach to treatment at that time was therapeutic—referred to as watchful waiting. Early studies from the 1980s showed that in around 85% of cases, the gender incongruence or distress ceased in the child after going through puberty. Later studies reached a similar conclusion, with between 67% and 90% desisting after puberty. Only a small cohort of children continued to experience gender dysphoria or incongruence after puberty, and it was that small group who would likely adopt a permanent trans identity in adulthood.

Everything changed with the emergence of the Dutch protocol, which involved the use of puberty blockers from early puberty. Puberty blockers are gonadotropin-releasing hormone analogues, which suppress oestrogen production in girls and testosterone in boys. They are licensed for use in children with precocious puberty—when



puberty starts much too early and it is beneficial to suppress it until a more normal developmental time and age—but in the case of gender dysphoria they are used to delay or even indefinitely stop natural pubertal development and maturation, and it is important to note that puberty blockers are not licensed for that purpose.

The original rationale for using puberty blockers to treat gender dysphoria was to press pause on puberty and give children time to think, but for some the aim was also to increase the chances of a child passing as a member of the opposite sex in adulthood. GIDS started trialling puberty blockers in the UK after 2011. The preliminary results in 2015-16 did not demonstrate psychological benefits, with some of the females suffering a worsening of symptoms, including higher incidence of wanting to hurt or kill themselves. The results of the study, which were not formally published until 2020, demonstrated no statistically significant improvement in gender dysphoria or mental health outcomes.

It is also important to remember the early studies that told us that in the majority of cases, going through puberty could relieve gender distress. It follows, therefore, that stopping or delaying puberty using medication could derail that natural desistance, essentially locking in or prolonging the gender distress, rather than allowing it to naturally resolve.

One would think that, in the absence of any evidence of benefit from puberty blockers, the NHS would have stepped back from using them after the trial. Furthermore, the high numbers of autistic, traumatised, mentally unwell and same-sex attracted youth in the group of children referred should have rung alarm bells loudly, but no; instead, puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones were routinely made available to an even broader group of children, including those with neurodiversity and complex mental health presentations.

An independent systematic review of published studies on puberty blockers, of which there were 50, was undertaken by the University of York as part of the Cass review. It was found that puberty blockers do indeed suppress puberty effectively. It was also found that, given that most children progress on to cross-sex hormones after starting puberty blockers, the main objective of pausing development is not achieved. No reduction in gender dysphoria or improvement in body satisfaction was demonstrated, and there was limited evidence of positive mental health outcomes.

Worryingly, bone density in those taking puberty blockers was compromised, and height gain may lag behind normal. In the case of biological males, it can make vaginoplasty more difficult in future, due to insufficient penile growth, forcing the use of gut tissue instead. The Cass review reports:

“There seems to be a very narrow indication for the use of puberty blockers in birth-registered males...in order to stop irreversible pubertal changes. Other indications remain unproven at this time.”

I take that to mean that those drugs have been given to young girls, not because they benefit them specifically, but because they might benefit a very small group of males. Professor David Bell, a retired consultant psychiatrist at the Tavistock, and Dr Sinead Helyar, a clinical trial nurse, also warned of the potential harms in a recent article.

“Current known and potential harms of puberty blockers are multi-fold and include a reduced bone density and early-onset osteoporosis, brain swelling and concerns around impairment of future sexual functioning and ability to form emotional relationships. A recent review of the impact of suppressing puberty on neurological function highlighted that adolescence is a critical window of neurodevelopment and puberty plays a critical role in this process. The author concluded that suppression of puberty impacts brain structure and the development of social and cognitive functions, in which the effects are complex and often sex specific.”

The over-representation of same-sex attracted girls and boys in the group of children being treated with puberty blockers is particularly worrying. In a study in the Netherlands of 70 patients given puberty blockers between 2000 and 2008, 89% were same-sex attracted, and most of the rest were bisexual. The same pattern was seen in most of the other trials, with the majority of the children growing up to be same-sex attracted adults. A paper from GIDS in 2016 reported 89% of the biological girls being either same-sex attracted or bisexual.

Why would same-sex attraction be over-represented in that way? Could gender distress be symptomatic in some cases of struggling with sexuality? Is sufficient emphasis put on reassuring those young adolescents about their sexuality, to establish if the gender distress is linked or separate; or is our society's hyperfocus on gender identity and gender conformity putting them on an unnecessary medical pathway to change their body? Keira Bell, who has now detransitioned, says,

“I became attracted to girls. I had never had a positive association with the term ‘lesbian’ or the idea that two girls could be in a relationship. This made me wonder if there was something inherently wrong with me. Around this time, out of the blue, my mother asked if I wanted to be a boy, something that had not even crossed my mind.”

The Cass review received several reports from parents of biological females that their child had been through a period of trans identification before recognising that they were, in fact, a lesbian. That begs the question: why are so many young lesbians being medically transitioned?

Before I move on to my questions to the Minister, it is important to note that almost all the children and young people who take puberty blockers go on to take cross-sex hormones. I raise that because it links the two treatments. The impact of puberty blockers cannot be looked at in isolation, because cross-sex hormones may lead to further surgeries, lifelong medication, and loss of fertility and sexual function. These are catastrophic impacts. How can a prepubescent child really understand what never experiencing an orgasm means and the impact that could have on their future relationships, or indeed what losing the opportunity to have children could mean?

It is very apparent that the lack of solid long-term data on outcomes for patients who are treated with puberty blockers is problematic. No doctor should prescribe something in the absence of strong evidence of its effectiveness and a clear understanding of the side effects. In May 2024, the previous Government temporarily banned the use of puberty blockers for the treatment of gender incongruence and gender dysphoria in under-18s, following the Cass review's findings of insufficient evidence to show they were safe and effective, and this ban was made permanent by the current Secretary of State for Health and Social Care in December 2024. In the light of everything that I have set out today, I fully support

[Rebecca Paul]

that decision: it is sensible, has full regard to the data, and puts the safety and wellbeing of children first.

It is also important to note campaigners' claim that suicides among young patients with gender dysphoria increased due to puberty blocking drugs previously being restricted, following the High Court decision in the *Bell v. Tavistock* case, has been disproved by Professor Louis Appleby's investigation and report, published on 19 July 2024, in which he confirmed that the data did not support such assertions. He concludes that:

"The way that this issue has been discussed on social media has been insensitive, distressing and dangerous, and goes against guidance on safe reporting of suicide. One risk is that young people and their families will be terrified by predictions of suicide as inevitable without puberty blockers."

At the same time that the Secretary of State announced the permanent ban on puberty blockers, he announced that a clinical trial would be set up in 2025 to examine the use of puberty blockers, in order to establish a clear evidence base for the use of this medicine in gender incongruence. The £10.7 million trial, called Pathways, will be carried out by a team at King's College and is due to run until 2031. Over two years, it will track:

"the physical, social and emotional wellbeing"

of young people who want to delay puberty, and whose parents and the gender service agree with this treatment option.

I will be grateful to the Minister for an update on the trial and how she intends to ensure that children are not physically or psychologically harmed. A trial of this nature of a drug that is unlicensed for gender incongruence raises many ethical concerns. In the words of Professor David Bell and Dr Sinead Helyar:

"The first duty of any clinician inside or outside of a clinical trial is to 'do no harm.'"

Can there ever be a situation where it is ethical to run such a trial when the harms could be significant? It is important to remember that the children who would participate in this trial are physically healthy children who stand to have worse health by the end of it. This trial is in no way similar to a clinical trial for a cancer drug, where the patient is seriously unwell at the beginning of the trial.

Secondly, approximately 9,000 children and young people were treated by GIDS over the years, which provides a plentiful supply of data about the long-term outcomes for those who took puberty blockers and those who did not. Would the Minister please clarify matters and explain why a new trial is needed, given this abundance of data? Will she please provide an update on the exercise that is currently under way to obtain more data?

Thirdly, the current trial only proposes to look at outcomes over a two-year period. To put that into context, a child who starts puberty blockers at the age of 13 will only have their outcomes followed and assessed until the age of 15. That is not long enough to understand medium and long-term outcomes. A positive result for a 15-year-old might look very different for a 25-year-old, when physical health, sexual function and fertility are likely to be more important and relevant to them than when they were 15. Does the Minister agree that two

years is not a sufficient timeframe to properly evaluate the impact of puberty blockers on physical and mental health? If this trial goes ahead, will she commit to funding and ensuring that there is long-term follow-up of these children into adulthood?

Fourthly, how many children will the trial be limited to, and what criteria will be used to determine which children are eligible and which are not? Is it possible that all eligible children will be included and prescribed puberty blockers as part of the trial? How many children in total does the Minister expect to take part in the trial over its duration? How will the trial establish an appropriate control group? Fifthly, given that gender nonconformity sometimes correlates with same-sex attraction in adulthood, how will the trial safeguard those children who may simply be uncomfortable with their sexuality rather than experiencing true gender distress?

Sixthly, given the high rates of progression to cross-sex hormones following puberty blockers, will only children who agree not to progress to cross-sex hormones be accepted on to the trial, so that the impact of the puberty blockers on outcomes can be seen in isolation? If the answer is no, given the corresponding likelihood of impaired sexual function and loss of fertility, which are monumental ramifications, how will the children taking part in the trial be able to give consent?

Finally, will the Minister please provide details of other trials that have been approved for paediatric medical interventions with equivalent or similar diagnostic uncertainty, to reassure the public that moving forward with a trial in this situation has precedent? I look forward to hearing the Minister's answers and thank everyone for attending this debate.

**Emma Lewell (in the Chair):** I remind Members that this debate will run until five past 6. I will be calling the Front Benchers at 5.45 pm, so I ask Members to keep their contributions to five minutes.

5.20 pm

**Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I wanted to speak today because, as has already been said, this is a really important debate—one that must be had in a respectful and open manner. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for opening the debate in precisely that way.

There needs to be a space to debate these topics openly and to engage with each other constructively because ultimately this issue is about the safety and wellbeing of young people. These are some of the most vulnerable, and often frightened, people in our schools and medical settings. They deserve a debate based on fact, open to new ideas and evidence, and respectful of their choices and identities.

The Cass review—an important review—did not find that puberty blockers cause harm in young people. Dr Cass made it clear that puberty blockers could, in the right circumstances, be effective and valuable in helping young people. That is absolutely why we need a rigorous, safe and scientific trial to determine, once and for all, the efficacy of puberty blockers in treating gender dysphoria.

I am grateful that the review also made clear that gender dysphoria is a diagnosable, recognisable and treatable condition. It is not about boys and girls being

confused, nor is it caused by the media or by playing with the “wrong” toys; it is something that has been studied, proven and diagnosed. Ultimately, we are also talking about the trans community, which I think we all agree deserves dignity and respect.

I have to say that I am not a scientist, doctor or expert, and I expect that many other hon. Members are not either. It is therefore incumbent on us all to listen to experts of all kinds who have welcomed the call for a substantial clinical trial into puberty blockers. That would not be the first trial, as many in the UK and internationally have found favourable evidence. However, I will never not be in favour of more evidence and in particular of a rigorous UK trial.

An outcome of the review was that a trial into the use of puberty blockers for those with gender dysphoria was welcomed, as I say, and that that trial

“should be part of a programme of research which also evaluates outcomes of psychosocial interventions and masculinising/feminising hormones.”

I am proud that the Government support a holistic approach to the treatment of gender dysphoria, with proper psychological and physical support as well as treatment. I urge all hon. Members to listen to that call for more evidence. The Cass review made that point strongly and expressed regret that a controlled study was not delivered in 2011, specifying:

“There are many reports that puberty blockers are beneficial in reducing mental distress and improving the wellbeing of children and young people with gender dysphoria”.

It went on to say:

“Importantly some children within this group who remain gender incongruent into puberty may benefit from puberty blockers and will be able to enter the specialist component of the service and access the puberty blocker trial in a timely way”.

The review did not rule puberty blockers out of hand completely, but wanted to ensure that there was a decent evidence base, because ultimately we are talking about young people. As we debate this issue, we should agree that more facts and evidence help, whereas conjecture, opinion and speculation only muddy the waters. I am very keen to see the framework for the trial as soon as possible—I think the hon. Member for Reigate makes some good points—so that we see the results as quickly as possible in a safe way. If they demonstrate that puberty blockers are beneficial for young people with gender incongruence, I hope all those who claim to want to protect and support young people accept that fact.

5.24 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve again under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I think this is the third time this afternoon, and it is always a pleasure. I commend the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for raising this imperative issue, which we talked about yesterday, and for setting the scene so well, with detail and knowledge. She and I are on the same page on this one—I share her concerns, as others will.

Medical professionals have raised with me their concern about the lack of knowledge and the impact on the most vulnerable people; they recognise and welcome the recent developments in Great Britain that have led to a significant policy shift, effectively banning access to puberty blockers for the purpose of transitioning young

children. That decision has been driven by comprehensive reviews, scientific fact, and emerging evidence that questions the long-term safety and efficacy of such drastic treatment for minors. It is the right thing to do. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) spoke about having time to look at these things and to understand and explore them in the necessary detail, and that we are right to do that. That is the way I feel as well.

No long-term studies have been carried out on the long-term administration of puberty blockers to children, because puberty blockers have historically been used only for specific reasons regarding rare conditions in the short term—never for what is primarily a lifetime choice. Given those concerns, and indeed the potential implications for the health and wellbeing of children, I wrote to the Health Minister in Northern Ireland to understand what steps were being taken by the Department of Health, and the Executive, to prevent Northern Ireland from being used by gender ideologists as a back door to those drugs, and to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

I looked back at the statement that the Minister, Mike Nesbitt, made on 11 December 2024. He said:

“Following recommendations from the Commission on Human Medicines (CHM), it is now intended that we”—

that is the Northern Ireland Assembly and Department for Health—

“will replace the UK’s existing temporary restrictions with an indefinite ban, subject to review in 2027.”

The Northern Ireland Assembly has made its choice. I represent Northern Ireland in Westminster, and I want to represent the viewpoints of my constituency—by the way, Mike Nesbitt represents the same constituency as me: he is the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Strangford, and I am its Member of Parliament.

The welfare of children is of the utmost importance, particularly those in the age category approaching puberty, so those age 12 and under. It is crucial that Northern Ireland maintains high standards of medical practice that prioritise safety and wellbeing. Aligning our policies with evidence-based practices will help to ensure that we provide the best possible care for our young children, and protect them from decisions being made “for them and about them” by adults, when they are at such a vulnerable time and age in their lives. It is important that those in the Northern Ireland Assembly back home follow the same logic as there has been here. I know that the Minister has a particular interest in Northern Ireland and she travels there regularly. She will be aware of all these things, so I just want to put that on the record.

In conclusion, concerns have been expressed to me by medical professionals who want to solidify our position and ensure that no backward steps are taken. I look to the Minister for that confirmation. Our children—I say this with great respect—are not test dummies, and no risk should be taken with their health and future. We must have this locked down in legislation.

Westminster did the right thing. The Northern Ireland Assembly has followed that solution, and the arrow is pointing in that direction—we are doing the same. We must have all the information in front of us. We must be able to make these decisions and most of all we need to protect our children. I am a grandfather of six young children, so the issue is really important to me. I have a



[Jim Shannon]

role to play on behalf of my grandchildren, and as an MP I have a role to play for my constituents, who feel the same way as I do.

5.28 pm

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) for securing this debate. Everyone, regardless of their particularities, deserves dignity, but that open-mindedness has in recent years been supplanted by an ideology-driven series of harrowing episodes involving, in this case, both medical policy and clinical practice. That led me, in 2019, to raise the issue of the Tavistock clinic when a number of the professionals there drew attention to the fact that they were

“often under pressure to refer young people for life-altering treatment even though they did not believe that it was in the individual’s best...interests...experimental treatment is being done on children who have experienced mental health difficulties, abuse and family trauma.”—[*Official Report*, 11 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 479.]

Those kinds of concerns led to the review by Hilary Cass, and Cass was clear, when she published her report, that there was a lack of evidence on the long-term effects of using puberty blockers to treat gender incongruence to know whether they were safe or beneficial. Later, I had an exchange with the current Health Secretary—the previous Government having taken action latterly—in which he assured me that he would be implementing the Cass report in full. It is right that he should, because of the tragic history of the prescription of drugs that even those involved in that process regarded with such concern that they gave up their professional lives.

We have altered young people; we have warped them, and that is a result of a policy that was adopted without proper consideration and of clinical practice that did not have its basis in scientific fact. Given that the Health Secretary has seen most of that and acted upon it, it is important to consider what happens next. We know that the Tavistock clinic has been closed and we now know that there is a new series of measures to deal with these matters. There will be six new regional gender identity clinics for children and young people by 2026.

However, alongside the decision to ban the prescription of puberty blockers for under-18s, the National Institute for Health and Care Research is sponsoring a clinical trial, and I have a number of questions for this Minister about that trial. The trial will be run by a team at King’s College London, led by Professor Emily Simonoff. According to *The Times*, the study will involve monitoring “the well-being of children who attend a network of new NHS gender clinics for children, including those not on”

puberty blockers, and

“whether puberty blockers affect young people’s thinking and brain development, using various activities and brain scans.”

All that is disturbing, it seems to me, and that view has been argued by David Bell, who has suggested that other kinds of research could be adopted, other measures put in place. He refers to long-term follow-up studies of those who have undergone such treatment, qualitative research into the experiences of the growing numbers of

detransitioners, and further animal studies to understand the biological impact of these drugs on adolescent brain development.

That view has been reinforced by the Clinical Advisory Network on Sex and Gender, which is calling for the Government and NHS to pursue alternative research options to the proposed clinical trial, including evaluating the effects of puberty blockers on children treated by the Tavistock clinic.

It seems to me that, after our having made the mistake that led to Tavistock and then having commissioned the Cass review, which led to its closure, the risk is that we now make another mistake, not out of ill will but out of a concern expressed by some of the people I have mentioned going unheeded. I hope the Minister will heed those concerns. They are not only mine, as I have made clear.

There was an ideological aspect to this situation that we must not understate. There was a belief, on some people’s part, that rather than accepting that young people as they grew might be homosexual, their sex should be altered. That is a chilling perspective, but it did hold sway in a number of cases, with medical intervention to support it. I hope this Government do not perpetuate that distorted view of humankind, and I am immensely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate for giving us the chance to explore just that.

5.34 pm

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. For too long, children and young people who are struggling with their gender identity have been badly let down by low standards of care, exceptionally long waiting lists and an unacceptably toxic public debate. That is why Liberal Democrats have been arguing for much better specialist healthcare services for children and young people who find themselves in this distressing situation. The old system, a single clinic, with a shockingly long waiting list and rated “inadequate” by the Care Quality Commission, was clearly failing vulnerable young people at the most difficult time in their lives. Before GIDS closed, more than 5,000 young people were stuck on the list and left waiting for an average of almost three years for a first appointment. For vulnerable teenagers and pre-teens, going through what are often incredibly difficult experiences, those three years must have felt like an eternity.

Liberal Democrats have consistently campaigned for action to tackle appallingly long wait times across the NHS, whether for cancer treatment or mental health, and it is right that we do so for gender identity services as well. It is clear that change is needed. That is why we have long been pressing the Government to establish new specialist services and recruit and train more specialist clinicians, so that children and young people can access the appropriate, high-quality healthcare that they need. The move to create multiple new regional centres is, therefore, a very welcome one, but only two are open now—in London and the North West—leaving those who have already been stuck on waiting lists for years to wait even longer. There is no sign yet of when the other centres will open. Would the Minister be able to give us an indication of when they might?

Unless the Government show far more urgency in getting these centres up and running properly, more and more children will be denied the care they need as they languish on those long waiting lists. While it is right that treatment is largely based on talking therapies for both the child and their parents to give all gender-questioning young people the time and space to make clear and informed decisions about their future, that has got to mean that people starting their talking therapy when they need it, not after years of delay.

Following the Cass review, the Secretary of State announced that the NHS would be conducting clinical trials on the impact of puberty blockers. That is due to begin very soon. I would appreciate clarification from the Minister about the current status of the trials and the terms of reference under which they will be conducted. The announcement of the trial came alongside an indefinite ban on the prescription of puberty blockers as a treatment for young people with gender incongruence or dysphoria, unless they are part of that trial. Numerous organisations, including the Council of Europe, have raised concerns about the potential ethical implications of only offering a treatment to a small group of patients taking part in a clinical trial. I believe that the Secretary of State confirmed at the Dispatch Box that the trial would be uncapped when he gave a statement on puberty blockers to the House in December 2024. Would the Minister confirm whether that is the case?

The ban has caused fear and anxiety for some young trans people and their families, who have been so badly let down for so many years. I have met with families in my own constituency who have highlighted the severe mental health impacts that uncertainty over treatment can have. It is crucial that any clinical decisions are made by expert clinicians based on the best possible evidence, not politicians with a point to make.

**Tracy Gilbert** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Are the Liberal Democrats supportive of the views in the Cass review? I do not think that that has been stated on the public record as yet.

**Helen Morgan:** I have met with Dr Cass. We have considered the Cass review, and we are in support of the clinical trial that she has recommended. That is why I am asking the Minister to clarify some of the points that have been made as that trial progresses.

When that decision was made to indefinitely ban puberty blockers, it obviously caused some concern and uncertainty for the families that are affected. Would the Minister commit to publishing the supporting evidence, including the results of the consultation, to give those families confidence in the decision to ban their prescription?

With any medical treatment, especially for children and young people, it is most important that the clinical professionals follow the evidence on safety and effectiveness. I welcome the Government's support for the research to improve evidence on the safety and efficacy of potential treatments; that research must take into account the direct personal experiences of those who have used those services in the past. More broadly, Liberal Democrats believe that all trans and non-binary people should have access to the high-quality healthcare that they deserve, and that Government should prioritise tackling unacceptable waiting times by expanding the provision of appropriate and timely specialist healthcare through

NHS child and adult services for trans and non-binary people, ensuring that trans people have access to high-quality healthcare on the same basis as we would expect for all patients, with medical decisions made by patients and doctors together, informed by the best possible evidence, and supporting research using international best practice to improve evidence on the safety and efficacy of potential treatments.

For puberty blockers specifically, it is for expert clinicians to build the evidence base and determine whether they are safe and effective. I do not think any politician, such as me, who does not have that clinical experience or evidence to hand should be making pronouncements on whether or not they are. We need the NHS to act on building up that evidence base, and for the Government to provide certainty that they will follow the evidence and expert advice when that is available.

Children and young people with gender incongruence are uniquely vulnerable, potentially facing an identity crisis, difficult relationships at home and social isolation at a very young age. It is extremely important that they are treated respectfully, safely, quickly and in the way that is best for their long-term health and personal development. It is unlikely that the same treatment will be appropriate for every individual in that situation, but when it comes to any individual medical interventions, Liberal Democrats believe it is right that those decisions are made by clinicians and patients together, informed by the best possible evidence, as is the case in all areas of healthcare.

5.41 pm

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I start by making a declaration of interest as an NHS consultant paediatrician and a member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. My work in the NHS at times involves looking after children who may have gender dysphoria, although it is not specifically for that purpose. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) on securing this important debate, and on her excellent speech.

Hippocrates' dictum, "first do no harm"—although it does not actually appear in the Hippocratic oath—captures a core medical ethic, and is an important guiding principle in policymaking. When it comes to children and young people expressing gender dysphoria, we must take a compassionate but firmly evidence-based approach. The causes of gender incongruence are not fully understood, but they are likely to be multifactorial and influenced by both biological and social factors. It is of huge concern that diagnoses of gender dysphoria have risen over fiftyfold, and that vulnerable and same-sex attracted children are over-represented.

There are legitimate licensed uses for puberty blockers, such as in cases of children who enter puberty very young, and in the treatment of certain malignancies. However, using puberty blockers for young people with gender dysphoria represents a significantly different context, both medically and ethically. With most children with gender dysphoria, symptoms resolve without treatment, with many finding that the natural process of puberty leads to a resolution to their distress.

The Gender Identity Development Service began trialling puberty blockers for adolescents with gender dysphoria back in 2011. Preliminary findings in 2015-16 showed

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

no psychological benefit from the treatment and, alarmingly, a deterioration of wellbeing in some children, particularly some girls. The Cass review, published last year, showed that there is insufficient evidence on the long-term effects of using puberty blockers to treat gender incongruence. I ask the Minister: why does the planned trial not look at long-term outcomes?

The Cass review made the risks of these drugs explicit. Puberty blockers can seriously compromise bone density and can lead to adverse long-term neurodevelopmental effects. As for the purported benefits, the review added that,

“no changes in gender dysphoria or body satisfaction were demonstrated.”

The often repeated justification that blockers are for “time to think” was not supported by the evidence, with concern that they may instead alter the developmental trajectory of psychosexual and gender identity.

In May 2024, the last Government passed emergency legislation to temporarily ban puberty blockers for new treatments of gender dysphoria. The current Government have renewed that order twice, continuing restrictions until the end of this year. However, that does not affect cross-sex hormones. Does the Minister plan to commission research on the outcome of masculinising and feminising hormones on young people? Do the Government plan to extend the ban to cross-sex hormones in the fullness of time?

We heard in February that the NHS has announced plans to start offering puberty blockers as part of a clinical trial. There are questions about this trial. Given that most children’s symptoms will resolve anyway, and that the Cass review clearly states there is no method of proving in advance which children will have improved symptomatology and which will not, the trial will be essentially treating a whole cohort of healthy children with drugs to see the effect on the around 15% whose symptoms may not resolve in adulthood. Former Tavistock clinicians, including David Bell, have said that they would not refer patients to the clinical trial.

The Government are taking direct control of NHS England, so it is now the Secretary of State’s responsibility to ensure that any such trial is properly conducted. The gold standard for a medical trial is the double-blind randomised controlled trial. Will the Minister confirm that if the trial goes ahead there will be a control sample? The trial still requires ethical approval from the Health Research Authority. Will the Minister provide an update on when that decision is expected, clarify how the Government are ensuring the impartiality and safety of the decision-makers, and clarify whether provisions are in place to pause or suspend the trial if safety concerns arise?

**Sir John Hayes:** Might my hon. Friend add to her list of questions and ask about the experience of other countries that have looked at these matters? For those countries that have used alternatives to having children in trials, how effective have such alternatives been?

**Dr Johnson:** My right hon. Friend raises important questions that I hope the Minister will answer. It is important to look at the data that we already have. That was the next part of my speech—my right hon. Friend is, as usual, reading my mind.

Given that these drugs have been used on hundreds of patients at GIDS alone, why not look at that data, rather than conduct new experiments on further children? Despite the last Government legislating to ensure that data could be made available for research, several NHS trusts refused to participate fully in the Cass review. What are the Government doing to retrieve that data and to ensure that NHS trusts, which are now more directly controlled by the Government, comply with data-sharing requirements in the future? If the trial does go ahead, how will the Secretary of State ensure the genuine impartiality of those conducting the trial so that we can rely on the results?

In conclusion, this debate is about the wellbeing of young people. Gender-questioning children are not solely defined by their gender incongruence and gender-related distress; they are whole individuals. They deserve holistic care and the same rigorous evidence-based care as any other young patient.

5.46 pm

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) on securing this debate, on the constructive tone in which she has engaged with me and my Department, and on the way that she opened the debate.

The Government’s approach is governed by three principles. First, the health and wellbeing of children and young people is our primary concern—a point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Secondly, evidence-led, effective, ethical and safe healthcare must be provided to all who need it, when they need it—a point well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca). Thirdly, this Government believe in the dignity and equality of every single one of His Majesty’s citizens.

Since the election, we have been calmly and cautiously guided by the evidence. We take children’s healthcare extremely seriously. That is why we remain committed to implementing the Cass review, and ensuring that children and young people who are looking for support in relation to their gender receive the highest quality of care, as one would expect of any other child health service in the NHS.

**Tracy Gilbert:** Dr Cass was clear in her review that the model of care for people with gender incongruence, and particularly for children and young people, needs to be changed to take into account their holistic care needs. Will the Minister update us on her Department’s progress in implementing those findings?

**Karin Smyth:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; I hope to get on to that subject in my speech. It is important that people are aware of that progress.

I know that many people are concerned about the ethics of this research, as the hon. Member for Reigate and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) both noted. I assure hon. Members that the UK has, as we know, extremely rigorous and robust ethical approval pathways, and that no clinical trial can proceed without the necessary independent scientific approvals.



We already regularly use those processes to consider clinical trials in children so that we can evaluate new treatments for a whole range of conditions, including cancer, depression, respiratory infections, or any illness. Many aspects of the methodology of this trial are still being looked at, such as how long it will follow children, how many children will be on the trial and how the demographics of the trial will be constructed. That is all still to be confirmed and approved; many hon. Members asked about those points today. All participants in the trial will also be part of the ongoing observational study.

Following the decision by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about puberty blockers, which was based on the evidence, we needed to make sure that we got on with helping scientists, researchers and clinicians to do their jobs. Some people have called for the Government to stop those experts from pursuing this line of inquiry, and we have heard such calls again in this debate. They have argued that the decision to halt the sale and supply of puberty blockers should be the end of the matter, and that young people should not have access to this medication, come what may. That would be to ignore the distress and real experiences of young people, and the Government have no doubt that it would drive people towards possible illegal and underground routes, shutting off young people's access to conversations with professionals and the opportunity to pause and consider other options.

Instead, as Dr Cass suggests, we can set out a proper path to treatment that involves young people, their parents, clinicians and mental health professionals. Knowing that they are on a path will reassure young people that they are being taken seriously. The cautious process that they will have to work through before joining a trial means that young people will have access to support and counselling, which may result in them deciding against joining the trial and pursuing a medical route. That is an approach entirely missing over recent years.

We all agree that treatment should be offered based on the best available evidence, and clinical trials in the UK are considered to be the gold standard for evaluating healthcare interventions. The Cass review found:

"The evidence base underpinning medical and non-medical interventions in this clinical area must be improved."

That is why we have commissioned the PATHWAYS programme of research, one aspect of which includes the world's first clinical trial designed to help us to better understand the relative benefits and potential wider effects of the use of puberty blockers in affected children.

We must look at the most appropriate medical and non-medical approaches to support physical, emotional and psychosocial health. That is why the trial forms just one component of a wider study and a growing portfolio of research, jointly hosted by NHS England. That includes looking at the experiences of the 9,000 adults who, as children, were cared for under a previous model of NHS care, which I know the hon. Member for Reigate has described as a "medical scandal". Dr Cass was clear in her review that both a clinical trial on puberty blockers and a data linkage study, which many hon. Members have raised today, are important to improving the evidence base on gender incongruence in children and young people.

Regardless of individuals' views on the practices of the Tavistock, I hope we can all agree that learning from the experiences of those thousands of people who have accessed puberty blockers is important; it will provide different and separately valuable information from the clinical trial. That data alone, however, will not provide the answer as to whether we should—or should not—consider routinely prescribing these drugs in the future, or continue the ban indefinitely.

The adult gender services have now committed to sharing their data, a point also raised by hon. Members. I acknowledge that we need to move quickly, and I expect to be making progress on this soon. We will consider all data that is relevant to puberty blockers, including from the adult gender clinics.

As with all clinical research, the team leading the trial must ensure that approval is obtained from the regulatory authorities, including one of the Health Research Authority's independent ethics committees and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Those are all standard steps where the research receives full scrutiny. Once approvals are granted, the study protocol will be finalised and published, and only then can the trial commence. I am not able to comment on the finer details of that today, but we will issue further updates when they are available, and I commit to keeping Members updated.

I assure hon. Members that entry into the trial will be guided by strict eligibility criteria. It will involve only young people under the care of the NHS children's gender services who have received a full assessment, where other appropriate forms of support have been offered and where their clinician supports a referral to the trial. Under the law, if a child is under 16, a parent will have to consent to their participation, and the child also needs to agree.

I am repeating myself slightly, but that level of caution was entirely missing over recent years. This is a more considered and evidence-based approach. In the past, puberty blockers were presented as the magic pill that young people needed to access; this trial will give children and young people the support they need to make these major decisions.

As we have heard today, we are currently in a situation where some people think it is unethical not to provide these treatments, and some think it is unethical to provide them. The reality is that we do not have definitive evidence. When that happens, we routinely ask for the study to be checked by an independent ethics committee. We spell out the uncertainty to young people and their parents, so that they can balance any such risk against their desire to join the trial before deciding whether they wish to participate.

**Sir John Hayes:** Will the Minister give way?

**Karin Smyth:** I am sorry, but I am tight on time.

Uncertainty is common to many new treatments, but through that process, we ensure that those treatments are no longer used in the absence of such evidence. During the trial, an independent committee checks whether new results have emerged from other countries around the world—a question that was raised several times—and, if those results provide evidence that the

[Karin Smyth]

benefits or risks are clear, such that we could issue clinical guidelines based on them, the trial would be stopped.

We need better-quality evidence to support the NHS in providing reliable and transparent information and advice to children and young people, and their parents and carers, in making important treatment decisions. That is exactly what NHS England and the National Institute for Health and Care Research programme will provide.

I was asked to provide an update on implementing the Cass review, which, beyond that research, we are absolutely committed to doing. From what we heard this afternoon, I am not entirely sure what the Liberal Democrat position is, but we are very clear that we will continue to work on that in lockstep with NHS England. We have opened the three services, and a fourth is planned in the east of England from this spring.

Those services operate under a fundamentally different clinical model, where children and young people get the tailored and holistic care they need from a multidisciplinary team of experts in paediatrics, neurodiversity and mental health. At first, those services saw patients transferred from the now-closed gender identity development service at the Tavistock, but I am pleased that all the services now take patients from the national waiting list. NHS England aims for there to be a service in every region of England by 2026. That will help to reduce the waiting list and bring the services closer to the homes of the children and the young people who need them.

5.56 pm

**Rebecca Paul:** I will speak only briefly. I want to say a massive thank you to everyone who has spoken. To echo the words of the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), I appreciate the respectful and constructive

tone. There have been some different ideas—not everyone is entirely on the same page—but we have all approached the debate in a way that is evidence-based and about sharing facts. It is very clear that everyone in this Chamber wants the best for our children. We absolutely share that objective.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his thoughtful contribution. We always tend to be on the same page about such issues. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and I are also very much aligned in our thinking on this point. This is a really important debate. Very vulnerable children are affected by the issue, so it is important that we get it right.

I thank the spokespeople, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), for their contributions. I also thank the Minister, who has taken a huge number of questions from me. She and her Department were very constructive in advance of the debate.

This debate is not political; it is about doing the right thing for our children. I am absolutely here to work with the Government and to support what they are doing to get us to that right position. If I can do anything to help, they should not hesitate to let me know. I thank the Minister for going through the questions, and I look forward to hearing the detail. I appreciate that some of the detail is not available yet, but will be forthcoming.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the potential impact of puberty suppressing hormones on children and young people with gender incongruence.

5.58 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

*Wednesday 30 April 2025*

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### Syria Sanctions

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty):** Today I am updating the House on the steps to update and adapt the UK's Syria sanctions regime following the fall of Assad's dictatorship in December last year and given the ongoing political transition.

On 12 February the UK issued a humanitarian general licence to provide essential sanctions relief to Syria, a country facing staggering humanitarian needs and a broken economy, and which is in the first stages of recovery after almost 14 years of conflict.

My statement to the House on 13 February indicated the direction of travel for our Syria sanctions regulations. On 6 March we announced the de-listing of 24 Syrian entities that were previously used by the Assad regime to fund the oppression of the Syrian people, including the Central Bank of Syria, Syrian Arab Airlines and a number of energy companies.

On 24 April we took further steps towards helping the Syrian people rebuild their country and economy. We have amended our Syria sanctions regulations to bring them up to date and have revoked specific sanctions measures on energy, transport (aircraft), financial transactions and trade. We have also de-listed a further 12 governmental and media entities given that they are no longer associated with the Assad regime and their designations were defunct. Our revised Syria sanctions regulations, however, give the UK scope to deploy future sanctions in the Syria context, should that become necessary.

In taking these steps, our intention is to help open up the Syrian financial system and support the flow of essential investment in energy infrastructure, above all in the electricity generation sector, essential for Syria's reconstruction. This is vital for ensuring stability in Syria and the wider region—recognising that wider international steps will be necessary to support these objectives.

The Government remain determined to hold Bashar al-Assad and his associates accountable for their atrocious actions against the people of Syria. As such, we will ensure that asset freezes and travel bans imposed on members of the former regime remain in force. We also continue to keep the ongoing developments in Syria under close review.

As the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), said to the House in his statement on 10 March:

“Stability in Syria is firmly in our interests.”—[*Official Report*, 10 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 664.]

We will continue to engage with the Syrian Government at all levels to support an inclusive political transition, and to encourage commitment to the protection of human rights, unfettered access for humanitarian aid, safe destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles, and combating terrorism and extremism. The UK remains committed to the people of Syria and will continue to stand with them in building a more stable, free and prosperous future.

[HCWS612]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Civil Recovery Cost Protections

**The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):** In December 2024, the Government published and laid before Parliament a report on the Government's review on introducing costs protections in civil recovery proceedings in the High Court under part 5 of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

The report stated that the Government have run a targeted engagement exercise seeking views from key stakeholders across law enforcement, the judiciary, civil society, the legal profession, and other Government Departments on whether it would be appropriate to restrict the Court's power to order costs payable by an enforcement authority in civil recovery cases in the High Court. The reference to the legal sector being engaged was incorrect. Since December 2024, officials have met with the legal sector to seek their views. This statement is being made to address the inaccuracy in the original report and to update Parliament on the legal sector's views. The legal sector understood the rationale for enforcement authorities to have cost protections for civil recovery cases. To mitigate any civil justice concerns, it supported the inclusion of additional safeguards such as the “just and reasonable” test to afford additional judicial discretion on when this measure could be applied.

Since this engagement, the Crime and Policing Bill 2025 has been introduced to Parliament. The Bill includes a costs protections measure which will protect enforcement agencies from paying costs during civil recovery proceedings unless the authority is judged to have acted unreasonably, dishonestly or improperly. The aim of this provision is to remove barriers to using civil recovery so enforcement agencies are not exposed to high legal costs when they act in the public interest.

These civil recovery powers are a valuable tool in the fight against crime and cost protections will remove the strain on enforcement agencies' budgets that might stop them from pursuing cases. We will continue to engage the legal sector and enforcement agencies to make sure the provisions continue to reflect the views of all those affected.

Copies of the updated report will be available in the Vote Office, and it will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS613]





## Written Correction

*Wednesday 30 April 2025*

### Ministerial Correction

#### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

##### Local Government Finances: London

*The following extract is from the debate on Local Government Finances: London on 26 March 2025.*

**Alex Norris:** ...I want to give some context about the financial settlement because it starts with a conversation about money, which has happened throughout the debate.

The settlement for this year makes available a total core spending power for London, including the GLA, of up to £11.35 billion. That is a £726 million increase on last year, and it represents a 5.8% cash-terms increase.

[*Official Report*, 26 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 399WH.]

*Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris):*

**Alex Norris:** ...I want to give some context about the financial settlement because it starts with a conversation about money, which has happened throughout the debate. The settlement for this year makes available a total core spending power for London, including the GLA, of up to **£13.35 billion**. That is a £726 million increase on last year, and it represents a 5.8% cash-terms increase.





# ORAL ANSWERS

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**not later than  
Wednesday 7 May 2025**

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**Westminster Hall**

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**Safety of Humanitarian Workers: Conflict Zones [Col. 138WH]**

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**Gender Incongruence: Puberty Suppressing Hormones [Col. 164WH]**

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**Written Statements [Col. 11WS]**

**Written Correction [Col. 1WC]**

*Ministerial correction*

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